**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 parahuman General. There was no bone, no flesh; the wings were simply there, golden energy and magnificence incarnated.

Fortunately 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 relinquish 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 starfighter 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, their works a 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, hunting 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 of sabotage 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 blasts 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 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 battleships 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 Ace 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. Large fields of space mines had been emplaced in front of the largest Gates.

Nova cannons and other weapons of strategic importance had disintegrated four fleets and roughly twenty-five battleships plus escorts. The mines had accounted for two more fleets and five battleships. 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 casualties.

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 recovered 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.

Hundreds of thousands of crewmen and crewwomen had died with their ships. And it wasn’t telling the whole story. For every ship utterly destroyed, three or four of the same tonnage were very heavily damaged and counting thousands of dead.

And of course the losses had been considerable on the ground too. 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’ didn’t 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 vital fluids of someone 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 a lot, 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 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 marching under his crimson banners 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 VAULTS! THE OTHERS! MUSTER YOUR ARMIES AND KILL THE MON-KEIGH!”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

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

**Colonel Tanya Sevrev**

The average Eldar was faster than the average human, a far better swordsman, had quicker reflexes and their weapons had hideous effects every time they hit flesh.

It was not defeatism to say that in a fight at close-quarters, Eldar were at least going to win ninety times out of ten.

So the Imperial Guard and the Fay 20th weren’t fighting at close-quarters. Each new counterattack of the xenos was facing a wall of Larkine lasguns and the heavy bolters mounted on the Chimera of the regiment.

The monsters were slaughtered and yet they kept coming.

“They aren’t very good at modern warfare, aren’t they?” Captain Anton Rykov said as the Basilisks of the Andes 10th Artillery opened fire again and transformed the zone occupied by what looked to be four or five regiments of crimson-clad Eldar in gore-filled craters and a ruined wasteland.

“This is their first true war, really” the blonde-haired Colonel replied. “The hit-and-run tactics they are so fond of do not work anymore, and they must fight on our terms in this war.”

It was a very painful experience for them. Two spires which had been blazing in black-crimson energy fell down, crushing thousands of beasts and xenos in the process. Bunkers, or at least things which should have been bunkers, exploded in massive eruptions of acid, blood and other disgusting substances.

“The Eldar war machine of the Biel-Tan long-ears relied on speed at the exclusion of everything else, but this type of Eldar sub-species at least understand the concept of tanks and armour. The Commorragh Eldar waged war relying everything on speed and terror. In practical terms, their artillery is mounted on light attack craft and they have no tanks whatsoever.”

These...these Drukhari may have thought they had the role covered in the case they were forced to fight someone in a conventional conflict. Fortunately for the Imperium, they weren’t. The long-ears had a lot of horrors deployed now: the ‘Flesh-towers’ were Knight-sized monstrosities made of screaming faces, black energy and shrieking voices; the ‘Torture Engines’ which were the corpses of screaming slaves strapped to immense machines of black suffering and heavy batteries and of course the ‘Tyrant Guns’ which looked like the work of the Archenemy Eldar-style.

All of these heretical creations were largely inferior to a proper Knight, and the armoured regiments were eating them for lunch.

“Do we tell the Andeans to stop firing in order to have our fun?” Captain Ekaterina Plaksine asked her.

“I think we can let them have their fun for a few minutes, Captain,” Tanya shook her head negatively. “The enemy appears to have another crisis of incompetence and is pushing more of its crimson-clad killers under the bombardment of our artillery. In fact...I think there may be a major counterattack coming our way. Contact Colonel Troy and ask him if he wants to join the Andeans in giving a nice welcome to the slavers.”

“I would prefer the guardsmen of New Chelsea,” grumbled the Captain of the 2nd Company. “The Amethyst Guard...”

“They are like us servants of the God-Emperor,” the Colonel reminded her subordinate before the Commissar nearby intervened. “And I have no cause to believe their commitment is insincere. As for the New Chelsea artillery, they are unfortunately busy finishing the remnants of a warband which came from underground. We will have to do without them.”

“I didn’t want to...”

“I know, I know.” The reason why so many of her women and men didn’t like the Megaran Amethyst Guard, in truth, was certainly because the military dictatorship reminded them far too much of the ‘old regime’ of Byukur and the excesses which came with it.

Unlike Nyx and Fay though, the not-so-benevolent Marshal-Governor of the Civilised World of Megara had rapidly sensed the way the wind was blowing and adopted several economic and military reforms Nyx had suggested. Since the artillery and other regiments of Megara were also a long-trained professional force, Tanya somehow doubted the social structure of this world was going to change anytime soon.

“Who do we have coming right behind us to help us exploiting the new breakthrough?”

“The regiments of the Brigade Indefatigable are our reinforcements, Colonel.”

Tanya groaned.

“A bunch of Ogryn and madmen. Wonderful.” The Buxenus 7th Mechanised Infantry wasn’t too bad, as it had been built on the mould of a conventional Mechanised Infantry formation – though their ‘farming traditions’ were strange by Fay and Nyx standards. The Ogryns were loyal, but they were a gigantic club the Commissars in charge unleashed at their own peril. And the Txacopec 1st Cavalry...these were the crazy maniacs who had decided riding carnivorous reptiles was an excellent way to provide their first military tithe to the Imperial Guard. But then as it was time to land to fight on Commorragh and their reptiles began to die from a chemical attack from the long-ears, the Txacopec had decided the completely logical new strategy was to tame several hundred Helspiders and use them as mount substitutes!

It was utter madness, as many of the Helspiders involved had not been controlled by Lady Weaver in their war zone. But somehow, they made it work.

“Let’s see the golden light in this, Colonel,” Anton chuckled. “The Eldar are going to be more furious at their presence than we are.”

Some three hundred of four hundred Helspiders in a sector where Lady Weaver had not sent her swarm? Yes, the enemy was going to be really unhappy.

“The Megaran Artillery is ready to open their bombardment, Colonel.”

Mere seconds later, dozens of Basilisks and even two Manticores added their firepower to the Andes 10th. The Eldar crimson-clad infantry charged on their own, their light attack craft conspicuously absent now that the Hydras had slaughtered them by the hundreds two hours ago.

Soon thousands of lasguns began to fire, adding illumination in this world of twilight, dust and smoke.

“We crush this wave and then we launch the new exploitation. I want our flag atop the next wall before these pompous blue-bloods of Atlas!”

The ground shook and a machine-roar echoed far to the left, as if to answer her words.

“Tell the artillery to stop the bombardment. Cease fire! Cease fire!”

They emerged from the dust and twilight like legends of old. They were immense and regal in black and white. Five Warhounds opened the march, and before them the armies of the Eldar opened like water meeting an unbreakable obstacle. Behind them the Reavers and the Warlords extinguished all resistance, their Power Claws collapsing spires and all aerial structures, while their Plasma Destructors and Gatling Blasters killed hundreds of thousands xenos every time they voiced their fury.

“Captain Tovar has finished freeing the slaves?” Tanya Sevrev verified without looking away from this marvellous spectacle. These were the God-Machines of the Mechanicum, and at this moment the title had never felt more appropriate.

“Yes, Colonel. Some five hundred of them want to join the fighting.”

“Who am I to deny them?”

The Fay guardswoman couldn’t even imagine the strength of body and will it took to survive in the hellish pits of Commorragh. As long as these poor souls had stayed untainted, Tanya was not going to deprive them of their vengeance.

“We will follow the Titans for this one. The sixth wall awaits.”

**Grand Princeps Surena Ctesiphon**

Imperial Titans were thought to have only two things to fear: other Titans, and the corruption of the Ruinous Powers.

Surena Ctesiphon had seen so far no sign of the servants of the Ruinous Powers...assuming you didn’t count the heretical things the Eldar monsters had done to billions of slaves. But the Living Saint had assured the Grand Princeps that for all their atrocities and crimes, the Drukhari weren’t directly worshipping the Enemy and the Fell Powers of the Warp.

Lady Taylor Hebert had not corrected him when he said these xenos were close, very close from worshipping the Enemy, however. And as Surena was *Ilium Scutum*, he had seen and heard plenty of horrors in the Port of Lost Souls and this sub-realm that the local monsters called Zel’harst.

Millions of things which should have never been dreamt of, and certainly not done in realspace, were considered normal in the spires and slave-markets of Commorragh.

“Blessed is the Living Saint for bringing us here. Blessed be Her Name for allowing us to purge these treacherous creatures from the Webway!”

“Blessed be Her Name!” repeated the other Princeps who were in range to hear his prayer.

“By the will of the God-Emperor, I smite down these walls!” The grand commander of the Legio Defensor proclaimed as *Ilium Scutum* created tank-sized holes in the structure of the ‘Wall of Massacres’ with its lascannon turrets. “By the will of the God-Emperor, I purge the xenos and contribute to humanity’s ultimate victory! For the God-Emperor and the Living Saint! Legio! We march once more! AVE IMPERATOR!”

“AVE IMPERATOR!”

Long had the Nova Guard asked the High Lords of Terra and the Fabricator-General to prove themselves in a Grand Crusade or a military operation worthy of their long and proud history. But before Operation Caribbean, the status of Errant Legio had been a heavy burden to bear. No one would question Legio Defensor’s list of victories and sacrifices in His Name, and no one would question their loyalty. Their Princeps had been among the first members of the Loyalists to acknowledge the divinity of the God-Emperor.

But while they had been brought back to strength after the Great Heresy, nothing could erase the fact their Forge-World had been destroyed during the darkest hours of the Imperium. Machine-holy Satyraes XII had been bombed to oblivion and despite the binary cants of some high-ranking Archmagi, the Mechanicus was not without its internal politics too.

As long as they were an Errant Legio, the Nova Guard would be assigned to secondary fronts and Sectors of little importance to fight the endless game of seditious uprisings and minable PDF rebellions.

Until today. Until the battle of Commorragh. And Blessed be the God-Emperor and His Living Saint, the crumbling resistance of the Eldar did not so far involve any type of their xenos Titans.

“I see only darkness ahead of me.”

It was not an exaggeration. The spires, the defences, the foundries and everything which might exist behind the sixth wall were shrouded in a darkness which was absolutely not something natural...assuming the word had any relevance in this realm of heresy and xenos depravity.

“Warhounds! Illuminate this realm of darkness if you please!”

Blastguns, mega-bolters, blastguns, Inferno guns and turbo-lasers obeyed at once his order, but surprisingly the darkness did not dissipate save where the Titans weapons directly impacted the ground.

“A perfect place for ambushes of all kind,” one of his Moderati declared. “I can see why our prisoners called this defence the Labyrinth of Darkness.”

“I agree it is perfect for ambushes,” Surena spoke, forcing the spirit of the Ilium Scutum to slow down its speed a bit. There had been no Titans of any kind, but the presence of several Craftworld Eldar in regiment-sized numbers was increasingly reported as the Imperial forces continued their advance. “But there is a simple solution to deal with it. Contact the Imperial Guard artillery and our Mechanicus support. Tell them to help us dissipate this darkness with heavy incendiary shells.”

“This is going to slow us our progression, Grand Princeps.”

“Maybe by a few minutes,” he conceded. “But the shock of the new offensive will give new nightmares to the long-ears...”

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Sometimes, the Eldar really made colossal mistakes in their inconceivably arrogant attempts to present themselves as the masters of the galaxy.

Although Gavreel had no idea how they had managed to convince themselves of their full and complete mastery of the galaxy in the first place. The Port of Lost Souls was maybe big enough to move five planets here, but certainly not ten. Each wall of Zel’harst had not fifty kilometres of distance between each wall. The other citadels were not planet-sized either. There were far bigger – and tougher – fortresses in the Imperium. Commorragh was impressive because it was a realm of cruelty and terror where gravity and the rules of the real galaxy had been killed long ago. It was not – and never would be, thanks to their invasion – the capital of an Eldar-inhabited Empire.

But the long-ears were of an arrogance that still managed to leave plenty of Astartes gaping, so the Sergeant was not surprised they still tried to hold on to the delusion they were above everyone else in the galactic species order. Even if judging by the weapons and the ammunition fabricated in their manufactorum, there was nothing very advanced or particularly revolutionary. The Adeptus Mechanicus could have forged many of these weapons...assuming the cogboys developed a sudden urge to inflict pain to every living being.

It was unnerving how far these sadist monsters were ready to go in their quest of pain, suffering and sensation.

But they were not the masters of the galaxy. They were monsters, they were slavers and tyrants, and they were a plague of raids and thievery. Mankind knew how to deal with those.

And their mistakes were colossal. Best to not forget that.

Gavreel didn’t know if the original Eldar commanders were still in command of Commorragh now, but if the answer was positive, he was going to applause for their schizophrenic efforts in defending their possessions. Anything they could do wrong, they had done. The worst error had been to let quantities of Helspiders, Ambulls and Haemovores in liberty, of course.

But it had just been the first error of a long series. The leadership of the dark creatures acknowledged the danger only to send hundreds of thousands of their best warriors in the pits and the underground to hunt insects. As a result, plenty of areas had been left undefended against the Imperial Guard and the Space Marines. There was no discipline, communication coordination or great chain of command. The long-ears had a hierarchy, but it was respected as long as the leader didn’t receive a shot in the back of the head, after that it was everyone for himself or herself. There were regiment-sized elites, but they often attacked on their own and whatever immediate air support they had.

In spite of the little detail no one knew for certain what the real orders given by the Commorragh leadership were, the magnitude of the disaster was evident to all. Many Skitarii cohorts engaged the enemy only to realise their opponents were armed with insecticide dispersers – something that naturally ensured a swift and bloody massacre. Tens of thousands Eldar infantry soldiers were still trying to engage the armoured insects of their Lady with their ineffective splinter weaponry, to the point no one asked anymore if it was all they had at their disposal .

The gains were thus regular and inflicted xenos casualties which were nothing short of catastrophic. There were reinforcement armies coming from open and hidden Webway Gates, but they were thrown piecemeal and often under the shells of the artillery the moment they arrived.

But now the Eldar of Commorragh had really searched for the whip to be spanked with – an image that would never have come to his mind under they stormed this spire-dungeon-whorehouse four hours ago.

Past the sixth wall of Zel’harst, the builders had created a realm of lava and volcanic eruptions. Under the weak light of the captive suns, they had created a mini-realm of volcanoes, lava and fire. A the risk of repeating himself, they had built fortresses and foundries, opened Webway Gates to let lava get through from somewhere in realspace, and transformed the location into something looking like a volcanic Death World in miniature.

And then they had summoned the very Chapter of Space Marines whose homeworld was a volcanic Death World.

If someone protested when he called the Eldar a civilisation of psychopathic idiots in the short-term future, Gavreel swore he would have plenty of arguments to discourage any being willing to defend the intelligence of the long-ears. Not that he supposed many people were going to after seeing the kind of atrocities the Eldar did to those they enslaved.

“Let the Salamanders try their chance first,” Taylor Hebert ordered from her improvised seat on her command Baneblade. “They know this kind of environment better than anyone, and my heavy land-based insects can’t cross the lava on their own.”

As the Salamanders were busy throwing Eldar corpses and spires’ debris first into the lava before building a first makeshift bridge, Gavreel had absolutely no problem with that.

“No insects to help us in this volcanic realm?”

“No...” Despite the twilight, the ashes and every condition darkening the air and the battlefield, their Lady remained a beacon of light and golden wings. Gavreel wasn’t going to say it out loud; Kratos had received a smack on his helmet as punishment the last time. “I think they have learned by now to kill most of the insects they were keeping in their labs or their arenas.”

“Or maybe they weren’t able to find insects and animals able to survive in lava,” Gamaliel tried in a faintly optimistic voice.

“We are speaking about Eldar,” it was more and more the basic counter-argument uttered by hundreds of thousands voices. The enemy can’t be that stupid? They are Eldar. The enemy won’t try counterattack when they are Titans able to intervene? They are Eldar. Building fifty metres-tall statues in bones, flesh and the mortal remains of your slaves is the height of bad taste? They are Eldar. “Have they been any sign of more Craftworld Eldar in the last hour?”

“No, General,” Marshal Groener replied. “So far we had a few regiments worth of Nacretimeï forces here in Zel’harst, the Necrons of course destroyed one Biel-Tan Fleet at Port Shard, and there have been several light craft and scouts from some unidentified Craftworld warriors here and there...but if they have landed several ground armies, we have seen no sign of them for now.”

“I don’t like that,” the angelic-looking woman stated. Gavreel and the Dawnbreaker Guard weren’t going to naysay her on this. “Our time here is already awfully limited, and fighting more Eldar aside from the forces of Commorragh will not help.”

“We could use...*that*,” the originally white power armour of Clockblocker – though with all the fighting and the environment, it was nearly back now – returned from the storming of a spire where some ‘Agony-Generals’ had learned how annoying time-stopping could be. “Leet is on his way, right?”

“No. This is a weapon of last resort, Dennis.” The General instantly shot down the idea. “We are winning. I see no reason to use...*that*.”

As if to support her words, the Salamanders began to use some gravitic weapon borrowed to the Mechanicus to begin altering the flows of lava and drowning an attempted Eldar-Mandrake counterattack. And by Terra, the shadowy long-ears could scream in pain when they were sufficiently motivated! But evidently after a few seconds, they wanted more...more in this case being a Thunderhammer in the chest as the fiery Terminators of the Salamanders chased their survivors down the burning slopes of this volcanic landscape.

“Signal general to all commands,” the insect-mistress said as new Bees and flying assets flew above their heads. “Enemy resistance is crumbling. Intensify the artillery bombardments and push back the enemy towards his last citadels.”

**Dynast Lythric Kraillach**

“My Most Glorious Dynast, the Wall of Lava is lost!”

Lythric Kraillach thought about the first two hundred most common methods he could make someone scream in agony before deciding he was a bit too short on relatively trusty messengers to get rid of this one.

“Yes, I am aware of this disaster.”

Because of all the Space Marines to capture, Vect had chosen the ones who were specialists of fighting in lava construction. Why exactly the arrogant vat-grown slave had thought this was a good idea was a Fall-level mystery.

The consequences on the battlefield had been...severe.

The Mon-keigh in scaly green armour had turned against his armies the flows of lava by a succession of improvised barrages, bridges and volcanic infrastructure, before encircling three armies on lava-drowning platforms.

There had been few survivors, as all air transports had been rather few in numbers when the thirteenth-damned anti-air guns of the primates had ran out of ammunition.

“The Wall of Lava is lost, yes. And the approaches of the Wall of Execution are now coming under assault while they’re critically undermanned.”

This was Vect’s fault again. The armies which should have been there had been sent to Low Commorragh before the fires of war reached Zel’harst. And now there was so much confusion and warfare down there his attempts to extricate them had not been obeyed!

“We must deploy other weapons...weapons like the Spectratikon, Mighty Dynast and Glorious Light of the Blue Sun.”

“For this we must take back some of the ground lost. The Aetherdeath, the Bilthradan and many of the precious relics of the Blue Sun in my vaults are too dangerous. The Mon-keigh primates are too close; should we unleash one here it would result in our mutual annihilation.”

He was not going to say he had not that many of these pre-Fall weapons left to his subordinates, not in this moment of weakness. Thousands of treacherous subordinates had to be thrown in pools of molten metal after the last defeats on the Wall of Executions. There were more and more deserters too. On the Wall of Betrayals, a mutiny had been barely stopped in time. Several Wyches Cults had been prevented from seizing an armoury for unknown parties. The garrisons of Middle Darkness and the Abyssal Wall had gone dark.

Meagre consolation, the few messages he received from his spies indicated his fellow Dynasts fared even worse than him. There was no more resistance in Mar’lych, and no one even knew if Dynast Ariex Yllithian was still alive. The Yngir were slaughtering every Aeldari in their range and pushing their deathless phalanxes towards Old City. The crimson armours of Xelian were butchered by the millions in futile assaults against fortified trenches and gigantic super-cannons at Utar’ragh.

“Time,” the Dynast of Blue Sun growled. “We need more time to give our reinforcements time to arrive coordinated and at full strength.”

“But the Mon-keigh vermin never stops attacking, Splendid and Glorious Dynast!”

“They are rotating their assault forces every four or five of their primitive cycles!” Lythric seethed. It wasn’t that complicated to understand! “First comes their artillery, then the red robes or the armoured thrust, and they finished by cavalry or infantry charges. The huge machines they call ‘Titans’ are inserted between one of the phases to cripple our counterattacks! It’s not complicated to understand!”

“Why not abandon Zel’harst? Let’s withdraw to the Corespur and...”

Lythric Kraillach could not hide the very horror he felt hearing the idea. Abandoning Zel’harst, his stronghold, one of his great seats of power, a jewel without equal in the galaxy, the citadel protecting his most valuable vaults!

“Never!” Lythric pressed a button and ten Sslyth rushed in and proceeded to cut the limbs, organs and muscles of the Agony-General who had dared suggesting such a cowardly tactic. “If Zel’harst falters, the Corespur will be next and this time, there will be no more walls to protect your miserable lives. No, we will stop the Mon-keigh invasion on the Wall of Despair. The Twilight Shields of the twelfth wall will resist the fire of the Mon-keigh artillery!”

And suddenly the very air felt...wrong. Lythric heard shrieks and felt some fragrant perfume...and barely managed to snap as six Daemonettes materialised in a chorus of alarms and screams.

“DISJUNCTION! MAJOR DISJUNCTION IN THE DARK CITY!”

The Daemonettes plunged their blade-claws in the back of an Agony-General who had not managed to fight against their illusionary aura. The next moment the Sslyth began to battle them, and Lythric himself drew his blade and began to fight the largest one which had tried to impale him on his throne.

“**For the Dark Prince**!”

The fight was one-sided in his favour however, as past the instant of surprise, a Dynast like him was largely superior to the handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts. And a ruthless series of attacks banished the Daemonette before the Sslyth-Executor had the opportunity to remove the last intruder.

Before he had the time to catch his breath, the Master of Sun saw one of his servants and deliver the news every Aeldari of Commorragh had dreaded hearing since the Fall.

“Khaine’s Gate is an under attack.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Khaine’s Gate**

**Seventy hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Succubus Jezekel ‘the Bloody Baroness’**

The sub-realm of Khaine’s Gate – which for some reason was also called Khaine’s Gate to increase the risks of miscommunication – was not very large. Jezekel had barely been able to gather an army of ten thousand warriors and support to garrison the never-large-enough fortifications.

So when the First Disjunction struck, there was no way to miss it. Six Dynast guards, two each for Xelian, Kraillach and Yllithian – began trembling before screaming both in pleasure and agony. And then from their corpses six Daemonettes emerged.

“**The Dark Prince comes! The Dark Prince comes**!”

The Dark Lances wiped them out before they had the time to repeat a third time their diabolic symphony, but it was too late. Two Incubi murdered each other and judging by their surprised faces, their control over their bodies had not belonged to them. One of her Wyches began to claw out her own eyes and had to be immobilised and subjected to sensory deprivation; as horrible as it was, it was the only known way to reject the influence of She-Who-Thirsts.

“Stand firm! Stand firm!” The elder Succubus shouted, as her army began wavering. “You are Aeldari of Commorragh! Reject She-Who-Thirsts!”

But as they tried to recover from the psychic and daemonic assault, the effects of the Disjunction became all too clear. The fissures covering the Webway Gate had been multiplied by three or four in length and size. And from the largest one, at the very centre of the portal, one could clearly see the storm of purple-pink energy piercing the post-Fall protections.

“Get away from Khaine’s Gate!” Jezekel ordered. “Get away!” she repeated as a pungent odour of lust and death poured in the sub-realm. One artisan who failed to stop his now useless attempts at repairing the Gate was transformed into a Chaos Spawn in the blink of an eye when the baleful energies touched his skin.

Five splinter rifles immediately gunned it down....but three more Aeldari fell, shrieking as She-Who-Thirsts claimed her due. The area surrounding the Gate was abandoned in all haste. Artisans, Haemonculi, and the teams she had assembled in extreme urgency ran to the Abyssal Wall’s Gate.

“We have two armies ready to reinforce us the moment you give the order, Great Succubus,” the Incubus next to her promised.

Jezekel nodded in gratitude. As much as the prospect scared her, they had to make a stand here. Khaine’s Gate could not be destroyed without wiping out all the core sub-realms of Commorragh and probably most of the surrounding arteries, avenues and main sub-realms of the Webway with it. It was difficult to say since nobody had ever been stupid enough to try.

The temptation was there to abandon Khaine’s Gate and retreat to the Abyssal Wall. That way she would gain some time to reinforce other sub-realms...but if she did that, there was no guarantee the mortal servants of She-Who-Thirsts would not find some way to reactivate the inactive Gates in this very sub-realm. No one had been moronic or desperate to see where they led, and no one remembered a time where those had been activated...but if she abandoned Khaine’s Gate now, it was far from impossible they were going to pour into Commorragh from an undefended path.

“The nine other armies are fortifying the inner defences of the Abyssal Wall?” She queried as four more large fissures appeared and an ugly sound of psychic-resistant stone cracking arrived to her ears.

“They are. But we won’t get any more reinforcements. I have sent many messengers to the Dynasts, but it’s a bloody civil war in the streets of Commorragh, and the Mon-keigh invasion continues to gain ground.”

The ground shook and the air vibrated in a veil of purple energy.

“Second Disjunction,” the Succubus of the Cult of the Impaled declared with a vicious smile. Six hundred sixty-six Daemonettes materialised in a random pattern everywhere across the sub-realm, and Jezekel was sure more had begun appearing everywhere in Commorragh. The Dynasts were going to be aware of the peril threatening every Aeldari...for all the good it was going to do.

Khaine’s Gate was now shining in eldritch pink light, and the army defending it put some one hundred more feet of distance. Even with this precaution, six warriors in dark-blue Kraillach colours began to mutate and shriek and had to be decapitated and burned.

Jezekel tried to desperately about a parade, a desperate action which would be able to delay the inevitable, but there was nothing. The Null-Engines which had been emplaced against the Gate were breaking down against the terrifying amount of Warp energy rolling off in waves from the fissures. Even if they had Farseers or Shadowseers to provide some resistance on that front, they would have been overwhelmed in short order by the sheer power and corruption coming from the depths of the Empyrean.

“The last protections are failing. It’s not going to be long now.”

Just as these words ended the shrieks coming from the other side became perfectly audible and the ancient crystalline surface of the Gate had thousands more fissures.

“FOR COMMORRAGH!”

The centre of Khaine’s Gate crumbled and a hole the size of two Aeldari appeared as a cloud of purple-pink corruption arrived in the sub-realm.

“**GLORY TO SLAANESH**!”

The Daemonettes led the charge. They could only come by two or three, but Jezekel could almost see the legions behind them preparing to assault Commorragh.

And then a second hole was created and the enemy skirmish became a general invasion.

“FOR THE DARK CITY AND THE AELDARI!”

“**FOR THE DARK PRINCE AND EXCESS**!”

The defences of Khaine’s Gate fired. Whether they were Jetfighter weapons adapted for defensive purposes or ancient weapons dating before the Fall, everything fired and disintegrated the first ranks of the Daemonettes. But as the holes in the Gate became larger and larger, the number of opponents was multiplied many, many times. The first daemons of She-Who-Thirsts managed to reach the army’s lines, and savage claw-to-blade fight started.

“Call the armies!” Jezekel ordered. “Call the armies before we are...”

Khaine’s Gate exploded, and the horrors of She-Who-Thirsts came through. So many Daemonettes it was impossible to count flooded the sub-realm and the pressure on her mind and her soul was nearly unbearable. Hundreds of the Dynast guards collapsed like they had been cut down energy and vitality.

“Belay that order! Belay that order! Retreat! Retreat to the Abyssal Wall!”

Steeds, Fiends and a myriad of creatures she would have preferred to never see in her existence hurled themselves without any tactic or specific strategy. In one instant her right flank was broken, and the only reason the left flank didn’t was due to the tenacious resistance of the Incubi.

There were simply too many daemons. The pink energy gave her nausea and the powerful urge to vomit. Her soul...was soul was hurt. Hurt, hurt, hurt.

“We can’t...”

They were in melee and everything hurt. Killing the Daemonettes was giving her more and more difficulties despite their slowness and crude battle-skills.

“**FOR THE LORD OF DARK DELIGHTS! FOR THE DARK PRINCE**!”

Something huge slammed out of the destroyed portal. It was obese and utterly repulsive, a true vision of horror.

“**CHILDREN! I AM N’KARI, CHOSEN OF GLUTTONY AND EXCESS! IN THE NAME OF THE DARK PRINCE SURRENDER TO EXCESS AND YOUR DARKEST DESIRES**!

Hundreds of warriors, Wyches and Hellions screamed in ecstasy and lowered down their weapons only to be Possessed instantly by the Daemonettes.

The lines of resistance crumbled. It was impossible to concentrate or to make oneself heard. There was only ugly, desperate fighting, and the struggle to fight for the mastery of one’s soul. An unending tide of reinforcements was granted to the servants of She-Who-Thirsts.

And then the Abyssal Wall’s portal deactivated.

“Betrayal!” the Incubi hissed while decapitating two more Daemonettes.

“I should have killed this useless slime of Xelian the last time!” The Succubus growled. He or Vect had done so many wrongs to their race by their ambitions and stupidity...

Since they would never be able to reactivate the Gate in time to save one warrior, they prepared for their last stand upon the slightly elevated platform where the Gate where salvation should have awaited. The Incubi and the Wyches of the Cult of the Impaled closed ranks. By this point, they were the only large formations to have survived the slaughter.

“MAKE SURE THEY REMEMBER OUR BLADES! ATTACK!”

“**SLAANESH WILL CLAIM YOUR SOULS**!”

All the Legions of She-Who-Thirsts fell on them. Jezekel abandoned all restraint and became a storm of death like she fought in the arena, stabbing, bisecting claws, paws and tongues, massacring everything and everyone trying to end her life. But it hurt. Why was it hurting so much?

The three Incubi guarding her back fell one by one fighting at one against one hundred.

The gigantic obese creature, the fiend which had called itself N’Kari towered above her.

“**YOU WILL SERVE FINELY THE DARK PRINCE**!”

Jezekel smiled and spat on the bloodied floor transforming into a carpet of pink flesh under the Warp influence.

“If She-Who-Thirst wants my soul, come and take it over my dead body!”

The Bloody Baroness avoided fifty-three blows before one faster-than-eye tail strike impaled her.

There was only torment and unimaginable agony after that.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Low Commorragh**

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

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

During his preparations for the coup which would lead him to be recognised as the true and contested Master of Commorragh, Asdrubael Vect had thought organising a *Battle Royale* to celebrate his victory over the useless parasites of Xelian, Kraillach and Yllithian.

For those who had been absent from the Dark City for some time, the *Battle Royale* had been an idea of the now deceased...what was his name in fact? Yes, it had originally been the idea of one of Yllithian’s worthless sons.

You feel the spectators of your greatest arena are going to be a bit bored tonight? Organise a spectacle where no less than thirteen factions are going to massacre and kill each other for the delight of your public!

To be absolutely honest, the idea had been extremely enticing, with its delicious number of betrayals, fake alliances, stabs in the backs, and ungodly amount of slaughters. That said, the Yllithian scion had chosen very pitiful specimens of the lesser species, and there hadn’t been much elegance or superb gestures during that night.

Asdrubael he would have done, far, far better without trying. It wasn’t like it was *that* hard.

Unfortunately, two mere cycles the Battle of Lower Commorragh had become to his great consternation a *Battle Royale*, as if to convince him of the irony of ill-thinking. Spires were crushed by thousands of riots and slaves uprisings. Markets burned. Stockpiles of ammunition went up in huge explosions. The atmosphere of slaughter and unbridled war was present.

But they were, right now, a bit short for thirteen factions, the Black Heart leader had to acknowledge this fact.

So far the main armies fighting were: the arrogant hypocrites of Xelian, the haughty cowards of Kraillach, the Harlequins of the Shattered Mirage, the various gangs and mercenaries bands of Low Commorragh, the armies of Craftworld Kher-Ys and of course his sublime forces now united under the dark banners of the Kabal of the Black Heart.

Obviously, nothing was going according to the plan.

His intention had been to strike hard and defeat quickly the forces of the two Dynasts and solidify his control of Low Commorragh before anyone else had the time to contest it.

The offensive had been at first remarkably successful, slaying five of Xelian great lieutenants and three of Kraillach, not to mention six Dynasts’ children...until the armies of Craftworld Kher-Ys chose this opportunity to assault his forces directly in his undefended left flank.

It was absolutely preposterous. Asuryani – like the spirit stones-lovers enjoyed calling themselves – were never coming to Commorragh at the best of times. And of course the damned Harlequins had arrived after the situation devolved in complete chaos and started everyone in Low Commorragh.

He had believed this was the worse he would get until the Mon-keigh managed to break through Zel’harst.

This assumption...was wrong.

“Daemonettes...” the Supreme Lord of the Black Heart hissed as he banished back to the depths of the Empyrean the handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts.

“This was the third Disjunction, Lord Archon,” one of the Kraillach guards who had defected to him as his Dynast failed to send him reinforcements. “I think there is something deeply wrong with Khaine’s Gate.”

“Yes,” he was forced to acknowledge. Their cousins of Kher-Ys were not the brightest minds, but even they knew better than to use their mastery of the Great Sea in the middle of the Dark City. Doing so was just akin to lighting a beacon for the Greater Servants of She-Who-Thirsts. “Fortunately, we have almost finished the Xelian and Kraillach armies of Low Commorragh. Provided the Prophets of Flesh arrive on schedule with the promised reinforcements, we should have no issue fighting our way to Middle Darkness and see what is happening at Khaine’s Gate.”

Asdrubael Vect didn’t expect the situation to be anything but desperate. Lone Disjunctions projecting lone daemons into Commorragh had happened in the course of the Dark City post-Fall history. But there never had been two Disjunctions so close, and there had never been *three* in close succession!

Everything in his heart and his brain told him something incredibly bad was coming this way, and he had not survived that long by ignoring his instincts.

“You! Go to the Hidden Blade, and prepare a general evacuation to Base Vect’s Spire.” Vect turned towards the other Haemonculi in his service. “We have lost too much time as it stands. I don’t care what Kher-Ys’ goals are by this point. They have attacked us and are refusing to see reason. Deploy the Slaughterwind Monkshood. And if you get half of the clowns of Cegorach with them, I will double your slave bonus.”

This was all the encouragement the flesh-crafters of Commorragh needed. As ranks after ranks of their emotion-repressed ‘Aspect Warriors’ surged out of the Gates to fight the Black Heart’s armies, darkness came for them.

It was difficult to describe exactly how the Slaughterwind Monkshood worked. One heartbeat it was a black wind flaying skin and bones, the next a black hole sucking out matter and light decimated the grav-tanks and the jetfighters of his enemies.

Even the Avatar of Khaine towering like a God over these mongrels was unable to survive the primordial fury forged by the pre-Fall Aeldari. The flame and the fury were beaten, the berserk monster they had mistakenly believed to be a God worthy of their adulation was removed from Low Commorragh. Where exactly the thousands of warriors of Kher-Ys had been sent with their bloody-handed ‘God’, Asdrubael didn’t know and he didn’t care.

All that mattered was the reality: the armies of Kher-Ys had been wiped out in a single blow and now Low Commorragh was at last going to be his.

“Prepare our fresh reinforcements to deploy against High Commorragh.”

And that’s when the Fourth Disjunction came.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

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

**General Taylor Hebert**

“So much for keeping the demons under wraps,” Taylor said to Gamaliel.

They may have been able to keep the big secret after the first two or three incidents. There had been less than a hundred of these Eldar-looking demons having bathed in purple paint.

Without asking anyone, she had known what they were: the servants of Slaanesh, one of the Four Ruinous Powers, specifically empowered by depravity, excess, and murder-orgies like the ones the Eldar of Commorragh loved so much.

The problem was that the fourth time, there had been over a thousand of them, and while they had been easily blasted back to whatever hellish pit they had spawned from, the damage had been done. It was difficult to argue demons didn’t exist when two or three hundred thousands of your soldiers had seen you using the Nebula’s Shard to decapitate and therefore banish the hideous Warp beasts.

“The Enemy is panicking,” the Custodes simply said when the General of Army Group Caribbean turned her head in his direction. Somehow, the Warden of the Golden Throne managed to remain as regal and imposing as he entered the battle. The cloak and the armour had not a minuscule detail out of order. Seriously, how did he manage to remain that clean and unaffected by the battlefield? Even with the golden aura and the wings protecting her from the ashes and the swarm to fight in her stead, she was unable to do that! “No doubt its hordes are busy as we speak fighting their way through the fortified defences the Eldar have emplaced to protect their city from the ravages of the Warp.”

“Given how badly we have broken the armies and fleets of Commorragh, I don’t think we can expect the long-ears to resist long the demonic onslaught.” The insect-mistress stated after looking at the new report compiled by her field headquarters. The Custodes confirmation was not long in coming.

“Indeed not. Do you think your armies can break the last two walls of Zel’harst and reach the Corespur before the Enemy?”

This was a question with so many unknowns it was more an educated guess than a true analysis of the pros and cons.

“Yes,” the female parahuman said at last. “Yes, I think we can take the last two walls in seven hours or so. But I will have...”

There was a shiver on her right trying very hard to remain out of her Ambulls’ vision.

“Trazyn, I know you are here. Stop hiding.”

Taylor never had any doubts the Necron ‘Collector’ was going to follow them to Commorragh – or precede them, no one had seen him entering the Eversprings Gate. And as the battle for Zel’harst progressed, her doubts had completely vanished. In every realm where the Imperial forces were fighting the long-ears, either her insects or her soldiers had seen small task forces of Necrons assault certain vaults, dark spires and spirit off with many surprised Eldar dignitaries. Since Phaerakh Neferten’s forces were not concentrated on pillage but on committing the largest Eldar xenocide their schedule allowed for, that left only one possibility.

It wasn’t like there were many Necron thieves at large in the galaxy, no?

“My dear friend! What a splendid day!” The Archaeovist of Solemnace, like the Custodes nearby, was still as pristine as ever. “Or is it night? Well, day or night, you look as radiant as ever! And the golden wings are absolutely amazing! They would look fantastic in...”

Taylor raised an eyebrow.

“...ahem...in the Imperial Palace of Terra,” somehow, the General was perfectly sure this wasn’t the way Trazyn wanted to end his sentence. And she found interesting the grip of the Custodes around his spear had tightened since there was a mention of the Imperial Palace. It looked like the bodyguards of the Emperor had already met Trazyn before...and knowing the Necron’s main hobby, it had certainly not been for a cup of tea.

“Yes. But as I’m sure you are aware, I have an invasion to supervise and my time is limited. So as pleasant your compliments are flattering for my ego, Trazyn, I have to insist you go directly to the point or continue your collection-raids on your own.”

“Of course! I would not dream wasting your time, my friend,” the violet and gold-clothed Necron walked until they were literally at arm’s length from each other and declared in a murmur which was particularly useless given how many transhumans were in the vicinity. “I was following the exploits of your Heracles Wardens when I found *them* in an abandoned vault. I found your Objective E.”

Taylor looked at the green artificial lights of Trazyn and wasn’t able to feel any deception...for what it was worth.

“I suppose you want something I have in my possession in exchange.” For all the collection value of this trophy, admitting having it and not releasing it in her custody would be a guarantee of having several Battlefleets sent to find Solemnace as soon as this battle was over.

“Indeed! Now your forces five hours ago acquired some tapestries and mosaics in the Brisar’lon Spire that I have some use for...” the list was rather long. It didn’t surprise her. The being in front of her was strange and how he gave a value to an item was not something a human mind could grasp. But even Trazyn knew that it was a primary objective because they weren’t going to find anywhere else in the galaxy. As such, it didn’t matter that the Necron wanted four red jewels larger than her fist, about two hundred artworks of long-lost xenos civilisations and a small mountain of coins to go along with several M33 tapestries.

“I agree to your demands.” All across the sub-realm, her Queen-ants relayed thousands of orders and the troops transporting the items Trazyn wanted stashed them apart from the rest of the loot. It did not take long for Necron parties to emerge from the shadows and grab them. “Fantastic! Since we are all good friends, I added a few trinkets I found here and there at Mar’lych!”

And on this the Infinite Collector took two steps back and disappeared in a blaze of emerald lightning.

Three seconds later, an advanced optical illusion dissipated and behind the elements of the Fay 20th and the Nyx 2nd eating and resting before the next assault, four large containers were suddenly revealed to human eyes. Three out of the four were clearly of Imperial manufacture, with the Imperial Aquila painted in gold over the old grey paint. The four looked more like something Trazyn had manufactured to transport his gains.

It would be extremely impolite to say the Custodes ran towards the containers. But the golden giant arrived well before any guardsman was able to touch it.

“Are these the containers half a dozen regiments were prepared to search the Corespur for?” The golden-armoured parahuman asked once the Custodes had finished inspecting the identification codes carved in the gold of the double-headed eagle.

“They are.”

“They were supposed to be in the Corespur sub-realm, not Mar’lych.”

“The Yllithian Dynast must have transferred them to his citadel...or there was a manifest error and the Eldar simply forgot about them. Does it really matter as long as they are once again property of His Majesty?”

“No,” Taylor recognised. “I am contacting Archmagos Felicia 24-Toledo and Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix. They will provide you an escort of twelve thousand Skitarii and tanks for escort across Zel’harst. I suppose you want to supervise yourself the evacuation of the containers.”

“Yes,” the Custodes agreed. The superhuman guardians of the Golden Throne did not look prone to emotional bursts, but it looked like the completion of its quest. “I regret I will not accompany you to the end of this battle but my orders are clear and non-debatable. The recovery of the priceless machines forged to serve as replacement parts for the Astronomican is the very reason of the Custodes ships I deployed with me at Pavia.”

Ironically, the very reason these parts had survived was because the Eldar raiders had stolen them in the last years of M30. According to the Custodes, most of the machinery ordered by the Emperor to serve as replacements had been destroyed by agents of the Ruinous Powers during the Heresy. Many, many Forge-Worlds had burned because the abominations had wanted to leave nothing to chance where the Master of Mankind was concerned.

Of course, these containers were filled only with critical components. The Astronomican was a gigantic machine, and not every part the Tech-Priests needed to maintain it was here. But it would repair certain sections, provide the Astronomican with direly-needed maintenance and maybe return its range to what it had been in better times.

“What is in the other container, then?” asked one of the Salamanders who was studying the Necron-forged metal.

“Only one way to discover it, I suppose,” she answered and used one of her razorbeetles to push the big flashing green button with an ‘OPEN’ above it. There was a flash of green light, and the metal rapidly dissolved into grey paste, to the great disappointment of the Tech-Priests three metres away who had already planned to study it assiduously.

“Relics...” one of the Frateris Templars’ vox-operators declared as a spectacle of gold, jewels and many banners became visible to every eye. “I think this Holy Cup is the Chalice of Saint Natalia! And here is the Aquila of the Militant-Baptist! Lost for two thousand years, the Chains of Saint Xavier! The Reliquary of Cardinal-Martyr Polycarp was at the forefront of ten crusades! This banner was presented to the Frateris 1st and stolen so long ago we always believed it had been destroyed!”

Wonderful. Taylor had a sinking feeling as she saw thousands of eyes watch her with expressions far too close to veneration and adulation. Trust Trazyn to make a bad situation worse. Half of the army was already declaring her a ‘Living Saint’ or any other religious saintly title, and now the thief had released plenty of ‘holy relics’ in her custody. Could this day get more embarrassing?

“I think the golden power sword is Galatine,” Marshal Werner Groener said hesitantly. “According to the tales, it was used by Living Saint Gerstahl in his defence of the Cadian Gate.”

If the other relics had as much aura and history behind them, Trazyn had given her priceless religious items...and for the moment she had no idea what to do about them. But for the moment it could wait. Quickly she ordered a few companies of Frateris Templar, Priests and Mechanised Infantry guardsmen who were no longer fit for frontline duties and ordered them to transport it To the Port of Lost Souls in boxes usually sued for precious archeotech.

“Everyone returns to war duties. We have walls to breach and the Enemy is on its way.”

Silently, the insect-mistress began to move some of the sizeable reserves she had accumulated in the last thirteen hours. Commorragh was a horrible place, but the number of locations to breed millions of battle-ready insects was impressive one you eliminated the local witnesses.

“Which approach do you want to storm the next wall, General?” Brigadier-General Theon Dan of Lionheart asked her after the usual salute. “Aerial, underground or the conventional assault?”

Weaver chuckled as five new colonies of Ambulls, several hundreds of thousands of Lightning-dragonflies, about a third of the Helspiders which were available and millions more Death World breeds were beginning to dig, fly or run towards the pre-assault positions.

“We will do the three approaches at the same time,” she answered. “The long-ears abandoned the last walls without too much resistance, we have to break them here and now. Otherwise, they are going to be a nuisance in our rear for the next hours.”

And while she could oversee the fighting in Zel’harst and the battle-to-come in the Corespur, there was a proverb about supervising everything and not making the correct choices.

“Legio Defensor and Legio Aeris Aestus can begin their bombardments without restriction. The next Gates won’t allow us to take the God-Engines with them.”

“The Necrons are continuing their advance in Mar’lych; by their own admission they have killed more than half of their armies and breached two more walls. And on the Utar’ragh front, the crimson armours are killing themselves against our fortified lines and the fire of the Ordinatus. Everything is proceeding according to the plan!”

Taylor hadn’t the heart to tell the young Lieutenant that even if things went according to the plan for now, things were going to get, far, far worse in the future, no matter how many Imperial reinforcements managed to reach them before the end of this battle.

“It’s time. Tell the Skitarii 2nd Legion and House Sablus to prepare to follow the Ambulls.”

As her airborne insects darkened the skies, Taylor flexed her wings and soared in the air, trying hard not to giggle. Even after a few hours of it, the very magic of this new ability had not lost its beauty.

High in altitude she saw the armies she had brought here, in the heart of Commorragh.

And the entire dimension of the Webway shook as tens of thousands Basilisks of the 1st and 2nd Army, helped by Titans, Knights and the Mechanicus and Frateris guns, fired their first volleys.

“Begin.”

**Dynast Lythric Kraillach**

This was not working. This was not working!

Dynast Lythric Kraillach jumped to the side and struck with his sword, decapitating the Ambull which had managed somehow to excavate a tunnel just under his feet.

“Dynast!” one of his Agony-General shouted as the screams of the dying and the supplications for more pain filled the air of Zel’harst. “We need to retreat! The Wall of Despair is lost!”

Just as if these words had been heard, a new tide of Helspiders arrived on top of this section of the ramparts and more Aeldari of his personal guard began to die.

Damn it, how many of these beasts had the Mon-keigh managed to breed in half a cycle?

“Retreat,” his pride told him to continue to fight; his reason told him the Wall of Despair was lost, with two large breaches created and Ambulls having created over five large tunnels to lead the mad red robes directly in the factories behind the walls. “Retreat! We will wait for them in my inner citadel!”

As he embarked on his largest customised Ravager, the *Invincible Blue Sun*, the Dynast could only feel loathing and unabated hatred for the Mon-keigh. Tens of thousands of cycles of exploitation, schemes and carefully laid plans to be able to build this citadel in the first place, and all of this was ruined by species unworthy to do more than lick his boots.

Because Zel’harst was lost, he wasn’t able to convince himself of the contrary. The Inner Citadel, also known as the Thirteenth Wall of Zel’harst, was going to take them more time and ammunition than the primates had wished for, but take it they would.

The air wings of Ravagers, Reapers and Razorwing Jetfighters were doing their utmost for him and the greater glory of House Kraillach, but for every flying insect they killed, ten more replaced it. The walls were eaten by termites, broken by ants, and overwhelmed by Helspiders. Ambulls and Haemovores dug under his magnificent walls, bypassing entirely the carefully murder-zones he had envisioned and ambushing his forces before they had seen the first of the real enemies coming to kill them.

And as the massacre continued the thirteenth-damned artillery grew closer, continuing its bombardment, massacring Aeldari and thousands of insects, but the latter were simply endless and the former weren’t. Entire companies of Blue Sun warriors were not even bothering to do more than a few short skirmishes offensively before storming his own depots and trying to reach safety at any cost.

The ugly mountain-sized machines stood in the middle of the Mon-keigh-army undaunted. He had managed to cripple or destroy a few of the smaller ones, but the larger had suffered no losses whatsoever, their shields and their aerial protection killing light craft long before they were in position to detonate their engines.

“I believe I have no choice but to use the most dangerous weapons in my vault this time...”

The Obsidian section of the Wall of Despair, which had stood intact and defiant for the beginning of the assault, suddenly vanished in an explosion of light. Even from his distant viewpoint, Lythric winced as it was like a thousand golden flames had been lit at once.

Space Marines flooded by the breaches, from the air and the tunnels, with tens of thousands of new insects.

She came.

His officers had called her *Maelsha’eil Dannan*, but this was pure nonsense. The Burning Angel Governing the Cycle of Entropy was not a mere Mon-keigh with a few light tricks and some disgusting ability to control insects!

It was the Mon-keigh creature which was leading the upstart primates against their legitimate masters.

Lythric could not deny though the warriors who defended the Obsidian Despair Bastion could not stop this creature, alas.

“We will see if it’s vulnerable to our sovereign weapons. We will see...

“Dynast! My Most Glorious Dynast, the Disintegrator Cannon of the *Invincible* has been sabotaged! We must evacuate before-“

Lythric and his two other guards had the reflex to jump away from the Ravager, and it was not a heartbeat too soon as the prow of his beloved transport was consumed by black light and poisoned fumes before beginning its long fall to meet the bloodied battlefields of Zel’harst.

The Master of Zel’harst had fortunately a jump pack built inside his armour for sensation thrills of this nature. But he was not a Hellion or a Scourge, and the air at this altitude was a scene of vicious fighting. Twice the large insects sparkling with electrical power missed frying him by a few fingers, and as the landing approach began he had to fight with a large spider who had somehow managed to climb half of a burning spire and get in position to jump upon him.

The pain and suffering in his left did not compensate for the horrible feeling of humiliation and the numbing symptoms telling him a large quantity of poison was in his blood and he had not the antidote on hand.

Then as he managed to kick the Helspider away he crashed into the debris of an auction slave-house and the pain overwhelmed him in pleasure.

“AAAARRRGGGH!”

He didn’t know how long he stayed there, unable to move. His body was poisoned and broken. Surely his guards were going to find him. They knew only he had the keys to the elixir-antidotes he regularly poisoned their food and drinks with.

His inbuilt communication device had been broken with the shock. He could not call for help. Vect! It was Vect’s fault his Ravager had been sabotaged! Or was it Yllithian? The perfidious bastard had cremated two of his concubines that way after all!

Where were his guards? They had to find him before the Helspiders! He could not die here! He was Lythric Kraillach! He was Master of Zel’harst, Dynast of the Blue Sun, and Tyrant of Low Commorragh!

Loud footsteps stammered the floor where he had crash-landed, and the heart of Lythric Kraillach was devoured by an emotion he had long believed he was immune to.

Fear.

“Yes, we have found him, Chosen of the Omnissiah. Yes, he is still alive and we can use him. We have studied the security protocols used by the xenos, and as long as we have its blood, eyes and fingers, we will be able to claim the vaults for the glory of the Omnissiah and yours.”

“I can pay you,” the Dynast of the Blue Sun cleared his throat as many of the primate in red robes surrounded him with many, many of the metallic tendrils holding a lot of cutting weapons. “I can give you...

“Silence xenos!”

Lythric tried to resist. It was his last mistake.

**Heart of Commorragh**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

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

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

If Commorragh as a whole received one security grade, on a range from zero to a thousand, the decision of the judges would earmark them a negative number without contest.

The Dark City was a catastrophe waiting to happen. Inflammable substances were stored less than fifty metres away from enormous foundries. Titan-sized vats of acid could pour in the shadowy streets at any moment. Explosives went off every minute and it was a minor miracle there had been no disastrous incident in the last hours.

In these circumstances, the duty of a saboteur was not that complicated. The long-ears of this sub-realm were busy stabbing each other in the back, preparing their next betrayals and of course waging war to reach the thrones at the top. The rumours were spreading one Dynast had been kidnapped by a xenos abomination and one was dead. No one had any interest searching for a lone Space Marine.

Aeonid wasn’t going to complain, though his pride was a bit insulted that even after flooding five entire hab-blocks in acid clearing himself a path under the shrouded suns, the psychopaths of Commorragh were unable to unite and make common cause.

Truly there was no hope for this degenerate race.

“Now. How do I find a prison in this sub-realm?”

The clues the dying White Scar had left him were ‘Eldanesh Prison’ and ‘Black Gate’, but unfortunately after the interrogation of several important-looking officers, he had learned no prison called ‘Eldanesh’ of the sort existed in Commorragh. Given that the Eldar were no better as keeping secrets than they were following sane security protocols, this piece of information could be relatively trusted.

There was one ‘Uldanesh Prison’, however. It was also nicknamed the ‘Black Gate’ and was rumoured to keep captive the most dangerous prisoners ever captured by the Dynasts of Commorragh. Since a Primarch, gene-son of the Emperor, could not be described as anything save ‘extremely dangerous’, this was most likely the prison he was looking for.

There was only one problem. Nobody seemed to know where the prison was.

The reason of this ignorance was as cruel as it was logical: the superior clique ruling Commorragh until a few hours ago had made the mere mention of this prison a capital offense. Those who asked and weren’t cleared by their masters were immediately tortured for long periods of time before being executed or disappearing for the jails of this prison.

As a result, Thiel didn’t even know if his efforts to search for a Webway Gate pulsing with black energy – of which there were hundreds in Commorragh – were a step in the right direction or not.

To make things more difficult the sub-realm of the Corespur was a maze of wealth, unlimited cruelty and disorder, and if a map of the region had existed a few thousand years ago, the builders had certainly not been updated it in the last century.

“I will just have to hope the Imperial forces are not far behind...” the loud screams of a ‘Mon-keigh invasion’ had not fallen on deaf ears, though the mentions of killer automatons with disintegrating rays had let him wonder how much time he had spent in the Webway. “Let’s continue the sabotage.”

Something he did very well, in all honesty. His favourite was to disable the anti-gravitational fields of the xenos spires. For a reason which totally escaped him, the long-ears were so arrogant they rarely guarded the reason their residential towers were not collapsing with less than twenty soldiers. It was very satisfying hearing them shrieking once they were strapped to their pain engines as the buildings fell upon their heads.

Many times the Ultramarine Captain had not to reveal his presence. Eldar loved, really loved drinking in crystalline glasses their drinks in front of tortured prisoners, and there many species – including their own species- who were slowly dissected, impaled or burned alive. But what happened when one of the monsters had absorbed the equivalent of a year or so of illegal substances and the shields keeping him or her prisoner failed?

Aeonid had already released tens of thousands in a dozen operations like these. Uprisings and massive rebellions only waited an opportunity to begin in Commorragh, and today the agitation was guaranteeing more disorder and violence to spread.

Seeing a new column of long-ears corner and butcher a Helspider, another unpleasant idea came to his mind. Since for some reason the Eldar suddenly seem to have a fixation upon exterminating the spiders of Commorragh, I am going to ensure the hab-blocks they’re spreading with insecticide have a lot of very dangerous goods which shouldn’t be in contact with chemicals...

It was not difficult to implement. Robbing several xenos stocks of liquids the evil beings used for torture and their sadistic activities was accomplished for the killing of five silver-armoured guards. And seeing the idiots disperse insecticide and scream when they realised they should have at least seen if there was nothing dangerous in the ‘insect lairs’ was incredibly amusing.

“Before the Heresy, unleashing the Night Lords on Commorragh would have been the logical answer...”

“That’s a bit cruel...cousin.”

From an archway that he had judged devoid of any enemies, twenty Astartes came out. Aeonid didn’t miss the fact their armours presented signs of minor damage everywhere, and the Gate they had just activated and gotten through was releasing a nice tapestry of devastation, fire and smoke.

Last but not least, a Dreadnought came through, finishing its mangling of an Eldar in blue armour.

“YES BUT FOR WHO?”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

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

**Magos Feng C-801 Skua**

Five hours ago, Feng had thought this was an honour to be assigned to be the liaison officer between Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar and the very famous Archmagos Dominatus Dominus Belisarius Cawl.

This sense of honour had lasted exactly the time to see the Martian Archmagos participate in the assault against the Eldar twelfth wall.

The Archmagos...was simply insane.

Solar Atomisers were used so far beyond their usual mode of operation it was a miracle they had not been incinerated! Plasma Guns were not meant to be fired in such rapid and exhausting volleys! Artillery was not supposed to fight directly atop your positions unless you were neck-deep in enemies!

Feng C-801 Skua thought he should have stayed on the *Standard Template Construct* and damn the promotions. Commorragh was already bad, as it was filled with heresies beyond numbers and monstrosities which made the Chosen’s insects perfectly adorable and cuddly in comparison. But this was the enemy! Allies were supposed to be trusty and reliable!

Sometimes, being a liaison was not just worth the promotion. He would make his next prayer to the Omnissiah about crazy-obsessed Archmagi!

Still, crazy or not, he had a liaison’s duty to fulfil. Belisarius Cawl may be a Heretek in doctrine and actions, but he was still one of the twenty most powerful Archmagi of the Imperium and giving him a reason to complain was a one hundred percent guarantee to be demoted before this battle was over.

“Archmagos Lankovar presents his respects and suggests we move to the north-west. Lady Weaver and the Dawnbreaker Guard called for Mechanicus support in extracting several valuable pieces of archeotech, and this column appears to be the closest available for support.”

Something Feng C-801 Skua decided was no coincidence. Archmagos Belisarius Cawl could very well proclaim he was going wherever the Omnissiah guided him, the Wuhan-trained Tech-Priest thought far more likely the Prime of Primes was using a tracker placed on a soldier of the Fay 20th or one of the other Guard regiments the Saint used as her mid-distance bodyguards – since no one would be busy placing one on an Astartes pauldron.

“My compliments to the Archmagos and my escort and myself are going to provide the necessary support,” a Mandrake jumped out of the shadows and the Omnisian Axe wielded by the Archmagos Dominatus Dominus struck faster than his augmented eyes could follow. The Mandrake’s body fell to the floor lifelessly, neatly bisected in two. “Thus the enemies of the Omnissiah always perish.”

This was not the first ambushes in the corridors of the citadel of Zel’harst, and it was not the last. While the approaches and the walls had seen the Eldar armies mercilessly exterminated, there were hundreds of thousands xenos crawling in the darkness which for some reason deluded in resisting the will of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Five times they were ambushed, in great part because Cawl was pushing his troops too fast, too hard. But each time, the arsenal the senior Archmagos and his bodyguards carried made short work of the enemies.

It took overall some ten minutes to reach the tactical coordinates provided by Archmagos Lankovar, though in the last minute they hardly could have missed the location. First, there were a lot of insects patrolling in the corridors, beginning with the ‘miniature artillery’ of the Queen-Tortoise and the beacon-shining Catachan ants, and ending with the Ambulls, with the disgusting Haemovores and the hundreds of thousands of razorbeetles. Secondly, the floors were littered with a stupendous number of enemies. It looked like the long-ears had tried to make their last stand here against the Chosen of the Omnissiah. They had been crushed for their arrogance, and Feng C-801 Skua felt a non-negligible amount of satisfaction at this discovery.

General Taylor Hebert, Angel of the Omnissiah-Emperor, was waiting for them before what had been a few hours ago a vault-door for some arrogant xenos prince. Now the armoured protection had been partially eaten and thrown aside by a colony of termites and other dangerous insects, and the dust-covered uniforms of the Imperial Guard were busy transporting several artefacts out of the vault. The Magos didn’t miss the fact certain items were transported by armoured beetles and directly set aflame by the weapons of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

“Archmagos Belisarius Cawl, what a surprise,” the tone of Saints and high-ranked officers was difficult to decipher, but Feng was rather sure there was absolutely zero surprise in the tone of Lady Weaver. “I was not expecting Mechanicus reinforcements to reach me so quickly.”

One of the Salamanders present coughed rather loudly and a few of the guardswomen smiled.

“The Mechanicus is always quick to act in the service of the Quest for Knowledge,” replied courteously Cawl. It had even the merit of being true.

“Of this I have no doubt,” the General said as one by one infantrymen and Space Marines began to pile at her feet a rather impressive number of power fists, plasma weapons, ancient M32-pattern shotguns and more strangely, dozens of servo-skulls. “As you can see, the Eldar owning this vault had a fetish for his collection of servo-skulls and several types of human-forged weapons. Don’t ask me why. I don’t understand Eldar minds, and I’m sure I don’t want to.”

“The Mechanicus will certainly ask this perfidious xenos tyrant the reasons for his actions,” one of the heavily-modified Tech-Priests in Cawl’s entourage spoke up.

The golden-armoured Saint clicked her tongue.

“That’s going to be rather difficult I’m afraid.” The move of the golden gauntlet where one of the giant centipedes lied dead was all they needed to realise the owner was still there in this ruined antechamber. The long-eared xenos had killed the insect, but the dying centipede had trampled in its agony. It was by all accounts a fitting end for one of these arrogant beasts. “Anyway, I think I’ve deactivated all the traps, killed all the beasts and massacred all the guardians. Please begin the transfer of the contents of this vault to the Port of Lost of Souls before resuming your Quest.”

Screams were heard in the distance. They were very powerful...and distinctly belonged to Eldar throats.

“Idiots,” murmured the insect-mistress, returning one of the shotguns she had been studying with the rest of the lined-up weapons on the ground. “When will they understand it’s better to flee than to die for nothing?”

Feng C-801 Skua thought that given the limitless Eldar arrogance, the answer was likely to be ‘never’.

And then Archmagos Lankovar made plenty of guardsmen jump in fright as one of his mechadendrites struck one of the servo-skulls without warning.

“Ha! Ha! I was right...again,” the Radical Archmagos laughed and commented with absolutely no humility. Feng frowned as the thoroughly ruined debris of the venerable servo-skull had revealed a sort of blue device. Whatever this was, this was *not* an STC. The repositories of the Dark Age of Technology could come in many forms and shapes, but now that the Mechanicus had obtained the Athena STC thanks to Lady Weaver, they knew to look for remarkable signs, and this small rectangle did not present signs of one.

“Perhaps you could explain, Archmagos Dominatus Dominus?” the inquisitive tone of the Saint made clear Belisarius Cawl better had a good reason for ruining a serviceable servo-skull.

The near-Heretek grumbled in a high-level cant incomprehensible to him before returning to Low Gothic.

“I trust you are all familiar with the concept of the Standard Template Construct,” Cawl began and everyone nodded.

“What you may not be aware of, on the other hand, is that the Emperor, in his great wisdom, was incredibly impressed by the system and wished to replicate the feat of the Ancients and then improve it. While it is beyond my imagination to guess the designs of the Omnissiah, I have recovered several stolen samples of projects he ordered several Forge-Worlds to research upon during my expeditions across the galaxy. The Horus Heresy destroyed many of course, and most of them were not ready to receive information, but...”

“But you think this archeotech is one surviving piece of His Majesty’s projects.”

“Yes,” the Archmagos replied levelly, staring in the eyes of the Saint as he did. “I believe so. Unfortunately, the advanced interfaces for this data-repository have been lost and the encryption promises to be...difficult. I will need several days in my lab to know for sure if schematics or templates have been recorded...”

“One way or other, this will have to wait until the end of the battle,” the Chosen of the Omnissiah stopped the beginning of what promised to be a very long monologue. “Magos...Skua, is it? The transfer of all this archeotech is now your responsibility until it reaches the landing zones of the Port of Lost Soul.”

Yes, finally things were looking up! He would no longer have to follow the Heretek into uncountable ambushes!

“Should this...M31 archeotech contain valuable data, Archmagos Cawl, you will be granted fifty percent of the rights of the discovery,” Feng almost gaped at the incredibly generous term. The Chosen of the Omnissiah had done all the work!

“It is my pleasure.” Of course it was, the ancient Archmagos was certainly going to receive a new fortune in favours and priceless archeotech!

“Now let’s return to the sack of this Citadel. We must crush all resistance on our way to the Corespur.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Utar’ragh**

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

**Aurelia Malys**

Aurelia had believed she knew what war was about before the humans invaded Commorragh. It had not even been arrogant to think so: when millions of assassinations and raid-sized battles happened every cycle under the suns of the Dark City, no Aeldari living there, Dynast or slave, was really ignorant when it came down to warfare.

Aurelia had been forced to swallow her ignorance several times during this last cycle, which was already called ‘Bloodbath Cycle’ by several of the big mouths who somehow managed to live through the killings.

The young Aeldari winced as the familiar sound of human artillery thundered again and like dozens of her fellow veteran warriors, she threw herself in an abandoned trench and tried to protect her head as best as she could while violent explosions transformed the ancient grounds into a crater-filled landscape.

Part of her mind screamed at the honourless, brutish and disgusting methods of war employed by their enemies. The infantry opposing them was gunning down every transport, fighter and bomber, hiding behind gigantic earthworks their red-robed creatures had built.

There was no glory for an ex-slave to find on this god-forsaken battlefield. More precisely, there was no glory to be won for anyone. The average enemy weapon was more a funny flashlight compared to a Dark Lance, but try to laugh when the short-eared opponents fired hundreds of thousands at the same time.

“I hate their sonic weapons,” growled an old-looking veteran in the colours of the Magnificence of the Falling Moon. “By Khaine, we were supposed to have the Ravagers support of the Crimson Guard on this counterattack! Where are they?”

“Dead,” a young black-haired male laconically replied, one which could not possibly be more than one year out of the vats. “And if they aren’t, they’re busy watching the spectacle from the Corespur spires while evacuating their families and their treasures.”

“I’ve heard several fleets and armies of the Craftworld were on their way to help us,” an Yllithian warrior said. “We may be able to hold with them.”

One of the Hellions which had joined their haphazard group after miraculously crashing without major injuries spat and murmured a few insults.

“Fleets won’t be of any use against the humans,” the Wych commanding the force they were all answering to stated. “I’ve heard the Yngir have detonated an anti-Gate Weapon in the Port of Lost Souls. Armies...yes, armies we could use.”

The former slave could only marvel at the fact the term ‘Mon-keigh’ was on its way to extinction as the number of dead and the tide of destruction refused to die down. In less than two cycles, the ‘human’ word had gone from being an unforgivable offense to a rising vocabulary word. Amazing how a thorough kicking in the vulnerable parts could give you some respect for a species the Aeldari had always looked down as a bunch of above-average primates.

“As long as they remember to keep their Lhilitu-damned sorcery out of Commorragh!” another conscript retorted hotly. “We don’t need more instability with the Disjunctions!”

Everyone tried very hard to look like it was business as usual. Aurelia did not remark out loud that most utterly failed. She knew her face mustn’t be a shade-pict of serenity and confidence. The human attack was bad enough; despite the combined efforts of millions of warriors, the invasion was neither stalled nor particularly defeated. But fighting humans and the servants of She-Who-Thirsts at the same time and across several sub-realm battlefields? It was a nightmare, no mistake about it.

“We should get out of this citadel before everything falls apart,” the blue-haired Wych gritted between her perfect teeth. Then the sub-commander realised she had voiced this out loud and send them a glare promising painful death if someone dared murmur something nasty about her.

“No, that’s a good suggestion, really,” the Falling Moon warrior agreed as the enemy artillery seemed to stop and try to annihilate everything on a section to their right. “Why don’t we evacuate the Dark City? I’m no Terror-Admiral of course, but I know enough to say that if we can’t cut the flow of human reinforcements, we are utterly screwed.”

“This...it’s not that bad?” one of the Xelian regulars tried to protest but no one knew if it was an affirmation or a question.

“You’ve not been to any raids,” their female commander half-confirmed the pessimistic statement. “There are planets with trillions of humans in realspace. Trillions we called vermin and raided for thousands of cycles to take slaves, artwork and satisfy our requirements of pain and suffering.” The blue lips twitched slightly. “For some reason, I don’t think our raid forces have left happy and Aeldari-friendly populations in their wake.”

“This is leaving me all desolated deep inside,” the Hellion sneered. “But I’m afraid the Oblivion Lances defending the private citadel of Mighty Dynast Xelian are pointed directly in our backs as we speak. And if you think our tyrant is wise enough to not consider us expendable...”

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR AND THE SAINT!”

“Oh by Khaine’s bloody hands, they are going to send their armoured walkers,” whimpered one of the conscripts as familiar huge figures bristling with weapons and hurting her ears rose from the enemy earthworks.

There was no question about what to do. Until they had such gigantic things on their side, every attempt to hold the line was just resulting in tens of thousands dead Aeldari.

“Abandon this trench and return to the previous defence line! Retreat from this trench before they incinerate us with their blasting guns!”

**Colonel Miroslav Suvorov**

“Your role, Major-General, is not to exterminate all the Eldar of the Webway by yourself.” The voice of Lady Weaver’s envoy was definitely not amused, thought Colonel Suvorov. “The General has not forbidden local counterattacks but there is a difference between pursuing a broken enemy and attempting a breakthrough when there are several undefeated armies converging in your position.”

Given that the man delivering them was the Second Naval Secretary of Nyx and one of the close councillors of Lady Weaver, this made his ‘recommendations’ very close an order from the Saint Herself.

Unfortunately, for all her mistakes where military tactics were involved, the Major-General commanding the 18th Division wasn’t an idiot and saluted, accepting implicitly the rebuke.

“I understand, Lord Clockblocker. This situation won’t repeat itself.” The vigour of the answer proved someone had definitely learned from the failures of several officers who charged stupidly ahead and disregarded the potential thousands of casualties their bloody-minded attitudes could cause.

“See that you do. Lady Weaver is not as forgiving as me.”

For a reason which escaped Suvorov and the rest of the high-ranked officers present, the man known as ‘Leet’ chose this moment to burst in laughter behind the dirty-white power-armoured man.

“The casualties of Brigade Light and Thunder, Brigadier-General Dovator if you please,” the young orange-haired man continued.

Miroslav Suvorov felt a jab of jealousy at the idea Major-General Anita De Waal was not going to be brought on a court-martial. Three hundred guardsmen of Fay had died to break the trap the Manchester 2nd Reconnaissance had placed the core of its infantry into by her fault, and the butcher bill for the men of Colonel Shannon were comparatively higher.

If it had been up to him, the Arminiun officer would be facing a firing squad as a reward for her tactical stupidity.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t up to him and he had to hide the anger he felt towards the blue-blooded woman who should never have risen to command a Division of the Imperial Guard.

“The Manchester 2nd has been badly hit by the Eldar flanking manoeuvre,” announced the white-haired, blue-eyed Brigadier-General who kept a large scar on his white cheek as a reminder of the greenskin battles in the Nyx Sector. “They have taken thirty percent of casualties, most of them unrecoverable. The Nyx 26th of Colonel Suvorov has bled, but remains operational for defensive duties with sixteen percent of casualties, half of them wounded. The artillery is mostly intact; the New Chelsea was only peripherally involved in the action and has five percent of its pre-battle effectives as casualties.”

Their so-wise aristocratic leader didn’t even feign regret or sorrow at the casualties inflicted to what was before the last assault a near-intact force. Not that Miroslav or the other Fay men would have believed her if she did.

Everything in Major-General Anita De Waal screamed fake. In appearance, the Arminiun guardswoman looked like a twenty-plus young woman with hairs so blue they were almost the same shade as the seas of Fay, and eyes of the purest silver. But like everyone else, he knew the reality. This ‘young-looking’ woman was ‘merely’ one hundred and seventy years old, and the ‘natural looks’ were created by so many gene-enhancements and body-modification therapies that even their former Planetary Governor would not have been able to afford them.

De Waal was in all likelihood the oldest Major-General of Army Group Caribbean, and there were rumours even the unbreakable hold of her family in the Sphinxium diamonds trade on her home planet had been unable to do more than keep her in the Guard until promotions were handed to her by virtue of seniority.

“Our psykers and our Magi Logis predict an important assault on this section of the Utar’ragh in less than four hours,” Lord Clockblocker said, thereby revealing the motives of his presence here and now.

“With due respect, Sir, we have stopped all the assault of the long-ears so far,” Dovator intervened. “And while some regiment-sized assault forces of the Eldar are showing a tendency to learn from their mistakes, I think we can deal with whatever they send against us. As long as there aren’t more of these ‘Disjunctions’ in the future, of course.”

Faces tightened. Learning the God-Emperor considered this operation sufficiently important to send a real Custodes had been a real morale booster for the men. But there had been small scenes of panic each time the abominations materialised, and Miroslav Suvorov wasn’t going to pretend he wasn’t afraid.

The God-Emperor had sent a Saint and a Custodes to win this battle. But the forces of darkness were there today too.

“Normally I would agree, but our Astropaths have received many, many alerts of Biel-Tan forces across the galaxy abandoning critical battlefields. You have one guess where we think some of their equivalents of our Titans are headed.”

They had angered so much the long-ears entire wars were abandoned for them? Miroslav was really impressed...before remembering the little issue of *xenos Titans*.

“Legio Aeris Aestus will redeploy here while Legio Defensor guards our gains at Zel’harst. But if we let the enemy choose the location and the pace of the engagement, we are going to take tens of thousands casualties at the worst moment possible. We need to force the Eldar reinforcements to fight on our terms.”

“And how are we going to force them to do that?” the female Major-General asked with a voice dripping with scepticism. For once, the Fay colonel didn’t blame her. The long-ears were fast and after more than thirty hours of pure, limitless slaughter, even the stupidest xenos seemed to realise charging head-on the armies of His Most Holy Majesty was a suicidal action.

The Second Naval Secretary sighed and his expression seemed to be filled with genuine...regret?

“To fight the monsters, we are going to unleash our own monsters. If the strength of our enemies is confirmed, we will activate a Case Cthulhu against the Eldar.”

“Say it,” Leet chuckled, surrounded by a large escort of Tech-Priests.

“Fine,” Lord Dennis Peters grimaced. “Case Cthulhu, Horribilis-1, is to be prepared for imminent activation. Password is...Han Solo shot first.”

Somehow, seeing the crazy grin of the black-armoured madman, Miroslav Suvorov had an urge to say he really, but really, didn’t want this weapon to be deployed...

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

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

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

“This is a rather big army,” Aeonid Thiel commented as tens of thousands upon tens of thousands midnight-clad Eldar of the ‘Kraillach’ faction emerged into the Corespur sub-realm.

“Indeed,” Isley replied to the Heresy veteran. “A big reminder our enemies have still large reserves to draw upon.”

Assuredly, by any standard the reinforcements the long-ears had just received were inferior in numbers to the forces his infiltration team had observed at Mar’lych and the estimates Lady Weaver had thought she would have to fight at Zel’harst.

Still, three hundred thousand-plus Eldar was not a toothless army, especially if it had aerial and artillery support – and this one had both in considerable numbers.

Moreover, they had someone smart in command, for instead of charging head-on the tunnels leading to Zel’harst – rigorous interrogation and look-outs of heavily wounded long-ears left little doubt on the subject – the Kraillach army was trying to fortify its positions.

It was good to put an emphasis on ‘trying’.

“I think their warriors are learning the hard way paving your streets with metallic skulls is not exactly good for digging trenches,” the Ultramarine said as several Drukhari behaved in a manner which would have made several Whiteshield companies face-palm.

“Until recently, they had their slaves to do these humiliating tasks,” Viktor chuckled. “Why bother dirtying your hands when the system works so well?”

“It must have helped the warfare doctrine of these xenos is nearly totally opposed to the Imperial Guard,” added Sergeant Isaac Flynn of the Iron Drakes.

Said doctrine being essentially extreme speed and deadly Eldar weapons combined in one package. If your army doesn’t see you and can’t touch you, then you have nothing to fear from him. It was very seducing when you had the technology and the centuries-old veterans to make it work. But there were plenty of reasons why the Imperium had never tried it, and the main one wasn’t naval conservatism.

It was the fact that when it didn’t work, the defeat was horrific beyond words.

And the current battle was the very example of what awaited the species disdaining armoured protections.

“What now?” Jared asked. The Demolition Experts of their kill-team was not smiling. “If they are trying to build defensive positions here, I suppose the Imperial Guard and Lady Weaver are not far from these Webway Gates. But judging by the sizes of these xenos tunnels, they won’t be able to use the tallest Knight classes, and I won’t even speak of the Warhound Titans.”

“We will have to use the Shell we have requisitioned from these Eldar thieves,” Thiel declared tranquilly.

The Heracles Wardens and Iron Drakes went silent, as always as the Ultramarine Captain suggested something.

It was not because of seniority or anything stemming from the importance of one of the First Founding Chapters. On these issues, Isley was largely the high-ranked Astartes of the force; he was an ex-Alpha Legionnaire – though they had delayed this revelation moment for the post-battle council – and a Chapter Master to boot.

But Thiel had become a legend during the Heresy, and while the Iron Drakes had not been briefed on his exploits, the Heracles Wardens had been more than happy to remedy to these informational deficiencies. Aeonid Thiel was one of the survivors of Calth, executioners of Night Lords and Alpha Legion operatives, and advisor to the Primarch of the Thirteenth Legion. He was undoubtedly one of the most decorated officers of the Ultramarines for the entire Heresy and the decades after, and all of this had been done with ideas which ran against most of the Ultramarines’ tactics.

Meeting him as they sabotaged an ammunition complex of Commorragh had *not* been anticipated. Among the Alpha Legion cells and cohorts, Thiel’s fate had always been something of a mystery. Many lieutenants of Horus had placed gargantuan bounties on his head, but no one had ever come forwards to claim it.

Well, this day provided the answer...though Jeremiah had felt really bad about informing the Ultramarine the news he had been lost for the next best thing to four thousand standard years in the Webway.

“We have no idea how stable the detonators are...and let’s not speak about...” Alexander tried to counter.

“I’m aware that what I propose is very dangerous,” Thiel interrupted. “But if your forces are on their way to these Gates, we can’t afford keeping this Eldar army intact and united. No matter how many insects your leader can afford to sacrifice, the casualties the rest of the troops will take to storm the Corespur are going to be awful. I’m sure you have noticed the huge Dark Lances they are transferring from the northern Gates. Practically, I am of the opinion these are starship’s batteries they are going to use against the Guard and the rest of our allies.”

That it would be very, very unpleasant and bloody was left unsaid, but everyone heard it.

“He is right,” Jeremiah voiced out loud. “Pierre, you heard the Captain. Prepare the Phosphex Shell.”

“WITH PLEASURE!”

Three kilometres away from their aquila’s nest, the pale-skinned monsters continued to try fortifying their army against the inevitable assault.

And then a Reaper they had ‘convinced’ an ingrate Eldar commander to cede to their cause smashed in their rear-lines.

The initial explosion wiped out close to twenty thousand long-ears.

After that the horrible green-white flames began to spread.

“This is really a horrible substance...” Jared stated, which from a Demolition Speakers was quite indicative of the destructive power of phosphex. Phosphex had not been named ‘living fire’ or ‘crawling death’ for nothing.

“Let’s hope they will act resolutely or...”

Darkness came to Commorragh, and Jeremiah suddenly felt like something monstrous was close. The part of the battlefield where the Phosphex Shell had begun its implacable work of destruction became a maelstrom of green flames and something very dark fighting each other.

“It is certainly one of the Eldar Exterminatus weapons,” an Iron Drake battle-brother spoke, disgust evident in his voice.

“I fear this is something far worse than that,” Thiel said. “I’ve seen several phenomena when we hunted the Emperor’s Children. This is a Warp-touched abomination.”

There was only one thing to say as sorcery faced the pyrotechnical attack.

“Damn it...we are going to have to intervene...again.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

**Sixty hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Major-General Domenico Flabanico**

It was a common saying in the Guard that the Ventrillian Nobles regiments were only interested in riches, glory and adventure when they volunteered for the Imperial Guard after the Trial of Lava.

These were well spread rumours...and Domenico could certify they were absolutely true.

In his fairest moments, the Major-General would admit high and loud it was unfair to poorer planets which couldn’t negotiate the sort of terms Ventrillia administration routinely negotiated with the Administratum, but he didn’t hear the Cadian complain about being granted the best equipment available either.

Every planet had to use its strengths and merits to rise in the esteem of the High Lords. Such was the imperfect galaxy they lived in.

Take his personal situation for example. It had been a series of less-than-perfect Warp travels which had seen him arriving at Samarkand, nearly five thousand light-years away from the headquarters where he wanted to meet with his old uncle. Had he known the pirate-hunt would earn such glory and lead them to launch one of the most glorious and adventurous charges of this millennium? Of course not! But he had volunteered, using his influence and his reputation in service of his flair, so he was here, part of the legend.

His cousins were going to be mad with jealousy, and that suited Domenico just fine.

“The last Eldar army is completely encircled, General,” and yes, though he was not formally a Lieutenant-General, he was assuming the duties of one. “The Knights of House Taranis and Hermetika are leading the charge to annihilate them,” his vox-operator added.

“Excellent!” He smiled. If the enemy had not been this vermin of Eldar slavers, the Ventrillian noble would have felt maybe a bit guilty thinking about the image of infantry being trampled by the giant machines of the Knight Houses.

But the enemy was loathsome even for xenos. And Domenico like everyone else had marched in settlements filled with human corpses that the monsters had poisoned or tortured to death to make sure the Imperium wouldn’t be able to liberate them.

“The Centaur 45th and the Bahamut 6th are in support positions?”

“Yes, General! And they have a demi-Company of Flesh Tearers which has just arrived on the battlefield!”

“In this case, let them have their fun,” a few queries on the vox made sure six other regiments would be available if the Knights failed to wipe out the last resistance of the long-ears. Not that Domenico expected failure from the Knights or his regiments. The horrible creations of the enemy had been decimated and pushed into the abysses of Commorragh burning and screaming.

The Battle of Zel’harst was won...for the moment. The most difficult action he had to do in the last hour was preventing the Mechanicus from dispersing its forces in an orgy of archeotech looting.

“Colonel Jensen, since the long-ears don’t represent any danger anymore, I suppose you can do the honours.”

“Thank you General!” the commanding officer of the Matapan 1st, a stout brown-haired man, saluted perfectly. “First Company, get that flag!”

More than thirty guardsmen immediately charged ahead towards the dark spire in front of them. Two died under one of the eldritch weaponry of the xenos, but the rest crossed the narrow boardwalk without problem and proceeded to explain to the long-ears why it was a poor idea to anger His Most Holy Majesty’s Imperial Guard.

His favourite moment was when the red skull-shaped helmet of the enemy commander was thrown with its owner directly into an acid pool twenty metres below.

It took several more minutes for the men of the Matapan 1st to verify there weren’t more potential ambushes waiting for them, and only then a group of five began the long and difficult part: climbing to the top of the spire.

Domenico would have loved to do it, but he wasn’t a young man anymore, and besides he wasn’t going to steal the glory of these hot-headed youth.

The Ventrillian guardsmen could cheer like everyone else though when the flag showing twin daggers and a blue eldritch symbol on black was removed from its honorific location and the aquila of the Imperium of Mankind replaced it.

“We struggle, we fight and we triumph. Thus it has always been, and thus it will continue until the God-Emperor orders us to stop,” Domenico uttered formally as the purple-gold flag given by Lady Weaver was hoisted for all to see at the summit of the Citadel of Zel’harst. “AVE IMPERATOR!”

“AVE IMPERATOR!

“AVE IMPERATOR!”

And the forces of the Imperium progressing below between the ruined walls and the now empty slave-markets shouted to bear more weight to the incredible victory they had just won.

“AVE IMPERATOR!”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

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

**Major-General Paul Dundee**

Paul had never seen an insect horde like this one, and he was from Indigan. Thanks to the stupidity of Governor Constantine Argoy, more commonly known one thousand years after his death as ‘the Zooimbecile’, Indigan never lacked Death Worlds beasts on a day-per-day basis.

Most of the beasts of Indigan were extremely dangerous, he wasn’t going to deny it. There was a reason Indigan was sometimes compared to several other ‘famous’ Death Worlds of the Imperium. But the Alpha predators they had rarely hunted in numbers superior to four or five – in general an adult male and female, and their progeny.

Lady Weaver’s swarm largely blew the threat they represented by the sheer numbers. Already, hundreds of thousands of arachnids, centipedes and ants were fighting on this side of the portal, and more were coming between the echelons of Imperial Guard, Mechanicus Skitarii, and Frateris Templar.

Paul bit into his cigar, trying not to show any nervousness at being effectively surrounded by a swarm which by all rights shouldn’t exist.

“The men and the guns are ready, General,” Colonel Eliantine commanding the Calypso 4th Artillery said in the name of the regiments forming the 7th Division.

“Show them no mercy,” Paul took the time to remove his cigar from his mouth and light it before giving the order. “You have seen what they did to the poor souls who were unable to take their own lives before being captured. I don’t know about you, but I really want to explain to these monsters the errors of their ways.”

Nods, bared teeth and determined expressions were all the signs he needed to know the guardsmen under his command took this seriously.

“You know we have little time to find the artefact the General was ordered to find. Her swarm hopefully will be able to cover more distance than us, but I don’t want to hear that we will have not done our best for the God-Emperor in the after-battle reports!”

“We will not fail, General,” Colonel Atomos of Nyx answered for the twenty-plus superior officers present. “We will...”

The assurance the man was about to give was left unfinished. From the Knight-sized Gate, an army of heroes advanced. Magi Dominus and heavily-augmented Skitarii, so many there had to be hundreds, and carrying so many heavy weapons plenty of them had to be more dangerous than a Battle-Tank on a firepower basis.

The Astartes followed them. The might Salamanders were first, their ranks of green scales and incinerating weapons the very symbol of the Emperor’s Justice delivered at long last to Commorragh. But they were many others just behind them. The Brothers of the Red had mingled with the Angels Sanguine, and the Crimson Scions marched with the Flesh Tearers head high. There were more than two hundred Iron Drakes, their presence bolstering the spirits of the divisions as they stood a couple metres away.

Then the Sunworms shone twice brighter, and the Dawnbreaker Guard flew in the Corespur around the Living Saint, and Paul Dundee shed a tear at the golden vision. The God-Emperor was with them. For several seconds, he castigated himself for all the doubts which had ever plagued him during his career. To his right Colonel Myrkos-Absalom had prostrated herself in religious fervour.

From the army, the battle-cries were shouted, soon repeated by millions of voices.

“DEATH TO THE ELDAR! DEATH TO COMMORRAGH!

“AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR!”

“DEATH TO EVIL! GLORY TO MANKIND!”

“REVENGE FOR THE FALLEN! REVENGE FOR OUR INNOCENT!”

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

Army Group Caribbean’s artillery began its bombardment, and as the flames began to consume this sub-realm, the 8th Division went to war once more.

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

If Slaanesh had been a sane entity, it would have never risked sending so many Legions of Excess to a single location in the Webway.

Of course, Slaanesh was one of the Ruinous Powers. And the entities currently dominating the Great Game of Chaos were by any living being completely insane. How could you explain Tzeentch’s ability to make sure half of its flawless plans collapsed at the worst moment from a cultist perspective? How could warriors find confidence in an eternal war when their Lord and Master the God of Slaughter didn’t care who won as long as blood was spilled?

The self-proclaimed ‘Gods’ were divinely insane. And Slaanesh wasn’t the exception to the rule.

By all rights, the logical strategy of the Dark Prince should have been to influence by corruption and blade the elites of the Dark City in order to engineer a Drukhari-Daemonic alliance. Another possibility would have been to stop the soul-sucking of its favourite toys for the duration of the battle.

There were other thousand possible grand strategies which should have at least severely inconvenienced the forces of Operation Caribbean and the expeditionary force sent by Phaerakh Neferten.

Instead, the entity having absorbed the decadence and the hedonism of the entire Aeldari Empire had chosen to send directly a sizeable number of its most dangerous Legions directly to confront the Commorragh forces guarding Khaine’s Gate.

Quite predictably, the Drukhari were fighting back and thus slowing down their Doom’s progression into the Heart of the Webway. And since the sub-realms of the Dark City were suffering from the same rule as realspace in that no individual could be in two places at the same time, the armies trying to delay the Legions of Excess were not fighting the Imperium’s invasion.

Slaanesh was...very annoyed.

Hundreds of Daemonettes which had been in disfavour at court were disintegrated by the fury of the Dark Prince.

In the meantime, the problem of the Commorragh souls had worsened. The river of Drukhari souls which had formed as the Battle for the Port of Lost Souls raged had become an ocean. Millions and millions of souls belonging to the cruellest species in existence were falling in the claws of the Prince of Excess.

And it was a disaster.

The debased descendants of the Aeldari were still inflicting suffering and pain to their slaves wherever they had the time, but this unanticipated conflict was taking most of their attention. Few nobles and their lieutenants were so lost in depravity as to prioritise suffering over their immediate survival.

The billions of deaths were creating an ocean of souls Slaanesh could feed upon, but it was a disgusting, shrivelled sea of incompetence, betrayal and blind arrogance. Most of the souls were shrivelled, half-born things. The immense majority of the Drukhari had never had a real choice at their moment of birth; they were damned by their predecessors before they emerged from the Haemonculi vats.

In practical terms, Slaanesh was exchanging an ocean of useless, crippled souls for six oceans of delicious suffering.

And of course, millions of souls which were never going to be born or corrupted by the Drukhari were vanishing from the Palace. The Warp was timeless, but it could not ignore the laws of causality indefinitely. For a soul to exist, a living being had to be born in the Materium or the Webway. No birth, no souls.

And thus in several battlefields of the Eye, many daemons which had been vanquishing the armies of Blood, Pestilence or Change were suddenly removed from existence. All in all, six Legions of Excess would no longer participate in the Game...and no, this sentence was wrong. They hadn’t participated in the games of the Ruinous Powers. They had never existed in the first place.

Slaanesh’s fury was terrible. Its hatred surpassed six times its anger. And for the first time since the Fall, the Dark Prince experienced a slight tingle of fear.

He-She-It was a God of the Empyrean. The Fall of the Aeldari and the Horus Heresy had ensured it could not die to the actions of mere soul-weak vermin. But Slaanesh could be severely weakened. It could be weakened enough to be prey for someone else. And the Warp was hardly a compassionate place. Disregarding the other Three, upstart challengers were not something the Warp lacked.

Slaanesh wasn’t sane. How could it be? Cegorach had been the Aeldari God of Folly, but the Lord of Dark Delights, had long devoured the madness of the Old Aeldari Empire.

And so at a time where all strategists would have advised to stop, Slaanesh continued to pour more Legions of Slaanesh into Khaine’s Gate.

“**WAR**.”

So much of Slaanesh’s attention was turned towards the Dark City, it almost missed the meteor striking the forests of Shrieking Symphonies.

Almost.

But as a dark form surged from the crater just created and the purple skies began turning a reddish hue, She-Who-Thirsts had no choice but to abandon several projects in all haste and call back several Legions it would have best preferred not to.

For rising from the depths of the crater, an immense Legion of Bloodletters was materialising.

And leading them was a tall humanoid figure with black-red skin soaked in an aura of blood and massacre.

“**WEAVER’S SKULL BELONGS TO ME**!”

There were only eight Bloodthirsters of the First Host in existence.

There were the mightiest servants of Khorne, and save the Daemon Princes Angron and Doombred, few entities were capable to survive a couple of seconds before dying horribly.

Flames began to burn the singing forests. The air grew heavy with the odour of smoke and blood.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!” Ka’Bandha the Angel’s Bane screamed, rising his titanic axe and his monstrous whip above his head. “**SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!”

And before the Palace of Slaanesh, the Legion of Blood charged to war.

**Nexus Ascending Moon**

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

**The Queen of Blades**

In hindsight, waiting for a transport had clearly been a waste of time.

A Ravager or any rapid transport was only faster than her if the Webway arteries weren’t crowded.

Granted it happened very rarely, and she knew what she was speaking about. Even its ruined state, the main tunnels could support settlements and the passage of thousands of warriors.

This cycle was an exception. But it was an extremely devastating one. There were jetfighters in various state of disrepair everywhere. The Reapers which should have been reserved to the Dynast armies were filled with wounded and dying. There were wounded mercenaries and beaten warriors everywhere.

There was no discipline in this crowd pouring into the main arteries, fleeing the non-existent security of the realms of Commorragh.

There was no leader, no order, and no purpose.

It was fleeing for the sake of fleeing, the Aeldari race blindly lashing out as it suddenly realised the masters of the previous cycles were now the prey.

Flashes of memories she had done her best not to think about returned. Flashes about a shrieking mass of idiots suddenly realising what their stupidity had wrought onto the Empire. Millions of terrified drug-addicts waking up from the deliriums of the arenas they had corrupted and turned red with the blood of the altars as purple Empyreal predators took form and impaled priests and slaves alike upon their claws.

It is exactly like the Fall, except it is limited to Commorragh and its surrounding accesses. But that’s only where the differences end. There are corsairs and pirates preying on the wounded. There are semi-intact companies betraying their former allies and stealing transports and ships to travel quicker away from the Dark City. Not that they go much further before being taken up in accidents and the chaos of the disaster.

Yes, it is exactly like the Fall. And the Dynasts wondered why she thought of them as narrow-minded petty pretenders.

Whatever the name she chose during an era, Aenaria had always considered her a killer and an elite fighter of the Aeldari. She was born in the Age of the War in Heaven, and during this cataclysmic conflict embracing your delusions was as dangerous as being an average warrior, if not more.

Killing and fighting always were her reasons to breathe and continue living. The one who fights, adapts, change, and thus avoids stagnation. The one who stagnates...there was the Fall.

The Queen of Blades shook her head, banishing the bad memories, and continued to run. The Fall was the past. She had tried to warn everyone that electing the arrogant Prince Malekith Uldanesh to be their next Emperor was going to be their death. They had not listened to her, and no one had raised a voice when she was banished.

Why would she help them? For millions of cycles it had been a thankless task to find and kill the self-destructive cults and the nobles supporting them. For millions of cycles she had tried to follow the promise she had made to Vaul.

And now look at what the Aeldari had become. There were pale-skinned ghosts who had never felt the caress of a real sun for more than a cycle. There were Haemonculi who were one step away from being Chaos Spawn in flesh and Daemon Princes in soul. There were torturers who served the cause of She-Who-Thirsts far better than their predecessor priests of the Dark Pleasures.

Why would she care about these errors?

The Nexus Ascending Moon was not better than the rest of the arteries once she reached it. In fact, it was likely worse. Forces of Yllithian, Kraillach and Xelian were looting and pillaging...or at least raiders and murderers armoured with their colours did.

The Succubus continued to run, slashing her daggers at anyone on her path. Four or five weaklings didn’t understand the lesson she was trying to impart them and tried an ambush. Three heartbeats were largely sufficient to exterminate them.

It was near the High Ruby Gate she found at last her two chief subordinates of the Cult of Strife, Melikka and Lyxanna. At first sight, neither they nor the fifty-plus Wyches the two lesser Succubi had with them were wounded, and the hierarchy was maintained. Good, Lelith would have disliked getting rid of them.

“Report.”

Salutes, ceremonies and pleasantries could wait.

“The Yngir have detonated the ‘anti-Dolmen’ weapon in the Port of Lost Souls like you feared, my Queen,” Melikka began as many young Wyches bowed and her second escorted her to the opened hatch of the *Final Strife*, her personal battleship.

“As expected,” if the Necrons involved in this battle were smart enough to let the humans take the brunt of the casualties, they were also intelligent enough to deny them the possibility of stopping the enemy reinforcements. “Disposition?”

“The Mon-keigh brutes are making a two-prong offensive against Zel’harst and Utar’ragh. The Yngir are supporting an assault against Mar’lych. The Dynasts or their surviving lieutenants are pouring more and more armies, but...there are more and more Disjunctions. Certain Gates have been closed as the servants of She-Who-Thirsts summoned the Enemy.”

“I think you can stop calling them Mon-keigh,” Lelith said as she went to her personal quarters and negligently threw several of her damaged weapons to her weapon-makers.

“My Queen?”

“They have given you a beating which is going to be remembered by every living species of the galaxy,” the Queen of Blades explained slowly. “When you call someone by a disparaging nickname, ensure first you aren’t in a position to be killed by him or her.”

Lyxanna looked rebellious, but didn’t argue.

“Khaine’s Gate?”

“It has fallen. The battle rages in the Abyssal Wall sub-realm.”

“Jezekel let the sub-realm fall?” The Bloody Baroness wasn’t her, obviously, but still...

“The Cult of the Impaled was betrayed by Dynast Xelian. Most of the Wyches and their allies were massacred as they prepared to wage war against She-Who-Thirsts.” Xelian didn’t disappoint her, then. Whatever the situation, he always took the worst possible decision.

Commorragh was lost. The Abyssal Gate had been built under the assumption its defences would be manned by all the Commorragh armies, not just what a few leaders could scrap together.

“Pathetic,” Lelith commented. “Leave me. You have much to do.”

The two Succubi bowed and left. Protections she had managed to save from better times activated.

Murmuring a password and touching three panels at a speed most Succubi were unable to follow, two large secret caches opened.

The first contained her sword of course. *Ala’ra*, the first Sword of Vaul, which in High Aeldari simply meant ‘the First’. Both the less powerful and most complicated of the One Hundred Swords to wield on a battlefield. It was a long and thin curbed blade devoid of all decorations. It was a reminder of the times when victory was all that mattered and niceties were for the idiots unable to understand this war would be settled by the annihilation of one side or the other.

The second contained her armour. She had called it the *Night Rose*, and it was certainly the last of its kind since all her other creations had disappeared forever during the Fall. Useless in her usual raids since no one could even touch her, but since the Necrons were present, it was best to have some means of protecting her skin. The Eternity Stone imbedded between her lungs was protecting her soul, but it wouldn’t do much if the parasites manage to drag her in the infernal depths or she took an annihilation beam from nowhere.

The last thousands of cycles had been boring. But that didn’t mean she was keen to be enchained to the abomination Malekith and his band of orgy-maniacs had created.

“Let’s see if someone can give me a challenge,” the ancient Aeldari whispered as she began to don her black armour.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Abyssal Wall**

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

**Hierarch Morr ‘the Blue Klaive’**

“Release the Void Mines! Release the Void Mines NOW!”

The Bombers obeyed his orders and released the Void Mines. Five heartbeats later, dozens of dark light singularities ripped opened the daemonic hordes surrounding the walls. In less time than it took to say it, hundreds of thousands Daemonettes were vaporised and thrown directly back to She-Who-Thirsts’ palace.

If only there weren’t millions more behind them.

It was a spectacle of agonising horror. The very air was distorted by purple clouds and poisoned perfume, and his Incubi could still smell and breathe the latter despite having void-sealed their black armours.

“FOR COMMORRAGH! FOR THE DARK SHRINES!” There was a time even a battle-hardened warrior of the Incubi felt the need to shout his battle-cry, and this time was now. Thousands of Incubi added his voice to his, and as their Klaives cut the members of the things trying to reach the top of the Abyssal ramparts, Morr smiled internally.

They were the elite. They were Incubi. They were fighting She-Who-Thirst’s Legions, and that’s how they would be remembered.

Not like these cowardly cockroaches of the Xelian Dynast, who couldn’t continue to exist if they didn’t commit a thousand betrayals per cycle.

“**FOR THE DARK PRINCE! GLORY TO THE THIRST OF EXCESS**!”

“**PREPARE YOURSELVES CHOSEN ONES! FOR SLAANESH**!”

“**SLAANESH! SLAANESH**!”

“**YOU CAN’T WIN! SURRENDER TO YOUR DESIRES**!”

The cursed name hurt so much every time it was uttered...and the Incubi of his army were resisting better than most. Thousands of Wyches and warriors had fallen in agony the first times it was voiced by the Enemy.

“Khaine’s bloody hands, there are so many...”

The ruins of the first fortress which had been supposed to suppress any daemonic activity was drowning in Daemonettes and other abominations Morr had no wish to describe or name.

It was an ocean of madness, uncontrolled psychic sorcery and raw, forbidden emotions. And each heartbeat saw more Legions of Excess pour into the sub-realm.

“If I ever have the opportunity to kill Dynast Xelian, I won’t make it quick, by Khaine,” the Hierarch swore, despite knowing how unlikely he was to survive to see it.

“And we will help you, Hierarch,” assured him one of his subordinates. “The evacuations in Middle Darkness have started...for all the good it’s going to do. There’s no order left in the large tunnel-gates leading out of the Dark City...”

“And once She-Who-Thirsts will have finished defeating us, we will not be able to delay pursuit for long,” Morr finished while using his Klaive to decapitate two Daemonettes.

It was too late to do anything else but close as many Gates as possible and hope that the possessed and the traitors serving the Doom would not be able to reopen them like they had done for the Gate between Khaine’s Gate and the Abyssal Wall.

It was in all likelihood a futile hope. Too many beings used the Great gates every day, and the Dynasts and Vect seemed to thrive in the excess of betrayal and the stabbing in the back.

Now they were drowning in the consequences of these choices.

Countless armies climbed and struck with fanatical devotion, never tiring, never stopping their infernal assault. Banish one and a million replacements took its place. The Void Mines he had activated were the last of the Abyssal armouries, but since the Voidraven Bombers had been destroyed by a cloud of winged daemons, it wasn’t like he would have been able to reuse the trick.

“STAY ON THE WALLS!” the Hierarch killed one Yllithian coward who was trying to run. “STAY ON THE WALLS AND KILL THE ENEMY!”

“**Why**?”

The shrieks of the Daemonettes stopped. Everything vacillated. The air seemed to pulse with danger and purple energy.

“**Why**?”

The abomination which had arrived on top of the walls was immense, easily twice his height. It was also incredibly armoured by a purple cuirass both decorating and protecting every part of its body.

It was a body which was serpentine and four-armed. Two large swords dripping with poison and two large shields were held by the other two limbs.

It was a creature which was both completely repulsive and supremely elegant.

The face of the beast, like a Mon-keigh which had been given several uplifting treatments, was the same way.

“Because we are warriors,” Morr answered, recognising with horror the servant of the Dark Prince which had been sent to take this citadel from him.

“**An acceptable and yet so predictable answer**,” the Prince of the Warp said mockingly. “**Come then, little Incubus. Let’s see if you can win where your Dark Fathers failed**.”

Morr swiftly saluted with his Klaive and placed himself ahead of his surviving Incubi, trying to ignore the sheer number of Keepers of Secrets and Daemonettes surrounding them.

“I am Hierarch Morr, of the Shrine of the Blood Strike!”

“**I am Fulgrim, the Living Perfection! I am the Chosen of Slaanesh**!”

Morr ran with the survivors of his Shrine, trying to come to blows with the monster. If they could banish this abomination, maybe this assault could be repelled...

He wasn’t able to evade the massive purple-gold shield which slammed in his head.

Nor was he able to raise his Klaive to parry the next blow which cut his legs.

Morr screamed as the poison seeped into his veins.

“**Slaanesh comes**,” the voice dripped with satisfaction and arrogance. “**And your species can’t deny her any longer**.”

The next strike didn’t kill Morr. But it made him wish he was dead.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

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

**Chancellor of the Imperial Council Samson Pitt**

There were receptions every important dignitary of the Imperium dreamed to be invited to.

No doubt billions of men and women would have said the one celebrating the ascension of Xerxes Vandire to the High Lordship of Master of the Administratum was one.

Samson Pitt didn’t agree, and not just because he had opposed the nomination of this amoral hypocrite to what was unquestionably one of the most powerful positions of the Imperium. In forty years of service, the Chancellor had assisted to the ascension of over one hundred men and women to a High Twelve seat, and no less than four Masters of the Administratum. After a while, the receptions all blurred together and he had stopped being impressed.

Nevertheless, appearances had to be maintained. By long tradition, the Chancellor of the Imperial Council held a Secundus seat in the Senatorum Imperialis, and as such was one of the Lords the courtiers and the millions of plaintiffs and billions of Adepts called the ‘Lesser Twenty’: High Lords unable to get a seat among the twelve most important men and women of the Imperium, but who you couldn’t afford to neglect such were their influence and personal power.

As several leaders of galaxy-spanning Adeptus were holding Secundus seats while Pitt had less than thirty million men under his personal control – his family’s resources were another story entirely – it was far from a dishonourable privilege.

Even if most of the time his job consisted in gathering the twelve most ruthless and ambitious scoundrels of the Imperium and prevent them for killing each other.

This was a well-paid job; Samson Pitt was not going to deny it. But it was also not one devoid of dangers. The last two Grand Masters of the Officio Assassinorum had taken a heavy dislike to him and by a curious coincidence, the number of assassination attempts had tripled in the last decade. Of course, he was hardly the only sole recipient for the hostility of ‘Hunter’.

Slowly, he analysed his reflection in the mirror, trying to discern flaws in his appearance, before turning away and leaving his private quarters, hundreds of his bodyguards surrounding him.

“Have there been more cancellations?” He whispered to Louis, his aide as they descended the long regular stairs leading to the magnificent aircars which went with his title and duties.

“No, my Lord,” the middle-aged Neptune-born Adept replied carefully. “But there are rumours the Speaker for the Chartist Captains intends to be ‘fashionably late’.”

Samson whistled an old-fashioned military tune for a few seconds, considering his options.

He could call High Lady Aliénor Gutenberg and tell her to stop her drama. Yes, she didn’t like Xerxes Vandire. So what? Samson didn’t either, and most of the other High Lords, from Primus to Septimus ranks, deeply hated him too. But on the sacred soil of Holy Terra, the number of people you liked was in general limited to your circle of very trusted allies, friends and family...and sometimes not even them.

On the other hand, at least the Speaker for the Chartist Captains had accepted to come to tonight’s reception. The Fabricator-General and the Arch-Cardinal Terran – the man who voted in the name of the Ecclesiarch since the priests had relocated to Ophelia VII – hadn’t. The same was true of the Grand Master of Assassins – though in his case, his absence was a relief, not a problem – and the Inquisitorial Representative.

“The next council promises to be extremely amusing,” Samson admitted to his aide with a thin smile. Thankfully, tradition imposed twelve days of mourning for the previous Master of the Administratum, and that meant he had nine more days to prepare for what was undoubtedly going to be an unpleasant moment of diplomacy. Unless of course someone summoned an emergency council of the High Twelve, but there were no current threats or legislative procedures requiring this, to his best knowledge.

“I don’t envy you, Lord.” Louis said as a thunderous martial-toned bell began to ring in the distance. To his mild surprise, he didn’t recognise this one.

“Is it the Bell of Lost Souls, Lord?” asked his aide.

“No, if it was, we would be searching for earmuffs, believe me,” of course it sufficed that he said these words for the sound to gain in power, and soon the ring of the gigantic bell had risen to an unbearable point.

If only he could remember what bell was rang at this very moment! But this was easier to say than to remember! Even limiting your search to the Imperial Palace, there were at least ten thousand bells of varying importance. Naturally, neither he nor the other High Lords bothered. You learned the most important ringing noises, and you ignored the rest. Or you asked the subordinate you paid to keep an eye on such things.

The worst part was that it had to be an important bell. Only those were authorised to deafen the ears of the High Lords and the billions of workers at heart of the Throneworld. Not to mention the Adeptus Custodes were rather peevish when someone annoyed them with something making their patrols more difficult...

And then the thought arrived in his head, horrible, impossible to shake off.

“No...no, no, it is impossible!” He protested out loud. “It has not rung for several thousand years...”

And yet the thunderous ringing was continuing, and if he had guessed right, it would continue for an hour.

“Lord...what is this bell?”

“It is the Bell of the Golden Dawn,” and if his voice trembled, Samson Pitt felt he could be forgiven. “The Custodes are called to war.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

**Uldanesh Prison**

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

**Heir-Dynast Grevyth ‘Barbtongue’ Xelian**

Grevyth had only apologised five times in his entire life, and until this cycle, it had always been to his sire.

But when someone had a blade against your throat and the poison covering the weapon was beginning to hurt your skin, the Heir-Dynast felt he had to amend his positions.

“I apologise, Great Warden-Baroness,” the Aeldari male lied with his most charming smile.

“Apology accepted,” Succubus Sorala of the Cult of the Crippled Lungs said. The Warden of the Uldanesh Prison didn’t even turn to speak to him. And the Hekatarii blade pressed against his throat was not withdrawn.

Deep inside, Grevyth burned to slay these treacherous Wyches, but with his escort of Crimson Guards lying dead a few feet away and over one hundred of the arena-fighters in the same control-torture room, his chances to win if it came to violence were nonexistent. Plus he had a Wych pressing her long dagger between his legs too.

“I never liked Xelian,” Sorala continued after long heartbeats of silence. “He never respected me for my art in the arena, he regularly derided me for my favourite activities, and above all he often refused my requests.”

Grevyth had a powerful urge to torture someone, anyone. Bow-wow, this was why Maestros Xelian was the Dynast and everyone else was obeying his orders. If Sorala wanted to be in charge, she knew what she had to do.

“But now he has the gall to kill my rival Jezekel, ignore the most powerful Disjunctions Commorragh has ever endured, and fail utterly to repulse the invaders, be they Mon-keigh or servants of She-Who-Thirsts.”

“Our victory is inevitable,” the Barbtongue lied brazenly.

“Before or after they will have finished placing the heads of your entire family on impalement spears?”

The Heir-Dynast had to grit his teeth and swallow the insults he wanted to scream at this upstart Wych.

“You swore a vow of obedience.”

“I muttered some words with a blade against my throat,” the white-haired Succubus retorted, finally turning to meet his eyes. Her smile was particularly predatory. “Sounds familiar?”

Grevyth didn’t answer immediately. He needed time to not let his anger get the better of him.

“I hope you will not insist I transfer my allegiance from Ultimate Archon Xelian to you...”

The older female Aeldari laughed without any warmth in her voice and all the Wyches imitated her.

“I will cut my own throat before accepting an oath from an insignificant parasite like you.”

Grevyth tried to ignore the rising pain against his throat. This was definitely going to leave a scar...assuming he survived, and this sounded unlikelier with every retort. One didn’t insult Lord Maestros Xelian like this without suffering abominable consequences. And as the simplest situation to avoid said consequences was to ensure he never returned to repeat the words to his sire...

“Purge the Uldanesh Prison from all the prisoners the Mon-keigh may want to free, and all will be forgiven,” the Xelian noble tried a last time.

“Do you believe this action to be that simple, ignorant prey?” One of the older Wyches purred. “You and your master failed to give us warning when the Disjunctions began. Many levels were overrun with prisoners possessed by She-Who-Thirsts. While we fought and killed them, all our mercenaries have been killed, and many other dangerous prisoners have broken out of their cells.”

“This includes a good third of the deepest and darkest cells we kept closed for an eternity,” Sorala said while examining her dagger-long nails. “And with She-Who-Thirsts’ armies so close, a lot of our most destructive purge-procedures can’t be implemented.”

“Are you the Baroness-Warden of the Uldanesh Prison, yes or not?” Grevyth could not restrain his exasperation.

“Now that you mentioned it...I have decided to resign and find something more rewarding in my life,” the white-haired Succubus pressed a button, and suddenly Grevyth had no blade against his throat or between his legs.

There were no Wyches in sight anymore.

There was nothing but a dark corridor, and screams of agony echoing in the distance.

There was no source of light, but this was not a drawback for an Aeldari of Commorragh. What was a problem, however, was the total absence of weapons in his hands, his holsters and his secret pouches. The Wyches had disarmed him completely. Damn this naked tight-legged nullity! Damn this rebellious incompetent band of females!

He couldn’t even scream his hatred. If the traitor Wyches had sent him on a level of the Uldanesh Prison as he believed, any obvious sign of his presence would be answered by a pack of screaming beasts ready to fight for his head. The Uldanesh Prison kept prisoner the creatures too dangerous for the Succubi to handle in the arenas and the political opponents of the three Dynasts. Both types of prisoners would be extremely happy to kill the Heir-Dynast of Maestros Xelian.

The only thing to do was keep his calm and try to climb towards the surface. The Uldanesh cells had been built into one of the ancient pre-Fall pits, and while he had never seen the prison plans, he knew at least the main exit was just below the surface of the Corespur, hyper-dimensional labyrinth or not. He could escape. He could bring news of this great treachery to his sire.

Something threatening pushed him to turn back and look what was arriving behind him. There was no screams anymore. The prison was like a grave.

Grevyth’s heart beat faster when his eyes were able to see the creature which was no doubt responsible for the lack of visible prisoners in the corridors.

It was...tall. Tall and huge. It reassured him. Big primates and other inferior species were pathetically slow.

“I congratulate you for surviving the challenges posed by your fellow prisoners. Let me grace you...”

“Silence,” to his shock the creature had answered...in perfect Aeldari.

“You...how?”

“I ate many of your kind. Silence.”

The closer the thing approached, the more Grevyth could see the thousands of scars and the ravages of poisons and uncountable duels and massacres. How could a lesser creature live through that?”

“My father...my father is a very wealthy and powerful Dynast. If you spare me, his benevolence...”

He tried to jump away but the arm caught him by the throat. The Barbtongue could not help but shout in disbelief. This kind of speed wasn’t possible for a huge brute!

“If there is something I’ve learned about your kind in my life,” the voice was guttural and utterly devoid of mercy. “It is that each and every Eldar in this galaxy is an inveterate liar.”

In desperation, Grevyth tried another tactic.

“Then believe me, when Maestros Xelian will learn you have killed his Heir, his vengeance is going to be terrible. He will begin to murder your homeworld, and then he will slay your friends, your family, your descendants...”

“More lies,” blue eyes colder than the harshest freezing poison stared at him. “I am Rogal Dorn and Terra stands.”

His body exploded in agony and his surroundings dissolved in a storm of blood, his blood, and darkness. Grevyth agonised, but before he held his last breath, he could hear his murder repeat the last two words. Somehow it crushed every thought like an Incubi mantra.

“Terra stands.”

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**Extermination Countdown**

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

**Surviving Drukhari population in the Webway**: **approximately 175.2 billion**

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**Author’s note**: To misquote a certain movie, this may not be the Primarch you were looking for...

The Escalation (and the Battle of Commorragh) will continue in Extermination 8-3 *Terra Stands*.