**Weaver Option Update 27 February 2020**

**Extermination 8.2**

**Hell or Commorragh**

*The impossible had happened.*

*The Port of Lost Souls, the greatest Aeldari shipyard of the Webway, had fallen to our enemies.*

*The first and greatest defence of the Dark City was burning in planet-sized infernos.*

*This was just the beginning of the end, we realised quickly. As the beaten armies ran to take refuge behind the safety of the walls of Zel’harst and Utar’ragh, the Helspiders gave chase and annihilated the rear-guard.*

*We thought the nightmare would end there.*

*How could it not be?*

*Zel’harst, Mar’lych, Utar’ragh; these were three of the most fortified and heavily garrisoned sub-realms in the Webway. Their dark walls soared to the very limits of the possible in the crimson atmosphere of Commorragh. The hundreds of bastions dreamt by the Dynast artisans had been built by many infamous artificers and billions of slaves. There was no space to bring a sizeable starship without it being brought down in the next heartbeat by thousands of anti-air guns.*

*I am not ashamed to say I thought the human offensive would be stopped in blood and tears on our last defensive lanes.*

*Utar’ragh had twelve defensive walls and more than sixty thousand batteries. Zel’harst was even more defended, as Dynast Kraillach had tried to ‘compensate’ the smaller size of Port Shard by making his key citadel greater than the palace-fortress of Maestros Xelian.*

*But more important, the effect of surprise was gone. Yes, the upstart Imperium had completely smashed apart the defence of the Port of Lost Souls, and the losses in warships and lives were beyond horrifying.*

*Already millions of reinforcements were pouring into Commorragh. The loss of the ports prevented the great fleets from entering Commorragh, but the armies and raiding forces had no such problem. There were smaller Gates which could be employed to transfer impressive quantities of fresh troops.*

*While no records have ever been made – not that it would have made any good considering what was coming – the Citadel of Utar’ragh was likely defended by more than seven hundred million Aeldari.*

*It was also considered by many strategists and commanders to be the most likely advance axis of the enemy. Port Shard had been abandoned to the Yngir, and Port Carmine had been extinguished without mercy, but the humans had fought hard and long to gain a foothold in the Port of Lost Souls. And if they wanted to take the Corespur, as many Dynast leaders voiced, the shortest and easiest method of reaching it would be a direct attack against Utar’ragh.*

*They were wrong – although unlike the delusional Farseers and Autarchs of Biel-Tan, they had the excuse of never fighting* Maelsha’eil Dannan *before the Shadowpoint.*

*The true offensive was going to fall on Zel’harst.*

*Before the battle, the very prospect of an attack against the mighty walls and defences of House Kraillach would have been considered the delirium of an agonising slave after injecting a hundred different drugs into his or her bloodstream.*

*Zel’harst was defended by thirteen walls, and if the Kraillach Dynast gave the order – and Lythric Kraillach had given it long before the battle in the Port of Lost Souls was over – it would be defended by the armies of the Blue Sun and all its allies. To name but a few, there were the Shrines of the Naked Hatred and the Cursed Night, eager to take revenge for the death of the Executioner. The Haemunculi of the Black Descent were leading the other Covens. Many renowned Succubi like the Marchioness of Beasts, the Green Fear and the Unbound Lover, ruling the Cults of Seventh Woe, Terror and Blade Denied had returned to the Dark City. The Mandrakes of Aelindrach had rallied behind their shadowy masters and come to honour the bargains of skull and flesh.*

*This was only the first wave of reinforcements. There were rumours of more armies and legendary figures on their way. It was whispered that the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom, Kharsac El’Uriaq himself, had smelled the scent of blood and was now on his way with his redoubtable armies. So was the Cult of Strife and the peerless Lelith Hesperax.*

*It is not impossible that during the whole battle raging in this sub-realm, there were more than one billion defenders waiting on the dark walls of Zel’harst.*

*And it was in vain.*

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

*I was not at Zel’harst. Few Aeldari can boast that.*

Maelsha’eil Dannan *went there.*

*And once again our certainties crumbled against the merciless tide of insects, humans and gigantic war engines.*

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“*There are fools who say the battle was lost when the Vileth pocket was exterminated and more than eleven million Dynast troops were massacred. There are mad prophets who claim we could have resisted and seized victories despite the destruction delivered to the Port of Lost Souls. They are so wrong I can’t help but laugh at their stupidity. The moment* Maelsha’eil Dannan *arrived on Commorragh was the clarion call of our demise. Without a thought, we gave her an army of Helspiders to kill us all. And naively, we tried to convince ourselves this never-seen-before form of control applied only to spiders and spider-like creatures. We were utterly wrong. A swarm of death and lethal beasts had been forged in the pits of Commorragh, and the Angel of Death had only to enter a sub-realm to unleash creatures we had lived next to for thousands of cycles...”* anonymous testimony of a Kraillach warrior in the Healing Chambers of Alaitoc. The Drukhari veteran would eventually succumb to the Helspider venom and the wounds suffered during the Battle of Commorragh.

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“*Before the Second Fall, we had a proverb: ‘never corner a Dynast in his strongest citadel’. The ancient weapons they were stockpiling in their vaults had some pieces no one wanted unleashed in the Webway or the galaxy at large. And for the most part, everyone had accepted this was a prudent course. Between the Founding and the Second Fall, only four life-cleansing weapons were unleashed by the Dynasts, and it was murmured at least two were catastrophic accidents, not voluntary purges. But as humans stormed the Port of Lost Souls, the unwritten customs and codes were suddenly null and void. And Lythric Kraillach, eager to win where Maestros Xelian had failed, began unlocking his vaults. Naturally, the humans retaliated*...” attributed to Aurelia Malys, 320M35.

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“*There is no God but the God-Emperor, and Lady Weaver is His Living Saint. Follow the Helspiders and charge*!” Ecclesiarchy Priest of the 2nd Army, Battle of Commorragh.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

**Eighty hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

Thought for the day: Nothing can hide from the Wrath of the Emperor.

**Dynast Lythric Kraillach**

An eternity ago, when the greatest architects sworn to his Dynasty had presented him the plans of the Fortress of Unyielding Slaughter and the Wall of Death which would defend the outer perimeter of Zel’harst, Lythric Kraillach had been promised that no enemy, living or undead, would ever be able to breach the first defence line of his great citadel.

The twelve walls behind it were only to give more despair to a potential enemy, obviously.

So if someone asked, the Ultimate Archon of the Blue Sun would say it was because of these false assurances that his chief architects and artisans were plunged in pools of sapphire-coloured lava inch after inch, their bodies reinforced by Haemunculi drugs in order to increase the duration of their agony. To their left the defeated commanders who had returned after the total defeat of the Port of Lost Souls were joining them in this excruciating and noble torture.

House Kraillach had standards, after all. Lythric left to Xelian the brutish and inelegant impalement. His line had ruled over the Aeldari for millions of cycles, and they had done it with grace and proper respect for the rules. And if after the death of the incompetent he had hundreds of exquisite sapphire statues to present to his visitors, well this was an additional pleasure.

Now that he was a bit calmer, the Master of Zel’harst returned to watching the displays and his surviving subordinates watching over the battlefield.

To his consternation, the situation had not improved. Really, he could say it had gotten far worse during his period of distraction.

“Helspiders...” the battle could be explained with this single word. There were millions of them storming out of the tunnel-gates from the Port of Lost Souls, and worst of all, hundreds of thousands more were rising from the pits and undercities of his own domain.

The Fortress of Unyielding Slaughter had been overwhelmed before it had the time to fire two salvoes of its most powerful batteries. Something everyone had told him that was impossible. And yet it happened under his very eyes. The Helspiders’ horde had not even slowed down. And now the beasts were climbing the First Wall of Zel’harst, the Wall of Death.

Even a blind Aeldari could tell his forces were slowly but surely overwhelmed.

“Have the beasts have been exterminated between the second and thirteen spheres of defences?”

“They have, my Most Glorious Dynast!” one of his Great Agony-Generals answered, prostrating himself before replying. “The only Helspiders the Mon-keigh will be able to use against us are those coming from the Port of Lost Souls and the first sphere.”

Lythric would have preferred his subordinate had not used the word ‘only’, not when there were millions of the arachnids climbing the outer walls. Still, he would have to accept it was the best that could be achieved for now.

In a rare moment of unity, the three Dynasts had enacted a general Webway Order after the catastrophe of the Vileth shipyards. Every species of arachnids, be it an arena-competitive Helspider or a finger-sized venomous Dark Widow, was to be exterminated immediately. Several Beastmasters had protested, and been dragged to the torture chambers by the Wyches and the Incubi. After seeing millions of proud warriors being encircled and killed by their own beast-weapons, no one was going to pretend the Helspider horde wasn’t representing a serious threat.

Lythric Kraillach shivered inside, taking great care to hide his unease from his servants and his inner circle. The Mon-keigh Warp-touched prey had a lot of curious powers that were denied to their Aeldari betters, but no one had had a clue arachnid-mastery had existed before today. Obviously, the Harlequins and the spies he paid so high were going to receive a large dose of his wrath once this whole fiasco was over. To not be aware of something like this was properly unacceptable.

The execution members were going to have the opportunity to create thousands of new statues in the next cycles.

“The Wall of Death is not going to hold,” the Dynast of the Blue Sun spoke, trying not to snarl and almost failing at the monstrous humiliation this simple acknowledgement would result in the cycles to come.

“The reinforcements are arriving to defend the Wall of Cruelty, my Most Glorious Dynast,” the Guardian of the Inner Walls announced. “They will not be in position to cover the Wall of Death before...”

“I know,” the Master of Zel’harst interrupted him. The one-sided the Helspiders had given them inside the Port of Lost Souls had been too quick, too total, too...shocking. The First Wall had not been ready for war, and they now were paying for it, in blood and agony.

Under his hawkish eyes, the Dynast observed tens of thousands Helspiders submerging the towers guarding the Death Gates. The very ground was soaked red and black as the corpses were piled up by the tens of thousands. The Gates’ servants sold their lives dearly as they should, but every heartbeat saw the arachnids press further. Soon they would be able to force the Death Gates from the inside, and it did not take a great mastermind to know what was going to happen a couple of heartbeats later. There were millions of beasts waiting outside for the signal of the feast.

Lythric Kraillach gritted his teeth, and tried to find a way to turn around the situation by the usual means he had conquered so many victories in the past. But too many factors weren’t present in front of him. Betrayal could have been considered, but as the Beastmasters had tried and failed to communicate with the Helspiders before being eaten alive, it had to be discarded from the list of options. Killing the Mon-keigh abomination controlling the horde would be his favourite course of action...if the Mon-keigh was in killing range, and it wasn’t true here. No assassin or long-range battery would be able to find its mark into the Port of Lost Souls where the enemy army concentrated.

It only left one option, the Dynast concluded as the flow of Helspiders’ reinforcements seemed to slow down. It was not his favourite, and Xelian and this coward of Yllithian were undoubtedly going to scream in offended pride once his actions arrived to their ears, but this succession of defeats had lasted for too long.

“The First Wall is lost,” the Death Gates were about to cede at any moment now, “but I swear this defeat is going to cost them their ambitions and their Helspiders. Deploy the Spectratikon.”

One of his subordinates hissed, and two murmured curses in surprise.

“Oh my Most Glorious Dynast, I understand your anger, but weapons like the Spectratikon are regulated by the Covenant of Khaine. Using it in the middle of Commorragh requires...”

“Yes, yes, it requires the approval of the three Dynasts voting unanimously in favour,” the Dynast smiled viciously. “I have neither the cycles nor the will to waste my time debating with these two arrogant venomous tongues. We have lost Port Shard, we aren’t going to lose Zel’harst! Besides,” the Master of the Citadel smiled largely, “the Mon-keigh themselves burned the Covenant of Khaine when they murdered Port Carmine and every Aeldari inside it. They can hardly complain this represents an escalation of violence.”

“Indeed, my Most Glorious Dynast!” the Master of Pain approved. “The vermin cavorting with the Helspiders need to be taught a lesson!”

“Raise the Twilight Shields for the entire Citadel save the war zone including the Wall of Death and the Fortress of Unyielding Slaughter,” Lythric Yllithian ordered. “Once it is done, deploy the Spectratikon.”

Preparations being what they were for Khaine-Ultimate weapons, the Dynast and his senior Generals had to watch the Helspiders breach the Death Gates and butcher their way through the forces of the Wall and its surroundings. Warriors using the chain-flails, the splinter rifles, the shardnets, the impalers, the heat lances, blasters or dark lances were facing the same problem: each time a Helspider was killed the rest of the beastly horde was aware how their fellow had died and learned from its mistake.

“Spectratikon deployed, Most Glorious Dynast!”

The air of the Zel’harst sub-realm was suddenly darkened by obscurity and a large pulse-explosion.

Then everything not protected behind Twilight Shields began to...change. It did not matter if the targets were Helspiders, Aeldari or the First Wall itself; everything began to fall apart in billions of dark crystalline petals.

The outer defences of Zel’harst were disintegrated, but since the horde of Helspiders was removed with it, it was an acceptable sacrifice.

“It is...beautiful,” before the tunnel-gates, everything had been transformed into mountains of beautiful artificial petals imitating the beauty of the black flower which had once grown on the Core planets of the Empire. This was where the name Spectratikon had come from at first: the Shadow Flower Heralding the End.

“A pity the Spectratikon magnificent flowery use can’t cross the tunnel-gates, your Limitless Magnificence,” the Master of the Slave Markets commented.

“Yes, a pity,” though if the Spectratikon had an ability like this, neither Yllithian nor Xelian would have agreed signing the Covenant of Khaine. It was best to keep that in mind. “Reorganise our armies mustering on the Wall of Cruelty. We will wait a bit for the last after-effects of the weapon to dissipate and then we will counterattack. The Mon-keigh commanding the arachnids must have been taken by surprise by the true power of Aeldari creativity; let’s make sure the prey will know more defeats and uncountable more suffering.”

Indeed, the flaw of the Spectratikon was that it inflicted little pain to those afflicted. As a result, the execution of the Helspider horde had been satisfying, but it wasn’t very soul-refreshing.

Not that it was much a problem. There had to be millions of Mon-keigh to capture and punish in the Port of Lost Souls...

“Most Glorious Dynast! Movement on the tunnel-gates...”

Lythric screamed in rage, followed by the rest of his subordinates, when a new horde barrelled out of the portals leading to the lost port.

But his anger was rapidly controlled and strangled into compliance. Now that the First Wall and the sprawl-slums had been reduced into crystalline flowers, the strategic vision available to him and the different officers was somewhat improved. It was sufficient anyway to realise that the new wave of enemies was not including Helspiders but...

“Ambulls? The Mon-keigh can control Ambulls too?” This wasn’t fair! What sort of psychic power allowed for something like that? Their primitive cousins managed to tame a few Megasaurs in hundreds of cycles, not dozen of species in a few heartbeats!

“Most Glorious Dynast, the Ambulls are beginning to excavate tunnels!”

Lythric Kraillach shivered again. He had underestimated the Mon-keigh...again. To imagine a second assault so fast...the Helspiders had been nothing more than bait. It was just bait and he had swallowed it with a large dose of elixir. The enemy knew now that he had Khaine-Ultimate weapons and were countering them by the same method they were going to use to bypass the Wall of the Cruelty.

“Cancel the counterattack!” the Master of Zel’harst commanded. “Prepare the sappers and all the slaves near the Second Wall you think expendable.”

The Ambulls had not been allowed to breed like the Helspiders in the dark depths and the undercities of Commorragh, but his memory found without problem reminders of numerous large-scale raids on the planet the Mon-keigh called Luther McIntyre IX. By Vileth and Khaine’s bowels, this was...another disaster.

“Send messages to these parvenus of Yllithian and Xelian,” the Kraillach supreme commander seethed. “Tell them the Ambull is to be added to the extermination list.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Mar’lych**

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

**Dynast Ariex Yllithian**

“So the Mon-keigh vermin has reached the second layer of Zel’harst defences,” Ariex Yllithian said mockingly. “Ah, how Kraillach must be proud of his *invincible* citadel....”

Each time they met, Lythric took a pleasure making aeons-long speeches on how great, tall, dangerous and unbreakable his walls were. Seeing him humbled in this manner was not unpleasing at all.

“Should we try to reopen some of the tunnel-gates leading to the Port of Lost Souls, Dynast?” asked the Succubus known as the Ripper Princess leading the forces of the Cult of the Flayed Hand. “The Mon-keigh brutes have, exactly as you planned, unleashed the Helspiders on Zel’harst first and Utar’ragh second. The moment appears well-chosen for a counterattack.”

“No,” the Dynast of the White Sun shook his head in denegation. “Kraillach and his useless commanders have not crippled enough our enemies. The core of the Mon-keigh armies is still intact and uncommitted. If we counterattack now, they are going to use their starships to bleed our forces like they slaughtered Xelian executioners on the Vileth shipyards. And then there will be a risk they will turn their attention to Mar’lych.”

Ariex wasn’t going to take the risk. He had already lost Port Carmine and died in a very unsatisfying manner – burning alive was *not* something he had any wish to reiterate. Losing Mar’lych would almost certainly ensure his fall from his rank of Dynast. Moreover, while he wasn’t going to say it loudly, his citadel was not as defended as Utar’ragh, and his reinforcements were still trying to reach Commorragh. Disorder, riots and several insurrections were raging in the main arteries leading to the Dark City, as the forces sworn to each Dynast were recalled at the same time.

Maybe in definitive a security exercise and a war game to simulate an attack on Commorragh had not been such a stupid idea in the first place, truly.

“No, we are going to let Kraillach and Xelian bleed their forces against the Mon-keigh and the insect hordes. Since they kept open their tunnel-gates to the end, I can only wish them great pleasure to deal with the rampaging creatures.”

The single Beastmaster in his throne room did his very best to not meet his eyes, or those of the two Succubi flanking him. Before this battle started, Masters of Beasts and their disciples were maybe not the favourites of the crowd in the arenas – this honour had always belonged to the greatest female weapon-mistresses – but they had been appreciated.

Now everything had changed. Cults, Covens and Dynast forces were busy murdering the arachnids and the Ambulls in their cages before the unnatural ‘horde-effect’ took control of them. Large slums and abandoned parts of the Old City were saturated with torrents of special insecticide. Oh yes, the Beastmasters had every reason to fear the future.

“I can only approve your pragmatism,” applauded one of the Haemunculi perched on one of his Engines of Pains. The creature had long abandoned the physical limitations of Aeldari physiology, with three mouths, eight eyes, and six arms.

The Homunculus would have perhaps not approved as much if he knew that Ariex had hired the great Urien Rakarth of the Prophets of Flesh to create him an army in the Haemunculi labs under this very citadel.

“Thank you!” replied the Dynast. “Now however I think we need to discuss the subject of sanctions. My dear friend the Dynast Kraillach has broken the Covenant of Khaine and my heart bleeds at his betrayal. This is a most egregious violation of the rules between the Dynasts of Commorragh! The horror! The perfidy! He dared deploying a weapon like the Spectratikon without asking for my permission!”

This was an insult and a humiliation in one.

“Make sure two of his children have tragic accidents the moment they set a foot outside the Torment Spire of the Corespur. And poison the water reserves of the Scream-Jade Market. The Covenant is a very serious affair!”

Or at least it was a very serious affair, as recent events had broken the established order. And speaking of the established order...

“Have our forces suppressed the miserable uprising of Vect’s rats?”

“Yes, Supreme Dynast!” one of his Raid-Masters said. “The Old City has been thoroughly purged of the vat-usurper’s supporters. We are exsanguinating a hundred thousand of the Black Heart’s supporters as we speak!”

“Excellent!” For too long the Black Heart had been allowed to plot and challenge their betters. They had been useful during the War of the Sun and the Moon, but their forces had long since crossed the line separating a minor nuisance from a massive headache. “Transfer a few hundred traitors to Mar’lych. I want to torture some of these race-traitors myself. Now what’s the next point of order?”

The earth rumbled under their feet. Lights flickered and died out. In the distance, a spire had its counter-gravity support extinguished and broke in half, impacting the surrounding structures and spreading death and explosions.

This was not an extraordinary accident. Several fuel depots were exploding at random. And finally the Palace of Justified Domination, his secondary residence in Mar’lych, blew up in a spectacular inferno of green light.

“How?” Ariex Yllithian shrieked. “We cut the tunnel-gates! There wasn’t an opportunity for the Yngir to enter Mar’lych!”

“You have forgotten much, have you?”

For a heartbeat everyone in the throne room stopped speaking and stared at the tall creature which had just appeared from nowhere. It wore a long purple cape and wielded a golden sceptre. Its body was finely crafted silver metal and the eyes shone with artificial green lights.

It was an Yngir’s slave.

And it was in his throne room.

“Allow me to present myself. I am Trazyn the Infinite Collector, Chief Archaeovist of Solemnace. And I wanted to notify you...”

“KILL HIM!” The Dynast of the White Sun screamed. “KILL HIM NOW! I WILL MAKE A RAIDER-MASTER THE ONE WHO TAKES HIS SKULL!”

A storm of splinter ammunition, black light and diverse projectiles as exotic as they were dangerous were fired.

A powerful green shield of energy stopped everything and the abomination emerged unfazed from the assault.

“Your dissatisfaction has been noted...and rejected,” the creature spoke slowly, using his sceptre to disintegrate a Succubus with a green blast. “I have come to save the treasures hidden in your vaults. And you will not stop me. As for you Dynast Yllithian...you will be one of the jewels of my Commorragh collection.”

Ariex had participated in hundreds of battles. He had cut down millions of enemies. He was a Dynast of Commorragh, Master of the White Sun, Lord of Port Carmine, the Old City of Commorragh, and the Citadel of Mar’lych.

And as this moment he knew there was no chance of victory against this monster.

The Yllithian Dynast jumped from his throne and began to run away.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

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

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

Just to be clear, Dennis didn’t believe the Emperor was a God. Yes, yes that was heresy, keep moving.

Honestly, this wasn’t because he didn’t believe the man struggling to keep the Astronomican functional did not exist or some other nonsense. No, the Emperor existed and was an extremely powerful being of untold power. But Clockblocker had seen people worship a golden hero called Scion too, and the entire world had paid the price when their faith in it was revealed to be horribly misplaced.

So no, like a majority of the parahumans living on the Hive World of Nyx, Dennis didn’t believe in the divinity of the God-Emperor. Unlike Leet however, he was careful enough to not give the local authorities reason to complain about his behaviour. There were plenty of times to joke around and prank unsuspecting friends, but religion wasn’t one of the topics you could afford to criticise or ridicule in public. Honestly, it was far simpler to visit a church twice or thrice a week and voice the prayers with the rest of the crowd. Plenty of issues and religious problems avoided for a minimum of effort.

This was all very good and all, and that way Dennis avoided being one of the many, many persons suffering from a crisis of faith before he was thirty.

On the other hand, he was a bit at a loss now that his fellow parahuman and superior had taken the appearance which could only be described as angelic.

It was not a facial surgery or anything major. In fact, Dennis was rather sure people having met from only afar the Basileia would be unable to tell they were differences. But some faint scars received during the Battle of the Death Star were gone, and a few traits which had made the Brockton Bay parahuman more...imperfect, more human were gone. Weaver looked far more noble and regal now.

That said, this was a little underwhelming compared to the elephant in the room: the wings. The *Angel’s Tear*, courtesy of the Tech-Priests and Dragon’s work, had included two decorative wings, on both sides of the jump pack.

They were the same shade as the radiant, large wings of auramite now shining in the back of Taylor Hebert, but the similarities stopped there. Having had the opportunity to watch them from close, he could tell these were things of solid energy answering to the will of Weaver. They were not part of the power armour; they were directly coursing across it to merge with the back of the female parahuman. There was no bone, no flesh; the wings were simply there, golden energy and magnificence incarnated.

At least for his sanity and the minds of everyone in the rest of the army, Taylor’s brain seemed completely unaffected by this and her behaviour had not suddenly shifted to those of an angel from the Bible or something as equally ridiculous.

One officer of the Imperial Guard could testify about that right now, although how long he would be in position to be a witness remained to be seen. The prelude of Operation Caribbean had shown Taylor Hebert had absolutely no reluctance about executing her superior officers when they failed the standard she had imposed, and the man in front of them had screwed up big.

“What the hell were you thinking Marshal?” Taylor demanded in one of her icy tone coming when you had created a mess and the explosion of rage was imminent. “There are maybe five or six anti-air Eldar anti-air batteries still active in the Port of Lost Souls, and the moment the Commissar keeping an eye on you is killed by a xenos sniper, you order the Luminy 9th Armoured to deploy in front of one!”

“Colonel Garigliano evidently failed to understand my orders,” Marshal Georg-Hans VI Ludendorff replied with the haughty tone which was the norm for this idiot. “And the armoured regiment stormed the Eldar bastion in the end, though I will admit the losses were substantial...”

“Thirty-eight percent casualties,” a Martian Magos interrupted after several metallic grumblings, “and half of the regimental officers, including Colonel Garigliano and his staff are permanent losses.”

“It is war,” the Cadian bastard had the gall to shrug. “Casualties are unavoidable...”

“Lord Commissar Zuhev!” the cutting voice and the name called finally made the Imperial Guard officer realise how badly he had screwed up.

The dark figure of the representative of the Commissariat took a step forward.

“I have no use for this kind of incompetence and mental cowardice in my army.”

The scarred face of the Lord Commissar could have been carved in granite.

“He will not be a problem anymore,” the veteran political officer ominously promised. Two guardswomen of the Fay 20th dragged the stunned Marshal of the 2nd Army away from the temporary field headquarters prepared by the Mechanicus.

“Lieutenant-General Cox will take up the duties of commanding officer of the 2nd Army,” the insect-mistress announced to her subordinates and the vox-officers charged to relay her orders. “Major-General Domenico Flabanico will replace him as the commanding officer of the 4th Corps. Brigadier-General Samuels, per our contingencies, will assume command of the 14th Division.”

The familiar bark of a Nyx pattern laspistol arrived to their ears. No one made any comment when Zuhev came back alone seconds later.

“Archmagos Felicia 24-Toledo, your tactical decisions on the deployment of the Skitarii Legions, if you please,” the supreme commander of Operation Caribbean said as she turned towards the representative of the Fabricator-General. Archmagos Hediatrix should have been there, but the other high-ranking Mechanicus fleet commander was busy studying the STC template recovered in the ruins of the Port of Lost Souls.

“By your will, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” the Martian female canted back. “The 3rd and the 9th Legion will stay in the Port of Lost Souls as suppression forces, questing support, and mobile reserves. They will be granted sufficient anti-air assets to support the fleet, the Knights of House Durbach, and the Ordinatus *Belligerent Guardian* once the mighty symbol of the Omnissiah is deployed.”

The first war plans made for the landings had not planned to use so many Skitarii and powerful assets to guard the rear of the ground forces. But per the ancient proverb, plans never survived contact with the enemy, and with the pirates and the monsters busy sending tens of thousands warriors by hidden portals in the shadows, the battles continued to rage in the Port of Lost Souls. And from the vids he had been able to take a few minutes to watch, it was very, very ugly.

“The 4th Legion will engage the Eldar armies coming from the war zone known as ‘the Sprawls’ in support of the Necron phalanxes.”

This one was certainly going to play the role of a secondary reserve. The green annihilation blasts of the Necrons were not something the pale-skinned Eldar had any answer for.

“The 5th, 7th and 8th Legions will participate in the diversionary attack against Utar’ragh, supported by the Knights of Houses Raven, Cadmus, Terryn and Winterveil. The Ordinatus *Volcano’s Wrath* and *Omnissiah’s Lance* will support them once the proper rites of activation have wakened their marvellous fury.”

Yes, this was a feint. And they would have the 3rd Army of the Imperial Guard and the 5th Company of the Iron Drakes with them. In this instance, the distraction should have been less powerful, but as the third citadel was no longer accessible for army-sized forces, the Knights and the Legion which should have gone there were going to march against the bastions the Inquisition’s prisoners called Utar’ragh.

“The 1st, 2nd, 6th, 10th, 11th, and 12th Legion stand ready to battle their way across the defences of the ‘Zel’harst Citadel’...”

The list of forces assigned for this attack was a very large book by itself. All the Titans were committed. The Knights of Houses Beaumaris, Curtana, Hawkshroud, Hermetika, Krast, Sablus, Taranis were going to handle everything which didn’t require one of the Mechanicus God-Engine’s interventions. The 1st and the 2nd Imperial Guard Armies would be in the thick of the fighting once more, accompanied by the rest of the Space Marines and the Frateris Templar.

“Consider the disposition of the Mechanicus approved, Archmagos,” Weaver replied as her aura seemed to burn in gold flames and somehow determination seemed to fill the atmosphere. “Tell Archmagos Hediatrix to get the STC Template of the hololithic device the Ryza Ranger recovered out of Commorragh as fast as technically possible. It may be damaged, but the risks keeping here are not worth it.”

There was a moment of silence and then the order which had been awaited for half an hour came.

“The Ambulls have brought down the second wall of Zel’harst and the enemy has exhausted its Exterminatus-grade weapons. Inform Grand Princeps Surena that his Legio can begin its march.”

If the five extra-large tunnel-gates where the God-Engines disappeared one by one looked like gigantic maws, Dennis was not sure it was just his imagination...

**Heart of the Webway**

**Nightmare Avenue, approaches of Port Shard**

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

**Admiral-Marquis Madrax Ysclyth**

A lot of times in the past, Madrax Ysclyth had thought his title of Master of the Nightmare Protection was the manner Dynast Kraillach had found to humiliate him when one of his raids only brought half of the slaves he had promised to the Blue Sun.

And to be honest, before the Mon-keigh stormed into Commorragh, it had truly been a joke and a humiliation. Everyone high-ranked enough to matter knew it. He was aware of it. His rivals were aware of it. Dynast Kraillach was not tight-lipped about it.

There were excellent reasons for this. Nightmare Avenue was the quickest and largest Webway path from Pandaimon to Port Shard, and there were four armies and five fleets encircling him at any time. No enemy could reach Nightmare Avenue without pulverising the defences of Port Shard or Pandaimon.

Ridiculous, anybody having a shred of sense agreed.

It was too bad that here and now, the galaxy had decided to become more insane than usual.

Port Shard had fallen against the Yngir’s slaves’ assault. Pandaimon was in the midst of a terrible civil war, and the first reinforcements they had received from the sub-realm were in all likelihood going to be their last for a while.

And in the middle of this was Nightmare Avenue, with his forces of the Marquisate of the Talon and his Dying Sun-class battleship the *Doom Talon*. Since the Dynasts had decided to scream for reinforcements without bothering about coordinating anything, the duty to coordinate the evacuations from Commorragh and the arrival of the reinforcements from every part of the Webway had fallen on his lap.

The Admiral-Marquis had obviously tried to release this ‘honour’ to one of the other Admirals, but the others had declined, obviously.

Nightmare Avenue and every great artery and large avenue of travel leading or exiting Commorragh were in utter chaos, and the situation was getting worse day after day. Many pirates using lairs near Commorragh had used the opportunity to settle their differences with the refugees of Port Shard. Over six squadrons who had tried to go to the relief of Port Shard had retreated back after losing two-thirds of their numbers to the annihilation batteries of the soulless creatures.

Each Captain, each Admiral, and each Succubus was trying to shout louder than the other and pretending he or she was in charge. Fleets and capital warships manoeuvred like they wanted without any supervision; most of them charged into several of the largest Webway Gates leading to the Port of Lost Souls. Generally, hideously brutalised survivors came back a few moments later, traumatised and half-insane.

Haemunculi preyed on rogue Cults and those they thought were in league with the Black Heart. Succubi and Wyches executed the commanders who didn’t bow fast enough.

It was chaos.

“We must reconquer one of the Ports,” Admiral Xindrell Y’Polleon of Magnificence of the Falling Moon said. “The more warriors and warships arrive, the more confusion and fights we will have to deal with. We are also forced to divert quantities of light craft like the bombers to less important avenues because we’re beginning to lack space for our largest cruisers and battleships.”

Madrax nodded, and not just because what Xindrell Y’Polleon had said was true. The older Admiral had proved a remarkably competent strategist, and unlike plenty of idiots he wasn’t going to list, the Falling Moon commander had enforced ruthless discipline among his troops from the start. If only he was the norm, not the exception everywhere the reinforcement armies and fleets concentrated.

“I quite agree. Without the Port of Lost Souls or one of the other shipyards, the transfer of the armies and the raiding forces is logistically disastrous. I have reserved three gates each for Zel’harst and Utar’ragh, but honestly the crowding and the lack of discipline are halving the numbers we are able to transfer to the Dynasts and the armies currently facing the Mon-keigh. Unfortunately, I don’t see how to improve the situation. Probably thanks to Yngir technology, everything from the biggest battleship to the smallest jetfighter emerging into one of the Ports is immediately the target of a capital warship. We are losing entire raid-fleets and we kill nothing in return.”

And as long as the Mon-keigh held Port Shard and the Port of Lost Souls, they had a knife tearing the throat of the sub-realms of Commorragh. Madrax was realistic enough to know the shipyards and most of the infrastructure there were total losses, but it was vital to destroy the enemy fleets and close the Eversprings Gate the fastest they were able to.

As far as their sensors were able to discern, neither the Mon-keigh nor the Yngir’s slaves had received a lot of reinforcements since the battle began. Mostly they were towing back their damaged warships out of the Dark City and replenishing their ammunition, fuel and supplies.

But there was no guarantee it would stay that way any longer; the Yngir had been thought to be sleeping, but that was evidently not true. And the Mon-keigh had billions of useless mouths in realspace to throw at them if they decided the risks justified the agony.

“I think we must think small for the time being,” Xindrell said after reviewing the latest tactical disposition of the enemy. “The abominations are clearly withdrawing from Port Shard. Ten of their battleships have returned to the Port of Lost Souls, with twice as many cruisers accompanying them. Most of the infrastructure is beyond repair, but we will be able to deploy a lot of armies to Zel’harst if we retake it.”

“It is certainly a trap,” the member of the Marquisate answered bluntly. “They landed millions of their killer-automatons to wipe us out, and now they’re withdrawing? If it’s not an invitation to annihilate more of our fleets, I don’t know what it is!”

“I will certainly not volunteer to enter first in Port Shard,” the other Admiral approved with a large smile. “And if it’s evident for us...”

Yes, even the bloodthirsty Wyches, the most arrogant Incubi or Admirals weren’t going to charge forward and sacrifice themselves after the previous massacres. Port Shard was a trap and unfortunately, no one here had any idea what sort of cosmic slaughterhouse the Yngir had been able to engineer...

As if the Dark Muses were answering his wishes, one of his communication lines was activated and Madrax had to control himself not to gape as a Farseer’s eyes met his.

“I am Farseer Hycklandir, Master of the Opal Expeditionary Force, Craftworld Biel-Tan. Rejoice cousins, for I have come to save you from your incompetence and kill your enemies.”

The Admiral-Marquis stayed silent. He had already to restrain himself not to order his subordinate captains to open fire on the first Biel-Tan warships which were – a bit late – announced at distant Gates in Nightmare Avenue.

“Thank you, *little* cousin,” replied Admiral Y’Polleon in both of their names. “How would we be able to survive without your help?”

“I have ten battleships, twenty-five cruisers and seventy-five escorts,” the Craftworld Farseer declared, ignoring superbly the mockery of Y’Polleon. “I have an army of two hundred thousand warriors ready to murder the Mon-keigh. Remove your forces from my path and allow my warships to annihilate the enemy presence in Port Shard.”

“This is...” he wanted to say ‘a folly’, but Xindrell was faster than him.

“This is an excellent idea! I and Admiral-Marquis Ysclyth are going to disciple severely our wayward subordinates, allowing you clear space lines to invade Port Shard!”

Farseer Hycklandir watched the noble of the Falling Moon with suspicious eyes before cutting off the communication.

“We...Biel-Tan is not going to forgive us, ever, if we use one of their fleets as bait.” And this ‘Opal Expeditionary Fleet’ was a considerable force. Madrax Ysclyth couldn’t remember a time when so many of these arrogant hypocrites had come so close to Commorragh.

“I don’t care,” replied Xindrell Y’Polleon. “Commorragh is under attack, and unless we retake Port Shard immediately, the only other strategy we have for us will be a headlong charge into the Port of Lost Souls.” He didn’t say ‘directly in front of the Mon-keigh super-batteries’, but the Master of the Nightmare Avenue heard him loud and clear. “If I have to sacrifice the fleet of this imbecile to reconquer Port Shard, so be it. Between the displeasure of Dynast Kraillach and the displeasure of these delusional Aspect Warriors, I choose the latter every day.”

The Admiral had a point. One was going to plunge you in a pool of metal in fusion if you failed him before resurrecting you and torturing your body and your soul anew, the Biel-Tan Farseers could only rip your mind and body once.

“I can’t fault you for this reasoning.” Madrax voiced aloud. “Now let’s clear the way for our ‘friends’ and throw some of the most expendable Cults and lone raiders for good measure...”

**Secret Sections of the Webway**

**The Black Library of Chaos**

The population of the Imperium of Mankind was, by the lowest estimates, around several quintillions. Of those, only an incredibly tiny minority had any clue something like the Black Library of Chaos existed.

The guardians of said repository of knowledge had no intention to change this situation. Protecting the Black Library was to be their duty until death or Cegorach released them, and they already had a lot of enemies to safeguard their legendary realm against.

The Black Library, for all its nearly-mythical reputation and its formidable array of defences, was regularly the target of the daemonic and many enemies. Some of them were Aeldari. Some belonged to the other races: the greenskins for example had an annoying tendency to find the tunnels leading to the approaches by virtue of not being intelligent enough to recognise they were completely lost.

Contrary to one might think, being admitted inside was no guarantee of safety. The only common point between the billions of books, scrolls, and every document Cegorach’s servants had been able to acquire was the subject of the Warp. The Black Library was without question the greatest repository of knowledge and the myriad of horrors it was able to unleash on an unprepared galaxy. As such, some of the knowledge was contained in books a Conclave of Puritan Inquisitors would have been delighted to throw in the nearest star the moment they were able to confiscate them.

The Inquisition would have been justifiably horrified to learn the Harlequins had after the equivalent of hundreds of years of peregrination been able to acquire musings and writings of the nine Traitor Primarchs and their chief lieutenants like the *Book of Magnus*, the *Treaties of Dark Justice* and many proscribed books besides.

There was no denying these texts were extremely corruptive and dangerous for every living being with a soul. Alas, compared to some of the imprisoned lore kept in the most defended sections, it was downright tame. Cegorach had been able to keep out of Slaanesh’s greedy claws many works dating from the War in Heaven dictated by the Old Ones. Many Empires infiltrated and brought low by the Primordial Annihilator had disappeared totally from realspace...but here in the Black Library, some of their memories survived, dire warning about the perils of the Warp.

This was why the Black Library was defended by a psychic barrier which had become a rarity as the 35th millennium continued outside the Webway. This was also why the only known Altar of Cegorach existed at the heart of this secretive sub-realm. The Black Library mustn’t fall to the forces of Chaos. This was something Cegorach had never made any secret of to its servants, and the Harlequins always had several contingencies to deny the slaves of the Four everything should the gates of the Library be breached.

This wasn’t the reason why tens of thousands of Harlequins had gathered here and now in the heart of the Black Library.

On an obsidian plinth, there was a tome of extraordinary beauty. This book was not made of paper or any material a writer would use; no, it was made of an exquisite crystal. And while it was easy to describe the plinth supporting it, the colour of the tome and its main characteristics were near-impossible. The best way to call this artwork of the Black Library was mesmerizing.

It had been there since the Fall of the Eldar. And no one, including the Harlequins and the guardians, had been able to read it. Chains of light had protected the book, keeping its content a secret well-guarded. The rare beings who had managed to reach it and test the esoteric protection were still regretting it...assuming one was willing to jump into the black hole which had swallowed them.

Until now.

The chains of the book had faded away, and immediately thirteen Solitaires of the Harlequins had appeared from nowhere to guard the work of their deity.

Time had no meaning in this place, and so it could have been mere seconds or long years before the first Harlequin Masque came to read the orders Cegorach had written for them. But come they did. A Twilight Troupe of the Masque of the Sunset Reflexion was the first honoured by the Trickster God. The Masque of the Penumbral arrived as the High Avatar of the Sunset Reflexion bowed down to the Solitaire leader and departed without a word.

For each Masque the process was repeated with an exacting precision.

Not every servant of Cegorach who was allowed to read the contents was a great Troupe or Masque leader. For the Masque of the Weeping Dawn, it was a Trouper. The Masque of the Silent Shroud would receive their commands from a Master Mime. The Masque of the Mourning Mist vanished after their Warlock read and bowed, tearful but obedient.

This reaction was not uncommon as more and more Troupes arrived to the Black Library. As befitting Cegorach, the message was one of folly and tricks. Victory was the goal, but the price the Harlequins and the rest of the Aeldari remnants may have to pay would not be small. Several Great Harlequins, beings who had ordered planetary genocides, sang funeral melodies as they fled the secret tunnels to accomplish His will.

Tens of thousands Harlequins walked into the dark corridors to hear the plan that might, at great cost, give them a chance to defeat She-Who-Thirsts, Doom of the Aeldari. Hundreds of Light, Dark and Twilight Troupes renewed their oaths to the First Fool as unknown to them, their deity was watching them in the shadows and gave them His benediction before they went to war.

 Cegorach could be cruel, as befitted the God of Folly and Enigmas, but He was not capricious for the sake of it.

The hour was too grave, the battle to come too important.

And as a Dark Troupe of the Soaring Spite departed, the sole Aeldari deity to remain free and uninjured from the Fall knew three Masques had not rushed to the Black Library to receive His instructions.

The Laughing God was not surprised. For all the thoughts of the Farseers that the Great Harlequins were directly communicating with Him personally, in reality his control of the Masques was indirect by necessity. She-Who-Thirsts’ hunters were still in pursuit, seeking those who knew a time before the Fall.

No, these Masques would not come, and it did not take a Seer-God to guess where they were going instead.

Dreaming Shadow; Frozen Stars; Shattered Mirage; He could only hope they were going to fail in their endeavours.

The crystal book closed again and the chains of light returned to protect the tome.

Cegorach and his thirteen Solitaires had long vanished in the Webway by then.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

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

**Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius**

Theodora and the core of Brigade Silver Rose mustn’t have stayed one full minute on the surface of the Zel’harst cavern between the moment they exited the Titan-sized tunnel-gates and the instant they ran in the Ambull-dug underground paths.

But it was far enough for the Abbess-Crusader to realise it was a war where her infantry had no place into. The landscape managed to be both strangely seducing with crystal flowers by the billions and utterly horrifying with cascades of acid and eldritch energies thrown by the enemy.

The fighting was terrifying and furious. All the God-Engines of the Legio Defensor and Legio Aeris Aestus had begun firing. There were fifty-six Titans, the great majority of the Warhound, Reaver and Warlord classes, and they were firing an apocalyptic bombardment on the Drukhari defences. Volcano Cannons and other macro weaponry rarely seen outside of Imperial Navy’s warships was relentlessly sending the long-ears straight to meet their damned deities. The Knights and the growing numbers of Mechanicus and Guard artillery pieces were adding their weight to the storm of destruction.

The monsters of Zel’harst were not staying idle, of course. But Lady Weaver had finally committed the Dragon Armours into the inferno, and the light attack crafts of the Eldar were thoroughly massacred as they tried to execute a flank attack against the Titans.

Dark spires were falling. Xenos anti-air batteries were exploding or vanishing in gigantic explosions.

And despite the aura of darkness and terror the impossibly tall and dark walls were projecting, Theodora knew deep inside that this gigantic series of fortifications were never going to stop them.

They had a Living Saint, a Custodes and the favour of the God-Emperor.

Theodora was not one of those clerks who were so stupid as to proclaim an imminent victory wherever a Custodian arrived on the battlefield, but so far the sheer number of xenos exterminated and the events unfolding in Commorragh promised salvation for Mankind and doom for the enemies of the God-Emperor.

“And you will accept His Might, when the walls of xenos oppression crumble against His Power...” Galatea murmured next to her.

The elderly commander shook her head in slight amusement. Her pupil had always been fond of these sermons based on the *Lectitio Divinitatus*.

Her thoughts concentrated again on the fighting to come. The underground of Commorragh was far from empty, and for all the Ambulls had excavated the tunnel ahead of them and ate the resistance they met, the risk to meet opposition was extremely fight.

And indeed less than ten seconds after, the first ranks of the advancing Atlantis 2nd Infantry fifty metres in front of her began to fire at lone Eldar emerging from the shadows.

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR AND FOR HIS SAINT!”

“AVE IMPERATOR!”

“THE GOD-EMPEROR PROTECTS! KILL ALL THE XENOS AND LET THE EMPEROR SORT THEM OUT!”

The charge of the Frateris Templar slaughtered the three or four dozen monsters and the towering abomination they had brought with them. Some of the treacherous long-ears tried to retreat, but a platoon-sized of Ambulls had run back, attracted by the noise, and in a few seconds the Eldar were all dead.

“They are coming,” Galatea said grimly, shooting a half-mangled xenos in the head just to be sure. Indeed in the distance it was impossible to mistake the loathsome laughter and war cry of the enemy for anything else.

“They are going to regret it,” replied the Abbess-Crusader. “Move the Sunworms to the first line.”

According to the Biologis Magi who had made the briefing, the Sunworm had evolved on the same planet as the Ambull. Naturally, the Eldar of Commorragh had captured many specimens, evidently wondering how they could torture worms requiring contact with sunlight to survive. There had been thousands of cages filled with them in the Port of Lost Souls, and the moment resistance had been crushed, the Sunworms were permanently placed under special lamps provided by the Mechanicus.

 “MON-KEIGH! KNOW YOU ARE GOING TO SCREAM UNDER THE BLADES OF HOUSE KRAILLACH!”

Theodora didn’t give a command. The Sunworms were under the control of someone far more saintly than her and unable to miss this provocation.

The Sunworms released the light and the energy they had accumulated for hours. For humans, it was like an unpleasant flash had been created. For the Eldar and their abominations, it was like a second sun was born. The xenos were damned and lived in a realm of darkness and twilight. Their senses were overwhelmed in less than a second by the light of the God-Emperor and hundreds collapsed or fell to their knees, screaming and begging their deities for a salvation they didn’t deserve.

“FIRE! FIRE AND SUN!” The tunnel dug by the Ambulls allowed ten men and women to stand side by side. Even a bad marksman could not miss this crowd of defenceless enemies and her Frateris did her proud. The first volley slaughtered the xenos, the second decimated them, and the third absolutely murdered the core of their counterattack force. In five minutes, the tunnel the xenos had used to sneak upon them was filled with Eldar corpses.

“FOR THE SAINT! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR AND THE SAINT!”

A second wave of enemies arrived, and more Ambulls arrived to massacre them. Surviving Helspiders jumped to meet their creators in a lethal embrace.

The air was filled with death, blood and screams of anger. Theodora ordered the Atlantis 2nd to follow the Ambulls with seventy-plus Sunworms and the spiders, supported by the Claire 3rd, while she used the Atlantis 1st to clean the xenos tunnel of its heretical dwellers. The possibility of being flanked had to be eliminated.

“THE NEW AGE OF REBIRTH IS AT HAND!” Galatea screamed. “KILL THE ELDAR!”

The first lines of the Atlantis 1st ran to meet the enemy, flamers, lasguns and grenades introducing the sadistic creatures to the concepts of death, humiliation, and having their arrogance trampled by the servants of the God-Emperor.

And the Eldar-built tunnel got larger - more than thirty soldiers could form a line side by side now – more and more horrors came. Some of the Mechanicus Magi had uttered terms like ‘Pain Engines’, ‘Haemunculi’ or ‘Deep Dwellers’, but frankly the differences between these monsters had not interested the Abbess-Crusaders very much. Incendiary weaponry worked against all of them, the precise volleys of lasguns were murdering them, and she could very well live without knowing the difference between the mutated beasts these freaks had created for their sick amusement.

“Their resistance is getting more fanatical,” her second told her after a few seconds. “I think we have found one of the resistance nodes which gave the Ambulls so many problems in the last hour.”

“That’s why we equipped the heavy platoons with Plasma Guns and Meltas,” it had cost Bishop Martin a few favours to change the ‘standard’ donation, but the Atlantis 1st had always believed speed was of the essence on a battlefield, and while Mortars and Lascannons were efficient, their sheer weight in a confined environment generated countless problems, beginning with the speed of a military operation.

“Surely the enemy is going to learn they can’t continue to fight us this way!” one of the members of Galatea’s staff voiced his astonishment. “Their armours are not built to resist battlefield punishment...”

But the ‘Dark Ones’, as the slaves they had freed from the hellish prisons called them, came back in strength like they had done dozens of time since this battle had begun. And once again, the commanding officer of the Division Atlantis-Divine was perfectly willing to teach the xenos before they died why you didn’t charge the firepower of the Frateris Templar unless you had far more armour than these arrogant long-ears possessed.

Approximately three minutes of one-sided slaughter at the cost of six dead and ten wounded, the counterattack was ordered and the Frateris formation shattered the debris of the enemy’s company and the annihilation phase was given. Needless to say, no quarter was given.

“Lady Abbess, we believe we have found why the xenos opposed so much resistance!” one of the numerous Priests included in the ranks of the Frateris unit called her. Theodora abandoned the mop-up to her subordinates and passed into a large tunnel, itself leading to a gargantuan throne hall.

The statue was definitely the eye-catching attraction of the hall. It was...maybe thirty metres tall? Since every possible entrance was way far too narrow and small to allow the passage of something like this, either the Eldar had used their techno-sorcery to transport it there, or it had been created on-site.

Predictably, it represented one of the Eldar leaders...totally naked, holding chains and whips.

Trust the monsters to be exasperating and lamentable to the point no one could contest them anymore the title of most depraved species of the galaxy.

This wasn’t why she was still staring at the statue, however. It was because the statue was made of *auramite*. The subtle gold-look alike colour was impossible to mistake for something else once you had seen the armour of the Saint and the Custodes.

“This statue will be worth a fortune...once we have cut it down into transportable parts.” And unfortunately, she had neither the tools nor the time to care about it. And according to her instructions, she was supposed to call the Mechanicus extraction teams to care about it. Damn it. Fortunately, the discovery reward would still apply, so the Atlantis 1st soldiers were not going to lack funds to operate in the coming months...

At least the cogboys were likely to be very pleased the Frateris Templar had killed the masters of this place. Part of the decoration included several impaled Tech-Priests of Mars, who had been tortured and affixed quantities of eldritch things which were definitely not mechadendrites.

“Be careful!” the elderly Abbess barked as several of her soldiers were shifting through the series of museum-worth pieces. “The Eldar are fond of lethal traps!”

“I found it! I found it!” One young woman shouted, attracting the attention of all soldiers searching for anything interesting in the room. Theodora recognised her as one of the last recruits they had taken from Claire 47 to bring the veteran companies of the Atlantis 1st back to their full strength. Brunhilda was the first name if she wasn’t mistaken.

The object of her joy was a small black elongated object, and slowly a holo-projector activated, revealing to hundreds of eyes the three-dimensional image of what looked very much like a human starfighter.

“Definitely going to have to call the Mechanicus to avoid any misunderstandings...” Theodora Gaius whispered, as she saw a bright future *and* a mountain of problems coming on the horizon.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Utar’ragh**

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

**Marshal Lorelei Moltke**

It had to be nice, having millions of Tech-Priests cooperative and willing to satisfy each and every of your demands. For herself, Lorelei was not and in all likelihood would never be called ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’ or any saintly title by the cogboys.

Not counting the current war raging in the Eldar Webway, the Mordian Marshal had to cooperate four times with large-scale deployments of the Adeptus Mechanicus in the past. To say these experiences had been thriving successes would have required a lot of amasec to get drunk beforehand.

Magi and Archmagi were always considering the affairs of the Imperial Guard unworthy of attention when compared to their objectives. Fair was fair, Lorelei Moltke could agree the value of a STC was far more important than the lives of an entire regiment. But generally, the Imperial Guard officers like herself weren’t able to tell, because the cogboys never told anything important to anyone.

The good news was that today, the Commissars around her and the influence of the Saint were sufficient to obtain some answers.

The bad news was that the initial attack of the Helspiders against the wall of Utar’ragh had revealed several caches of ancient plasma and laser technology the xenos had stolen from humanity, and now thousands of Tech-Priests were refusing to make their precious Ordinatus fire again by fear of damaging more precious archeotech!

“Archmagos,” she said to the commander of the 7th Skitarii Legion. “I regret very much the potential risk of destruction the archeotech held by the xenos will suffer,” this was really a huge lie, “but I fear we have no choice to risk it! There are millions of mercenaries’ xenos and Eldar abomination preparing their counterattack behind the second wall of Utar’ragh. I need the considerable firepower of the *Volcano’s Wrath*...and I need the *Omnissiah’s Lance* too.”

In many ways, the initial ‘feint’ Lady Weaver had forged in the blood of the Eldar had functioned too well. Unlike the rumours of Zel’harst, the much diminished swarm had not inspired limitless terror to the enemy – understandable because for each insect marching to Utar’ragh, one hundred had gone to Zel’harst. As a result, these crimson-armoured Eldar had not used their own version of chemical warfare or other ‘mini-Exterminatus’ weapons. Thus the Mechanicus had been able to pillage fortresses, xenos museums and former manufactorums at will.

Of course, the Imperium didn’t need to conquer Utar’ragh. The plan she was ordered to supervise demanded of the 3rd Army to fix the crimson-clad armies for as much time as possible. But against the thousands of portals vomiting legions of scum and monstrous xenos by the hundreds of thousands, even holding the line was going to require the help of the Mechanicus’ great creations. But for reasons no one had explained to her, Archmagos Rho-5-12-Oberon of Mars was only willing to take orders from Basilic-Delta-90-Ballista and not his fellow Archmagi of the 5th and 8th Skitarii Legions.

Clearly the foolhardy Tech-Priest was not going to be a happy cogboy when the Living Saint demanded explanations from him. The fate of Lichtenlade before Pavia and now those of this idiot of Ludendorff had proved beyond question that your high rank was not going to save your life if the Emperor’s Angel had decided you had failed the God-Emperor and the Imperium.

But Lady Weaver was at Zel’harst, and Lorelei Moltke was not going to ask for an intervention of her superior now. It would be an acknowledgement of weakness, and all the cogboys would try to step on her prerogatives and her authority later.

“Should the Ordinatus provide their unceasing support against the xenos hordes and the 7th Legion pledge more than forty percent of its Skitarii effectives to reinforce my infantry and armoured regiments, all archeotech acquisition efforts will be given to our allies of the Mechanicus between the second and fifth wall.”

It was in many ways stopping the pillage of the cogboys now for more problems in a few hours, but Lorelei needed the largest beachhead to prepare defensive lines for the 3rd Army, and the Mechanicus...well, if they were willing to take their chance with a person they had decided to call ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’, who was she to interpose herself?

“Acceptable,” the Archmagos canted after a long series of buzzes and weird noises that they used to communicate between cogboys, before leaving the big transport she used as her mobile headquarters.

Precisely one hundred and twenty seconds later, the Volcano Cannon of the *Volcano’s Wrath* fired, perforating the eldritch shields of the second walls, blasting away gigantic chunks of black fortifications, and undoubtedly killing thousands of xenos.

And its brother-machine the *Omnissiah’s Lance* was at last leaving out the largest tunnel-gate they had captured in the Helspider offensive.

“May the God-Emperor protect us from our allies,” Lieutenant-General Marcus Hannover prayed, and neither Lorelei Moltke nor the Commissars had the energy to burn telling him his words were wrong.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Mar’lych**

**Secret Haemonculi Labs**

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

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

“It seems that somehow, a Necron infiltration force has managed to enter Mar’lych with us,” Jeremiah whispered. “They are busy wrecking havoc in the Eldar inner citadel and our servo-owls have been able to detect the xenos equivalent of their Tech-Priests move against the tunnel-gates we travelled through to reach this sub-realm.”

“So the Necrons’ invasion is imminent.” Logan, the sniper of the Kill-Team voiced the words for formality’s sake.

“Do we have an idea why they have chosen this...curious method of approach?” murmured Sergeant Isaac Flynn of the Iron Drakes. “I will admit plans don’t hold together very well once battle is joined, but it appeared the Necron leadership had agreed with the approach of War Plan Olympic. The last thing the xenos attacking Commorragh with us need is to have an insufficient quantity of troops trapped on the wrong side of a Webway Gate.”

“I don’t think this is the idea of the Necron leadership,” Viktor intervened. “I think we are seeing the Necron thief trying to add plenty of unwilling subjects to his collection.” All the Heracles Warden and Iron Drakes members of the infiltration force frowned.

“So Trazyn has followed us to Commorragh,” Jeremiah sighed. Why wasn’t he surprised? “Our methods aren’t going to work with this troublemaker nearby. We assumed as long as we were cut off from the Army Group and our allies, setting these perfidious bastards against each other had the best chances of success while we went to sabotage the genetic facilities.”

“I agree,” the green-armoured Space Marine replied in a barely audible tone. “We are out of time. I already see two guards running four hundred metres away. In a few minutes, they are going to reinforce this entire facility and our chances to get out of there alive will be...minimal.”

There was no counter-argument. For all the inbuilt resistance of Space Marines, they were not invincible. It was true the common Drukhari weapons were nothing more than toys against an Astartes’ power armour, but they were only eleven Heracles Warden and eight Iron Drakes left now. Jeremiah had lost Jonathan to a self-destructing xenos weaponry and two Iron Drakes, and by an ill-turn of fortune, this included their Apothecary, had perished.

Now, Jeremiah Isley had never been impressed much by something like ‘unfavourable odds’, but by his lowest estimate, there were one or two million Eldar mutants and abominations to take care of each Space Marine in this very citadel.

And they had no wish to be taken prisoner and be vivisected by the crazy sociopaths of the Commorragh society.

Jeremiah glanced at each of the Astartes he had chosen to come with him, meeting only steely and determined expressions. Then he glanced on the spectacle below their resting place.

The best thing that could be said about it was that it fell short of the labs of some Nurgle cultists they had killed in a mission long ago. Still, even for a Space Marine, it was very bad.

There were hundreds of thousands of amniotic tubes on this level alone, attended by mutants and abominations. It was impossible to say if they had once been Eldar or from another species. In each of these tubes, surrounded by devices spreading feelings of pain and suffering, a young Eldar was waiting to be born, its growth accelerated by atrocities committed on dying slaves and unending screams of agony from beings which should have been long dead but were kept alive by heretical and odious processes.

Every device, every cocoon, every table, every instrument, was a dark mockery of the hospitals and the place of healing Lady Weaver had built at Nyx. If there was something pleasant to look at in this laboratory of abominations, Isley hadn’t seen it. If there was one crime against life the ‘Dark Ones’ had not committed, the former Alpha Legionary had no idea which atrocity it was.

Each of these lives the creatures manufactured was one of the Damned, he didn’t need an Inquisitor to be aware of it. No good could come from these pulsing machines of cruelty and suffering. Each Eldar who would be created by these monsters would become a monster too and perpetuate the cycle.

No wonder the Emperor’s Children had never made a serious effort to invade Commorragh from the Webway Gates in the Eye of Terror. The denizens of this dark dimension were already serving one of the Four in every way which mattered.

“I do not see the key-target of Objective B,” Logan said.

“He must be on a level we haven’t scouted,” one of the Iron Drakes battle-brother whispered. “There are fifteen levels above this one, and at least two below.”

The Chapter Master had heard some Planetary Governors joke about ‘growing an army in the mothers’ wombs’, but their xenos enemies had evidently taken this adage and twisted it to their amoral minds.

It was likely there were more than ten million Eldar being prepared for accelerated birth in this gene-lab of horrors. If there were more like it elsewhere in Commorragh, the Eldar would be able to recover from their losses with an incredible facility.

“There are more Necron bombs exploding above us,” Charles, the Techmarine of the Iron Drakes, informed them. “A first tunnel to the Port of Lost Souls has been activated.”

A chorus of shrieks echoed in the distance. It was certainly an invasion alert for the xenos.

“The choice is out of our hands, cousins, brothers,” Isley announced, not bothering with a whisper anymore. “You know what we have come to do. Viktor, Charles, once you reach the main power source, set the time for self-destruction on ten minutes. All encounters with Haemonculi must end with the xenos abominations dead and incinerated. Destroy this lair of perversion and abominable science! In the name of the Emperor, let none survive!”

“FOR THE EMPEROR!”

Pierre was the first to smash something, the Venerable Dreadnought having decided to jump-crash right into the middle of the gigantic vats. In a couple of seconds, dozens of tubes were pulverised, conduits filled with nutrient-rich liquids were demolished and plenty of pain devices silence with no hope whatsoever of repair.

The lab-guardians shrieked and tried to interpose themselves between the Astartes and the vat-grown army. This was their first and last mistake. The bolters of the Iron Drakes found their marks and without a head, most of the horrors of Commorragh died like every normal enemy. Isley ran towards the level below, using his Volkite weapon and his blade to exact the maximum of damage.

Five Eldar were guarding the chokepoint to the other lair of Eldar birth-creation. He eliminated them before they had the time to do more than touch the handle of their weapons. One demolition charge was placed out of view on one of the supporting devices showing all signs to be a xenos counter-gravity generator.

Several liquids which looked like the fuel they had torched in the Port of Lost Soul was set aflame and thrown onto the vats. There was no time for small actions, and in the next seconds Jeremiah Isley used his considerable experience to cause untold devastation and sabotage. This horror of a gene-lab was vast, but in fifty seconds he was proud to say that if the security teams didn’t arrive in the next minute, they would be nothing to save. Chemical solutions had been combined to create some of the most dangerous acids, Volkite shots had made sure there was plenty of fire, and there were three demolition charges along with the first one. All the Pain Engines and other living horrors were mercifully dead.

“HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU MON-KEIGH!”

The scream was so loud, so visceral, so filled with hate that the former Legionary almost jumped in surprise. But the enemy wasn’t there. The object responsible for this alarm was the xenos equivalent of a vox-caster, though naturally the Eldar had used lungs of someone and somehow made it work.

Isley destroyed it with his blade, and then went to another level to continue his work of destruction. All along he was pursued by the sound of the hateful voice, because of course the vermin had dispersed hundreds of ‘lung-relays’ in this facility to make sure everyone heard his voice.

“I PROMISE YOU WHATEVER VICTORY YOU STRIKE HERE WILL BE REWARDED BY A MILLION OF YOUR YEARS IN TORTURE!” Isley activated a grenade and let it fall into another vat containing something between five hundred and seven litres of an inflammable black-coloured substance. “NO! MAKE THAT TWO MILLION YEARS OF TORTURE! I WILL CLONE YOUR BEATING HEARTS AND DEVOUR THEM EACH TIME MY SLAVES BRING ME A MEAL!” The Heracles Warden commander almost smiled before throwing a bunch of torture instruments in a machine which looked like it was regulating the temperature of an aquarium...the fishes in it were definitely not friendly, it had to be said. “THE FORTRESS OF MAR’LYCH WILL HEAR YOUR SCREAMS FOR ALL ETERNITY!” Two guards in silver armours stormed in as he was leaving the level he had just thoroughly ‘sabotaged’, and their lamentable swordsman’s skills saw them eliminated in less than ten seconds. Seriously, this was really disappointing. If the loud-mouth was as old as Jeremiah thought, he should have learned the cardinal rule of not gloating before his opponents were permanently neutralised. It was like Voldorius all over again, but this time the enemy had long ears...

Apparently, whatever efforts to stop the wave of destruction spread by the Space Marines must have been as efficient as the attempts to stop him, because the next rant of the local megalomaniac was particularly impressive.

“KNEEL! KNEEL BEFORE THE MASTER OF THE PROPHETS OF FLESH URIEN RAKARTH! YOU ARE MADE TO BE SLAVES! YOU ARE MADE TO KNEEL BEFORE THE MAGNIFICENCE OF THE AELDARI CHOSEN! YOU WERE NOTHING BUT PRIMATES WHEN WE RULED THE STARS AND WHEN YOUR AGONY ENDS YOU WILL BE A SYMBOL OF FAILURE! I AM A GOD AND I SAY YOU ARE GOING TO DIE!”

Jeremiah Isley rolled his eyes...and then winced as the ‘lung-relays’ relayed the noise of an armoured fist hammering something far more fragile.

“PUNY GOD,” the voice of Pierre resonated thorough the facility.

“We have found the...thing powering the inventions and the labs of the Haemonculi, cousin,” the voice of the Iron Drake Techmarine was announced after the correct vox password. “We are preparing the detonators of the Melta demolition charges now.”

“PRIMARY OBJECTIVE B LOCATED AND KILLED,” Pierre grumbled, “TWENTY-PLUS CLONES OF RAKARTH ELIMINATED. TEN CLONES OF ASDRUBAEL VECT ACCOUNTED FOR. THE SABOTAGE OF THE COMMAND ROOM IS NEARLY COMPLETE.”

Jeremiah though at first it was too good to be true but no, as every Astartes replied using the correct protocols, it appeared they really had not suffered a single loss. The flames were beginning to finish the efforts of the two Chapters to ruin the future of the Commorragh Eldar.

“We leave using Exit E-4. Twenty more seconds of destruction, and then we let the monsters have fun searching the demolition charges about to blow their nice resurrection chambers.”

Perhaps Rakarth had more facilities like this one. It was extremely unlikely one of the most wanted enemies of the Imperium would have only one lab for sole contingency plan. But one thing was sure, the self-proclaimed ‘God’ was not going to use this lab for his ambitions or any other plan in the short-term. The loss in terms of resources and influence would be severe, no matter the outcome of the battle.

“We move on to the Corespur. We have other Haemonculi facilities to visit.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port Shard**

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

**Destruction-Overlord Sitkah**

“Nemesor, please contact our human allies and inform them that the Asuryani have decided to help the Drukhari slavers in this battle.”

“Yes, Destruction-Overlord.”

Sitkah watched as one by one, escorts, cruisers and battleships emerged from six different Gates into Port Shard. Her command battleship’s data-node compiled without difficulty the order of battle which had just arrived: ten battleships, twenty-five cruisers, and seventy-five escorts.

Moments after this invasion of vermin, three more Gates activated and eighty additional Drukhari escorts returned to their ruined shipyards.

“It appears the data we received on the different sub-species of the Aeldari descendants is wrong,” the subordinate of Phaerakh Neferten said. “The Asuryani and the Drukhari will fight together if given a sufficient incentive.”

Although in this instance, the female Necron Overlord believed it was maybe a genuine error on the thief’s part. The invasion of Commorragh was an unprecedented war, and during such exceptional events, the flesh beings’ cognitive abilities failed them and they took steps they would not consider with processors and unflinching logic.

“Are we going to recall the battleships from the Port of Lost Souls, noble Overlord?” one of the ten Crypteks behind her queried. “This Asuryani fleet, while potentially more dangerous than a Drukhari one, is largely within our capabilities to destroy...”

It was tempting, very tempting. But Sitkah wasn’t going to do it. The Port of Lost Souls had to be secured and the Necron phalanxes prepared to be deployed against the Drukhari points of resistance in the other sub-realms. And when it came down to it, if she sent back half of her fleet to Port Shard every time a fleet of the long-ears translated ready for battle, nothing would ever be done.

“No, we aren’t going to give them the honour of being crushed by our full fleet. I have a fate far worse in mind for our long-eared foes.”

Whoever was in command of the Asuryani was fleet was not a great tactician, that much could be said. The fleet of the arrogant Aeldari successors was forming two horizontal lines nearly perpendicular to each other. It had been considered obsolete by the end of the War in Heaven for sure.

“Release the C’Tan.”

“Yes, Destruction-Overlord. Maximum control on its necrodermis shell and the Tesseract?”

“Yes. The shard of Nyadra’zatha doesn’t need its full power to defeat ten battleships and support. And I think we can trust our ‘God’ to not show any mercy to the Asuryani and the Drukhari.”

Of all the C’Tan, the Mighty Exalted Lord of Flames, Infernos and Novas, the Burning One – yes, this was the title every Necron had to call him by and pray to at first – Nyadra’zatha had undoubtedly been the one most determined to conquer the Webway and hunt the Old Ones in their last hideouts. Its flames had devoured many parts of the Ancient Webway in its time, and Sitkah didn’t think it was going to need a lot of incentives to burn more and kill the favourite toys of the arrogant reptiles.

“Preparations complete, Overlord.”

“Release the C’Tan,” she repeated.

The enemy fleet fired first. The Asuryani fleet had no intention to enter the Necron fleet’s range. The batteries of her battleships began to fire back, not that there was much danger. The long-ears in command had once again taken the worst decision possible, and divided its fire between her three Cairn battleships, therefore lacking the firepower to cripple one.

A gigantic column of fire burst into existence and Nyadra’zatha screamed its hate in the Webway. The Burning One had two legs, two arms and one head like Necrons, Asuryani and Humans, but no one would have ever mistaken it for one member of these species. It was a tall shell of Necrodermis eternally consumed in flames. It was an arrogant monster with the power of the suns to justify its universe-sized sense of superiority.

The Asuryani were faster than the Drukhari to recognise their doom had come and tried to change course and lock their weapons on the C’Tan shard.

Before they had time to fire their weak pulsars Nyadra’zatha struck. Two of the battleships leading the first line were swallowed by the star flames. They were just the first ones, as the fire spread and three escorts became raging infernos plunging like meteors on the devastated docks of Port Shard.

This was the Storm of Heavenly Fire, and while it was much diminished it was as impressive as in the past.

Some warships had the time to strike back, but every energy shot or physical projectile was pulverised or diverted to strike a part of the local infrastructure.

In a third of the time it took to say it, the Drukhari ships were screaming torches and the power of the Lord of Fire was tearing apart and burning at the same time the last Asuryani warships.

Some ‘Aspect Warriors’ had managed to throw themselves out of their warships before the hulls became fiery graves, but they had just exchanged this death for a slower one. Nyadra’zatha pursued and disembowelled them fifteen by fifteen in a combination of a wheel of fire and some torture-fire that even the Aeldari probably didn’t deserve.

“Return the Burning One to its Tesseract Vault. I think the long-ears understand the lesson now.” Sitkah ordered. “The destabilisation matrixes are ready?”

“They are, Destruction-Overlord.”

“In this case begin our withdrawal from Port Shard and activate them. It’s time for the stolen suns of Port Shard to die.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

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

**Ninth Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

Freya had just shot down three xenos aircraft High Command had tentatively identified as ‘Razorwing Jetfighter’ when Hell came to Commorragh.

The warnings and alerts blared on every frequency, but it did not much good. In the space of four seconds, over three thousand Gates which had stayed inactive so far pulsed with baleful energies.

And then the enemy fleets came.

Not one, not two; over a dozen massive formations of capital warships, surrounded by a gigantic swarm of light attack craft. The cogitators tried desperately to account for the prodigious numbers of warships pouring into the Port of Lost Souls, but failed before the enormity of the task.

At the same time, new portals were also activating close to the Eversprings Gate and the landing grounds captured by the Imperial Guard. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of Eldar stormed out in a cacophony which was heard despite the distance.

“White Squadron form on me! White Squadron form on me!” White Leader screamed. “For the God-Emperor don’t let them reach the battle-line!”

The Nyxian noblewoman watched with horror the spectacle for a fraction of a second before pushing the afterburners to maximum military power and following the squadron leader into the fray. Somehow she didn’t think winning her fiftieth victory and the title Ace of Aces had implied ‘rewards’ like this one.

One of the xenos crescent-ships pulsed with eldritch green lights and many portals seemed to flicker out.

But too many Eldar ships had gotten through. The displays indicated tens of thousands light craft and this was more likely a fraction of the total.

The Imperial Navy starfighters, the flying machines of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Aeronautica Imperialis met the attack head-on.

This was nothing like Freya had ever trained for or had any experience of. This was a gigantic dogfight and this maelstrom of violence skill was not even the deciding factor anymore. Less than ten seconds in the melee she saw White Leader die as his Thunderbolt and one of the dagger-like xenos aircraft collided and mutually wiped out each other.

There was no grand strategy, no discipline anymore. It was just killed or be killed. Squadrons had disintegrated and all those who bore the aquila formed and reformed new squadrons on a whim and as chance dictated.

And suddenly after bringing down one more xenos bomber there were no more enemies coming.

For the first time, Freya looked at her energy and ammunition levels, which were deeply in the red. They had fought for nearly twenty-four minutes in this unprecedented aerial battle.

The young woman watched the fighters and all the other aerial engines of the fleet stream back to the battle-line, which had lost a lot of elements but was still standing valiantly, even as more and more warships had to be towed away.

It was almost unbelievable that so much happened in twenty-four minutes.

But they had held the line. And as the operators of the Fleet Carrier *The Great Quest* guided the scarred and battered remnants, there were ecstatic voices spreading the kind of news everyone had prayed for in the last hours.

The Salamanders were coming.

**Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr**

The Port of Lost Souls was presenting an apocalyptic spectacle as the Battle-Barge *Vulkan’s Wrath* arrived in this realm of the damned.

There were crippled ships and monumental explosions everywhere. In the first three seconds the flagship of the Salamanders fleet broke in half a xenos cruiser which had tried to got too close.

“It looks have the xenos called ‘Necrons’ have been forced to use their portal-collapsing weapons in the last minutes,” Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn declared as the tactical display tried to sort the mess they had upon their hands. “Only the portals fully under our control remain active.”

This was probably for the best, Vulkan N’Varr thought. The Eldar had struck in overwhelming force the Port of Lost Souls, and judging by the fury of the fighting continuing on the intact platforms, despite their courage and all their training, the forces of the Imperium had taken massive casualties.

“Your orders, Regent of Prometheus,” the Forgefather of the defunct Eighteenth Legion spoke out loud.

“Though the times are dark and the enemy is numerous, it won’t be said the sons of Vulkan will have stayed idle when the destiny of Mankind was fought in the Port of Lost Souls,” the Chapter Master said gravely before his expression grew more bloodthirsty. “Prepare all the teleportariums, brother. It is time to exact our long-awaited revenge on this monstrous xenos species.”

Advice and suggestions were exchanged with Captain Ronan of the Howling Griffons and Captain Alexis of the Silver Skulls, but in five minutes top more than ninety percent of the available battle-brothers aboard the fleet were ready.

“INTO THE FIRES OF BATTLE, BROTHERS!” the Regent of Nocturne bellowed, rising his massive Thunderhammer *Ignis Magnificat* without effort.

“UNTO THE ANVIL OF WAR!”

There was a flash of ozone, and then one second or an eternity later, five hundred Space Marines materialised by the sides of Mechanicus Skitarii bearing the symbols of the Ryza Forge-World.

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“FOR GUILLIMAN SON OF THE EMPEROR!”

“PRIMUS INTER PARES!”

“VULKAN LIVES! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

A gigantic firestorm was born, and in a moment the armies of the Eldar died, incinerated by the breath of Nocturne flamers and heavy weapons.

“FOR NOCTURNE! FOR THE IDEALS OF THE PRIMARCH!” Each strike of the *Ignis Magnificat* was breaking four or five long-eared xenos. Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn was carving a bloody path into the crimson armours of the Eldar, so fast even the Firedrakes had difficulty to follow his rhythm. “WE REMEMBER COWARDS! COME TO OUR BLADES! COME! THERE IS NOWHERE ELSE TO FLEE!”

The tide of battle had turned against the Eldar, Vulkan N’Varr realised. More of the cobelligerent metallic xenos called Necrons were deploying north of their position, disintegrating companies of pirates and murderous scum. The Ryza Mechanicus had regrouped, some of their Rangers mounting large beetles and ants to go on the offensive again.

But more importantly, the naval battle above their heads was won and the perfidious Drukhari of Commorragh knew it. How could they not? They were seeing many of their battleships disappear into the abyss, cruisers torn apart by the implacable fire of Astartes Strike Cruisers, and their superiors scream as Archmagos Belisarius Cawl teleported his elite forces directly in the vital compartments of their warships.

The time of reckoning was at hand. The raids of these abominations were going to cease.

“VULKAN LIVES!” The Forgefather screamed as a hundred-plus monsters burned in the pyres of judgement. “VULKAN LIVES AND HIS PUNISHMENT COMES IN FIRE!”

**First Naval Secretary Wolfgang Bach**

“Destruction-Overlord Sitkah informs us her ‘Anti-Dolmen Psy-Jamming Device’ will be able to stay activated for the next seventy-five hours,” Archmagos Thayer Sagami said in an extremely tone, even for a Mechanicus cogboy.

“Thank the Necron commander in my name, Archmagos,” formalities had to be respected, since it was in great part thanks to the Necrons they were all still alive and standing defiant.

The future Rogue Trader – that is, if they managed to get out of Commorragh alive – took a large breath and steeled his nerves again. It wasn’t time to show indecision and panic, obviously.

“So our window of opportunity is down to seventy-five hours.”

Some of his old instructors at Kar Duniash would have called it pessimism. Wolfgang preferred to call it a realistic outlook.

They had thought they would be able to handle everything the Drukhari and their mercenary allies would stand against them. Wolfgang wasn’t too proud to admit they had been completely wrong.

The Drukhari had truly recalled everything to reconquer the Port of Lost Souls, and by his best estimate, the ‘everything’ which had managed to get through before the Necrons disrupted the Webway Gates had included at least sixteen massive fleets and twenty armies. The precise count might be never known, but Archmagos Hediatrix had sent a preliminary report of seventy-five xenos battleships, six hundred and twenty cruisers, and over fifty-three thousand light craft destroyed.

About eighty-seven percent of these numbers had belonged to the crimson-clad long-ears, and the God-Emperor only knew how many were still waiting behind the Gates for a chance to finish the job. On the ground, it was thought the ‘Dark Ones’ had mustered the next best thing to fifty million warriors, all of them armed to the teeth. This time they had not faced inexperienced conscripts or the equivalent of children playing with real weapons. This time the real infantry of the Eldar had come to wage war, and the fighting had been vicious and utterly merciless.

The only reason they were still alive was because of the preparations they had taken to counter potential counterattacks. All long-range cannons and macro-batteries had been loaded and ready to fire when the skies darkened again such was the number of warships arrayed against them.

Nova cannons and other weapons of strategic importance had disintegrated four fleets and roughly twenty-five battleships plus escorts. The rest had begun to fire back and the carnage had been total.

If he survived this operation, he would have to watch again the recordings of these minutes, analyse the litany of desperate improvisations he had barked and see what he had done wrong. For now, the blonde-haired Naval Secretary knew that as correct some of his moves had been, there had been too many enemies to prevent a breakthrough.

The Drukhari and their horde of mercenaries and monsters had come like a tidal wave and there had been no time to intercept all outside killing range. The *Enterprise*, the *El Dorado*, and the *Utopia Planitia* had suffered their first casualties, though they were incredibly minor compared to the rest. Lady Weaver’s flagship lucky reputation had been more than confirmed, with less than two hundred dead crewmen.

The rest of the battle-line had been severely battered, however. The Emperor-class *Cerberus Engine* had died weapons blazing, taking in death three Eldar battleships and as many cruisers. The *Machine’s Stand* had behaved like its name implied, but it would need at least a year of reparations before being considered functional. The Abolition-class Bombardment Cruiser *Priceless Damage* was completely unresponsive, engines and most its weapons gone, and no one even knew if towing back was going to be humanly possible.

The Lunar-class *Red Fiefdom*, not completely repaired from the Battle of Pavia, had perished after taking over six hundred torpedoes. So had the Discovery-class *Fringe’s Exploration*, the Inferno-class *Vindication of Production*, and every surviving cruiser had taken a lot of casualties and damage only a true shipyard would be able to repair. The escorts of the Mechanicus had paid a proportional price to try saving their larger cousins. Three light cruisers, their last heavy frigate, seven frigates, ten more destroyers and six which would need total reconstructions to be functional again, two Titan-Transports, five Macro-Transports, one Fuel Transport and four non-specialised transports would never serve the Omnissiah again.

The rest of the Caribbean fleet had also paid heart-breaking losses. The Defensor fleet had lost the cruiser *Volcano Rage*, four more destroyers, and two minor transports. The Lunar-class *Fury of Jupiter* had preferred self-destroy when boarding murder-parties of Eldar were one door away from taking the bridge and the engines. The two Dauntless-class light cruisers had accompanied it in death. One Corvette, eight Destroyers, and five transports had fought and died like legends...and it had just been enough to give a stalemate until the Rescue Fleet arrived.

The Iron Drakes had lost the Strike Cruiser the *Relentless War*. The Frateris Templar captain of the *Dutiful Sentry* had rammed a xenos battleship and therefore saved the existence of the crippled *Holy Warrior*. Fifteen destroyers had given the souls and lives of their crews, leading an insane charge in the heart of the bloodbath and giving enough time for the *Enterprise* to devastate the enemy battle-line. The last Inquisition Frigates had died giving heavy orbital support. No one knew how many starfighters and atmospheric fighter-bombers had found martyrdom, but the air wings had given everything in their hearts to the God-Emperor. At one against ten or twenty enemies, they had stopped the bombers and the jetfighters of the enemy permanently. Many, many pilots had achieved the distinction of Ace of Aces with fifty victories, and there were even cases of claiming kill-counts over one hundred kills.

And of course the losses had been considerable on the ground. Three Knights of House Durbach had gone down fighting five metres-tall horrors many the brass had already nicknamed the ‘Flesh-Towers’. The 9th Skitarii Legion had bled hard in oil and broken machinery, with casualties approaching twenty-five percent. The 3rd Legion of Ryza had fared even worse with twenty-nine percent of dead, wounded and missing, though their Legion was far larger and thus somehow more functional after...after that. But Archmagos Dominus Mu-Sever-400101 had been slain, his bodyguards and himself unable to kill an army of Mandrakes fast enough to save their lives. The Petersburg 47th Infantry, who had not yet been deployed against Utar’ragh defences, had lost sixty percent of its guardsmen in thirty minutes and all its commanding officers were dead.

But the Salamanders, the Howling Griffons, and the Silver Skulls were there, along with a new Ark Mechanicus and two more battleships. They had held long enough to secure the Port of Lost Souls for seventy-plus hours.

“Do we know what the Necrons have done to Port Shard?” the de facto fleet commander asked. He had not questioned the wisdom of the Necron withdrawal when there had been far more pressing things to care about, but the anomalous energy readings now compiling on the hololiths did not reassure him.

“The only logical explanation is that the Necrons found a way to destabilise the containment-matrixes stabilising the three suns of Port Shard,” declared one of the Nyxian Magi in a tone that was very impressed.

Wolfgang looked at the suns right above the Enterprise in the Port of Lost Souls and estimated the gravity effects and the radiations aftershocks of such an action. Then he returned his attention to the Magos.

“We’re speaking of a potential supernova,” Wolfgang Bach considered it a triumph of self-control he didn’t begin screaming.

“The simulations are running, but such a potential outcome is not impossible,” the Magos shook his mechadendrites like unleashing such gigantic explosions was a perfectly rational decision. “The destruction of the sub-realm known as Port Shard is considered certain.”

And since the 4th Skitarii Legion had abandoned the Sprawls when the Necron did, the only tunnel-gates or other exits from the Port of Lost Souls were the Gates the Necrons had somehow ‘prepared’ with their strange green technology. So the Imperium could still travel to Pavia by the Eversprings Gate, and its armies could reach the fortified sub-realms of Mar’lych, Zel’harst and Utar’ragh.

The flanks and the rear were clear of serious opposition...for now.

“The Salamanders are finishing their preparations to advance into Zel’harst,” Archmagos Thayer Sagami returned after a few minutes with the vox-operators. “A demi-company and the Silver Skulls will stay here to help us secure the Port properly from the remnants of the armies and light craft fleets which have hidden after the Eldar defeat. The Howling Griffons have volunteered to go help the forces assigned to Utar’ragh.”

“And the Mechanicus reinforcements?”

It wouldn’t be polite to say an Archmagos was sulking, but that was exactly what his interlocutor began to do at the largely inoffensive question.

“They are deploying to support the Salamanders.”

This was for the best, Wolfgang supposed, though he knew saying it aloud would not made him popular among the cogboys. Zel’harst was the priority, and the Necrons had decided for some reason the citadel of Mar’lych was going to be their separate ground theatre.

“There is more bad news,” the Archmagos said. “Our ammunition expenditure is exceeding all pre-war projections. Army Group Caribbean is using las-cells, shells and other ordnance to levels previously unmatched since the last Black Crusade. The Logis don’t think we have more than one hundred and twenty hours of war supplies to continue the fight.”

“Prepare a new report to Lady Weaver,” the blonde-haired Naval Secretary replied unsurprised. He had seen what his superior considered ‘appropriate artillery bombardment’, and this apparently included placing then thousand Earthshaker cannons side by side and pummelling the enemy until everything was dead. If the same strategies were applied in the sub-realm of Zel’harst...

“By your will,” the Tech-Priest bowed. “Do you think we can declare Objective G accomplished?”

For the first time in an hour, Wolfgang was able to find to smile.

“I think I can answer positively your question, Archmagos,” Objective G had called for the maximum of Eldar fleets to be recalled to Commorragh. By any standard, this was a success. Yes, they had not been able to destroy all the reinforcements – they were certainly a lot of Eldar warships and captains scurrying around trying to reactivate their Webway Gates - but the Eldar fleets had come back to the Port of Lost Souls. In fact, they may have succeeded perhaps over their most ambitious goals. A Biel-Tan fleet had been destroyed in Port Shard by the Necrons, and plenty of Eldar with similar banners and colours had been seen in the limited fighting of the Sprawls. “Objective G has definitely been accomplished. For the first time in centuries, I think the galaxy has a shortage of Eldar raids.”

**Heart of Commorragh**

**Nightmare Avenue, approaches of Port Shard**

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

**Admiral-Marquis Madrax Ysclyth**

There were moments in your existence where it was difficult for a commander to say who was to be rewarded with a visit in the torture pits.

This moment was one, no hesitation about it.

This was a bloody disaster, a colossal defeat, a Khaine-bloody catastrophe, a Dark Muse-inspired humiliation...he could have voiced many, many descriptions of this nature, but he hadn’t the time.

“You know, Admiral,” the Admiral-Marquis said conversationally to his counterpart of the Falling Moon, “I wondered what could honestly push the Mon-keigh at first to invade our beloved Dark City. Really, we know they don’t like our raids and our methods of captivity, and these...lesser species have always been delusional where qualities are concerned. They seem to believe honour, faith, and loyalty among other things are important!”

“And now?” Xindrell Y’Polleon raised an eyebrow.

“Now I wonder if the Mon-keigh and the Yngir leaders are just outright insane and have joined together because their craziness will be more and more contagious as this battle goes on.”

It said something that before the Necrons unleashed what was certainly one of their broken ‘Star Gods’, he had never considered it.

“I have nothing better to propose,” the other Admiral spoke with non-feigned regret. “And on this, I suggest we turn our minds to working about a plan to reconquer the Port of Lost Souls. Somehow, I don’t think we will able to use Port Shard anymore.”

Madrax laughed, and he was surprised how hysterical the sound appeared to his own ears. There was nothing left of Port Shard, and Y’Polleon knew it very well. Destabilising the suns of Commorragh had certainly ruptured the Webway in this sub-realm, but even if it hadn’t, three suns being released from their containment-matrixes at the same time must have been like seeing the Fall in more luminous and less daemonic. Somehow, the Talon officer didn’t believe ruined shipyards could handle the gravity, temperature, radiations and shockwaves of several supernovas.

No, Port Shard was utterly gone. At least Port Carmine had ‘merely’ been incinerated and would be able to be rebuilt in dozens of cycles, assuming the securities of the Webway which had activated when the Mon-keigh threw their damned realm-killers could be overturned somehow.

Of course, this assumed they won the cataclysmic battle raging in the sub-realms of Commorragh. And Madrax Ysclyth was not as confident as he had been of this outcome now.

“I think that’s going to be the easy part; there is nothing we can do about the Port of Lost Souls as long as the Yngir keep the Gates closed. And even if by some miracle of Khaine we could open one, I would never send one fleet alone and unopposed. Not after...”

He shivered again, the screams of torture of those who had failed him continuing around him and yet failing to provide him any pleasure. Everything was turning rancid and unpleasant as the Mon-keigh and the Yngir demolished fleet after fleet and army after army.

“As much as it pains me to admit it,” Y’Polleon said slowly, “we may not afford one more failed offensive like this. Between the catastrophe of the Port of Lost Souls and the four fleets we lost in Port Shard, a good fifth of the Xelian fleets have been annihilated. Since the Mon-keigh brutes have been reinforced and nothing stops them from calling for more, we have to make sure our blows strike true. I fear...I fear every ship we have is irreplaceable. It is my opinion armies and ground raiding forces are now far cheaper and less valuable than our warships. Let’s keep the reinforcement fleets concentrated for the killing blow; the Necron devices won’t be able to deny the work of our ancestors for long. Let’s reinforce the Citadels first; we must prevent the primates from storming into Commorragh proper.”

This...this was not a bad way to look at the storm of defeats and the consequences they had to adapt to. There was no denying the shipyards were gone; now the most important things were to save the Haemonculi labs, the slave-factories, and most of the valuable treasures and infrastructure of Commorragh.

“I can’t believe I am saying this...” Madrax grimaced. “But...”

He wanted to say ‘we should begin an evacuation of Commorragh’, but two silver armours, three crimsons and five dark blue on his bridge convinced him to stay quiet.

Asking for an evacuation would be tantamount to admit defeat. If the invaders had been an alliance of Craftworlds or another faction of Aeldari long forgotten after Fall, this would have already caused huge problems, but to accept implicitly they were beaten by up-jumped primates that were probably convinced their sun turned around their planet a few thousand cycles ago...it would be political and military suicide.

Never mind that more than eight billion Aeldari had already been sent directly to meet She-Who-Thirsts since the beginning of this slaughter-feast. Never mind that their race was not going to be able to rebuilt the shipyards of the Port of Lost Souls in a thousand cycles such was the scale of the devastation and the losses in qualified Aeldari

Never mind that the citadels previously thought impossible to conquer were reeling under an assault never seen in the living memory of the Masters of the Webway.

They were Aeldari. And the orders of the Dynasts didn’t involve retreat or evacuation.

“To war, then. Let’s defeat the Mon-keigh and the Yngir before they try to make the disaster worse.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Utar’ragh**

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

**Duke Leary O’Hara**

House Winterveil had always hated the Eldar pirates, be they from Commorragh or any other realm of damnation the vermin was taking refuge wherever they faced serious opposition.

Longer than there had been an Imperium, House Winterveil had stood vigilant, defending the worlds of the Galway Cluster against the depredations of the Eldar pirates.

Many oaths had been sworn by generation after generation of young Knights who arrived too late to do more than bury the victims of villagers targeted by these evil long-ears.

As such, today was more than a day of reckoning for House Winterveil. Today was the day where the Lances under his authority were going to fulfil the oaths of their ancestors. It had taken thousands of years, but the noble Quest’s end was in sight.

Leary O’Hara smiled, and the Acastus-pattern Knight Porphyrion Immortal Grudge roared as it fired its Irradiation Projectors against the xenos hiding behind the ruined black walls. Against heavy armour it would have likely been a waste of were priceless relics of the Ancient Age, but the ‘Drukhari’ – and by the God-Emperor, wasn’t this abominable name perfectly fitting for an awful civilisation and an even more loathsome species? – had little heavy armour. Torture instruments, splinter weaponry, acid guns, traps whose sole purpose was to inflict great suffering yes, they had them. But conventional weapons built for the kind of wars fought regularly against greenskins? No, they hadn’t.

“The Howling Griffons are coming, husband,” his wife Rosaleen called him, as her Acastus-pattern Knight Asterius the *Knight of Dawn* erased the threat represented by the last bunkers of the xenos with its Conversion Beam Cannons. “And the Marshal asks to reform the line.”

“Why?” Leary wondered out loud, as he trampled fleeing Eldar and executed a group who thought they were particularly smart by attacking him from behind. “I don’t think whatever reserves they hid underground or on the other side of another portal will do the xenos any good after several Ordinatus bombardments supported by the Imperial Guard artillery.”

Leary O’Hara was not that fond of Marshal Lorelei Moltke. Aside from her past record, the female officer was not the kind of guardsmen or guardswomen one invited to the completion of a Quest or a Crusade back home. The woman never smiled or seemed to have any use in a conversation that was not a military one. The fifth highest noble of House Winterveil had seen many soldiers like her during the wars fought outside the Galway Cluster. People like her were always breaking at one point. Career, duty and war merged together until there was nothing else to validate one’s existence, and when it broke...

“The enemy has received new reinforcements of the units called ‘Flesh-Towers’.”

“I’m on my way,” Leary replied as more than twenty Drukhari were boiled alive by the Irradiation Projectors. Immortal Grudge’s bellicose machine-spirit tried to protest when he changed course and ignored the last pathetic long-ears trying to dig some hideout in hope his auspexes wouldn’t find them. “I wonder how many abominations the Eldar have left in their vaults now that we have sterilised their first two layers of defences. Unlike Lady Weaver, I don’t think they can breed a new army from the bodies on the battlefield...

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

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

**Captain Gabriela Jordan**

They met General Taylor Hebert near one of the major breaches which had been created in the fifth wall of the Eldar fortress. The Wall of Torments, the xenos had called it before a swarm of bees filled the air above it and the cannons of the God-Engines had bombarded it to oblivion.

Tziz was very glad this fortification had been destroyed. A wall of screaming faces with hundreds of thousands of human and alien skulls on the ramparts was heretical work and had to be treated as such.

But since the long-ears had never dreamt their defences would have to withstand the might of the God-Engines and thousands of artillery shells striking it for a good hour, the monstrous Wall of Torments had fared as well as the Wall of Cruelty, the Wall of Eternal Torments, and the Wall of Agony, which was to say it had crumbled in a very pathetic manner.

The Eldar reinforcements were the major source of resistance, not the Wall. It was why the sea of spiders, beetles and ants surrounding the Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard were busy feasting on tens of thousands of xenos corpses.

There were mountains of them, and thanks to the brilliant lights of the Sunworms and other insects under the control of the General, the scale of the massacre and the replenishment operations for the swarm could not be missed. Even as she spoke, hundreds of new gigantic centipedes and spiders were marching in neat columns between the Guard and the Skitarii. Perhaps the Army Group was short on manpower, but it certainly had no problem replenishing in mandibles, claws and fangs. Every hour saw more Helspiders return to the battlefield, and for every Eldar killed, there were likely ten or twenty insects born and ready to kill in their new mistress’ name.

The former Callidus Apprentice wondered if the xenos truly realised how much it changed the outcome of the battle. Probably not, she immediately concluded. If they had, the Eldar would have tried to use their Exterminatus weapons from the start, when the battle for the Port of Lost Souls began. And they shouldn’t have wasted their time ordering the deaths of the Helspiders, then the Ambulls, and one by one every Death World monsters as Weaver deployed them. It was utterly inefficient, the insect-killing efforts were poorly coordinated and deprived their frontline troops of critical elite forces when the walls were under attack.

Tziz Jarek had never been particularly about the performance of certain Adepts from the Administratum, Munitorum and other Adeptus. But the way the Eldar handled this insect crisis was proof the xenos administration of Commorragh was significantly worse. After the survivors of the Alamo 4th were sent to fill the holes in the Wuhan 20417th Infantry, she had been witness of countless examples of Eldar turning on each other in the middle of the battle. Yes, it was as stupid as it sounded.

“Excellent job with the Alamo 4th and the Wuhan 20417th, Commissar-Colonel,” the Angel spoke. Yes, everyone had changed as the skies of Commorragh were in fire and the ground was covered in millions of Eldar corpses, but General Taylor had changed far more than most...the golden wings and the very large aura were difficult to miss. It was like speaking with a blazing beacon of light in the twilight of the Dark City.

“Thank you General!”

“Since Colonel Han suffered a tragic wound to the head as a result of his cowardice, I think it is better that you keep the leadership of the Wuhan 20417th until this battle is over.” The Saint spoke in a tone that was formulated like a suggestion but in practise was more an adamantium-clad order.

“If you allow me one remark, Lady Weaver,” Vulpahan declared without ambiguity, “the methods the Wuhanese use to select their Guard superior officers are in dire need of change.”

“You are not the first one to make this remark, I assure you,” the golden-winged woman caressed the head of the closest spider, a beast which had an abdomen the size of a Space Marine. “And I will answer you the same I did to them: once I return to the Nyx Sector, there are going to be changes to Wuhan.”

The former Callidus Apprentice was not a politician or a great expert in the planetary institutions of the Nyxians, but that bode ill for the Wuhanese nobility and every member of the upper class who had at one point or another influenced in a negative manner the Imperial Guard.

One might even suggest there were going to be purges, executions and many Penal Legions created in a not-so distant future.

“Since your new regiment has already lost eleven percent of its men killed or wounded, I want them to follow the Haemovores on the southern front and help them free the population of slaves.”

It had to be noted Commissar-Colonel Vulpahan didn’t even flinch at the mention of the Haemovores. ‘Gabriella Jordan’ did not either, but she was frankly one step away from protesting. The Haemovores were blood worms, and as the name implied, the Eldar psychopaths were using them as a weapon to drain the user of vital fluids in ten seconds top. And since the former leaders of Commorragh were unparalleled geniuses of cruelty and arrogance, they had bred particularly huge specimens they had tried to use as a terror weapon against the Imperium.

It went without saying the xenos must regret this strategy totally, assuming they were still alive to do so.

“A lot of these slaves on the southern front and the areas we have not broken the cages are xenos, General.”

“That’s why I’m sending the Haemovores with you, Commissar-Colonel. If they promise to fight against the Eldar but end up betraying you, I will make sure their end will not be pleasant.”

“I understand.” One couldn’t have said Vulpahan was happy to receive these orders, but he understood the logic like Tziz did. Everyone in Commorragh hated the Eldar – including the Eldar themselves apparently – but the loathing slaves felt for their ‘Dark Masters’ was far more powerful than those of mere guardsmen and guardswomen. Giving the opportunity to other xenos to kill the treacherous xenos for the mere cost of one regiment as overseers was not a great sacrifice.

The Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard suddenly changed the disposition of their protection system, and the reason did not wait long before coming before their eyes. Separated in two large columns of vastly different sizes, came Space Marines of the Salamanders Chapter and Skitarii of Mars. These had not been uncommon sights in the battles fought in Commorragh, but these newcomers were not of the 1st Skitarii Legion or the contingent of the Forgehammer.

They were far, far more dangerous, if the quantity of heavy weaponry, the Terminators and the sheer aura of ferocity surrounding them was any indication. Their leaders were even more impressive. The Salamander leader was a mountain of green and scales, a Thunderhammer in one hand that no non-Astartes would be able to lift, never mind using in battle.

The Archmagos next to him was an even stranger sight, its misshaped body being equipped with quantities of rare and ancient weaponry.

Both of them bowed largely as they came within ten feet of the Saint. The Salamanders Chapter Master in fact went further and his right knee touched the ground, so it counted technically as ‘bending the knee’.

“Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn, Regent of Nocturne!”

“Archmagos Dominatus Dominus Belisarius Cawl of Blessed Mars!”

“Rise Chapter Master, you do not have to...”

“We do.” And the Space Marine voice made clear he wouldn’t tolerate a negative reply.

“Fine.” For a single second Tziz thought she saw some exasperation on the General’s face, but if there was, it disappeared very quickly. “Rise, we have much to do and plenty of xenos to wipe out.”

That, at least, got the Chapter Master and the Archmagos undivided attention.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Utar’ragh**

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

**Dynast Maestros Xelian**

“FECKLESS TRAITORS! SPIDER CHEW-TOYS! EXCREMENTS UNWORTHY TO COMMAND A RAID FORCE!” He was surrounded by incompetent subordinates. He was surrounded by incompetent Admirals and Generals! How dare they come back in defeat again and again! The Helspiders weren’t even in this assault! They were at Zel’harst, not here!

“Supreme Dynast, we have only followed your directives...”

“IMPALE HIM!” Maestros shouted and the Sslyth surged forwards, seizing the defeated Master of the Labyrinth. “HE LOST THE LABYRINTH OF FOLLY! HE MUST PAY FOR IT!”

Three lines of defences lost in a single offensive from Mon-keigh of all vermin. There wasn’t even a single Yngir deployed against them like Mar’lych faced. There weren’t Ambulls, Helspiders, Haemovores or whatever other species the destructing power leading the Mon-keigh turned against Kraillach at Zel’harst. No, the Mon-keigh assaulting his citadel had no Yngir technology, no insects...just big guns. Why, oh why where his army commanders unable to stop them?

“Where are the Denarkh and the Lovarr Terror-Barons?” He asked as the forty-plus commanders he had summoned from every part of the Webway prostrated themselves before him.

“They have deserted, Ultimate Archon,” the flesh-reaper of Joaveil admitted. “When they heard of the final destruction of Port Shard...they fled in the darkest tunnels of the Webway and we had no time to pursue them.”

“They deserted...” Xelian repeated, feeling very numb as he tried to process the unbelievable words. Aeldari armies didn’t desert. Their commanders tried regularly to usurp or betray him, obviously. They stockpiled weapons and ships away from his gaze in the hope his spies wouldn’t discover them before he discovered their treason. But never, never since he had taken up the title of Dynast, never since the Fall armies of his own had cowardly abandoned their duties and renounced all dignity to behave like rats. “I will hunt them down once this battle will be dealt with.”

“In this case Grand Dynast,” one of the rare Wyches left in his council intervened, “I humbly request a weapon of your vaults to deal with the two super-cannons of the Mon-keigh. The first was already destructive enough against our walls and traps, but the second is a sonic attack which incapacitates every fighter we have, no matter the skill, speed and prowess. The brutes are taking advantage of our advanced senses to murder us!”

Xelian wished he could accuse the Succubus of defeatism or cowardice, and let her join the rest of the impaled traitors who had failed him. But the Mon-keigh super-cannons existed and had to be destroyed. These were the only things these upstart primates had to threaten his magnificent citadel.

“Since the situation is so bloody, I suppose I will accept with my legendary generosity.” Xelian answered, before pointing his finger to one of the Pain Engines serving as direct liaison with the guards of his heavily guarded vaults. “Prepare the Bloodrot Crown torpedoes for immediate deployment on the frontlines.”

The Covenant of Khaine had been pretty much torn apart since Kraillach had used three of his most dangerous weapons, and neither the Mon-keigh nor the Yngir appeared to very much be interested about limiting the infrastructure damage and the killing of his servants.

To accomplish his vengeance, the Bloodrot Crown was perfect. Every non-Aeldari being in the blast zone was immediately seeing beautiful red flowers grow on his skin, and it rapidly grew worse from there as the Bloodrot fed on its host and took control of its nervous system. Before long the Bloodrot had turned the contaminated beings into its puppets, and instinctively tried to acquire more.

In general, it was not a weapon very useful, for every self-respectable Aeldari had the antidote or a Haemonculi-engineered reagent to protect himself or herself. But against Mon-keigh, it was perfect.

“This time we counterattack and we push back the vermin to the Port of Lost Souls! This time we go on the offensive and punish these trespassers! This time we capture the leaders of this invasion and make sure they are screaming for all eternity in our dungeons!”

“Dynast! Sublime Dynast!” A messenger ran in front of his great throne. “One of the Bloodrot Crown stored inside your vaults was defective and when the vault was opened...”

“All of my guards assigned to defend my vaults are immunised to the deadly effect of the Bloodrot Crown!” And how this vat-grown messenger dared pretend otherwise!”

“Yes, Sublime Dynast but...there was also another weapon not of the Bloodrot variety inside the same vault, and I’m afraid...”

Maestros Xelian murdered the incompetent messenger with a scream of rage.

“INCOMPETENT! I AM SURROUNDED BY INCOMPETENT SERVANTS! YOU! GO FIND THE ACID WEAPONS AND PURGE THE DEFECTIVE VAULT! THE OTHERS! MUSTER YOUR ARMIES AND KILL THE MON-KEIGH!”