Weaver Option Teaser 23 February 2020

**Extermination 8.2**

**Hell or Commorragh**

*The impossible had happened.*

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

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

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

*We thought the nightmare would end there.*

*How could it not be?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*And it was in vain.*

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

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

Maelsha’eil Dannan *went there.*

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

\*\*\*\*

“*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.

\*\*\*\*

“*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.

\*\*\*\*

“*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**

**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 Gates of Death 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 and shards, 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.”