

VALEDOR™

GUY HALEY



WARHAMMER
40,000

AN APOCALYPSE NOVEL

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

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IT IS THE 41ST MILLENNIUM. FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED CENTURIES THE EMPEROR HAS SAT IMMOBILE ON THE GOLDEN THRONE OF EARTH. HE IS THE MASTER OF MANKIND BY THE WILL OF THE GODS, AND MASTER OF A MILLION WORLDS BY THE MIGHT OF HIS INEXHAUSTIBLE ARMIES. HE IS A ROTTING CARCASS WRITHING INVISIBLY WITH POWER FROM THE DARK AGE OF TECHNOLOGY. HE IS THE CARRION LORD OF THE IMPERIUM FOR WHOM A THOUSAND SOULS ARE SACRIFICED EVERY DAY, SO THAT HE MAY NEVER TRULY DIE.

YET EVEN IN HIS DEATHLESS STATE, THE EMPEROR CONTINUES HIS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. MIGHTY BATTLEFLEETS CROSS THE DAEMON-INFESTED MIASMA OF THE WARP, THE ONLY ROUTE BETWEEN DISTANT STARS, THEIR WAY LIT BY THE ASTRONOMICAN, THE PSYCHIC MANIFESTATION OF THE EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIO-ENGINEERED SUPER-WARRIORS. THEIR COMRADES IN ARMS ARE LEGION: THE ASTRA MILITARUM AND COUNTLESS PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES, THE EVER-VIGILANT INQUISITION AND THE TECH-PRIESTS OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS TO NAME ONLY A FEW. BUT FOR ALL THEIR MULTITUDES, THEY ARE BARELY ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT FROM ALIENS, HERETICS, MUTANTS – AND WORSE.

TO BE A MAN IN SUCH TIMES IS TO BE ONE AMONGST UNTOLD BILLIONS. IT IS TO LIVE IN THE CRUELLEST AND MOST BLOODY REGIME IMAGINABLE. THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE TIMES. FORGET THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE, FOR SO MUCH HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, NEVER TO BE RE-LEARNED. FORGET THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND UNDERSTANDING, FOR IN THE GRIM DARK FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR. THERE IS NO PEACE AMONGST THE STARS, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF CARNAGE AND SLAUGHTER, AND THE LAUGHTER OF THIRSTING GODS.



DÛRIEL SYSTEM

THE VORTEX OF DESPAIR
(Warp Rift)

HIVE FLEET
KRAKEN
(Splinter Fleet)

ULANIEL
(ADEMAR)

BARANTIEL
(MEGUS)

ISORN
(ECTOR)

HALATH
(Nuën)

DÛRIEL

MALACATH
(DAEA)

DÛRIEL
(VALEDOR)

HIVE FLEET
LEVIATHAN

Dûriel, worldformed in the dying days of empire with her sisters, wiped clean of eldar life by the Fall. A True Star made to insure against ruin, and for the return of better days. Usurped by the mon-keigh and laid waste 2,000 cycles past. The Vortex of Despair troubles the system, whence She Who Thirsts' laughter mocks all that we have lost.



Wraithlord/Wraithknight/Phantom Titan

For the living to persist, the dead must fight. To animate any ghost warrior carries a terrible price. With an increase in might, so comes an increase in cost. To motivate a Wraithlord shell, so must a hero of power equal to that of the construct be called forth from rest. In this manner, our greatest offer their souls in pursuit of the eldar's survival.

The Wraithknight is the emblem of tragedy itself, representing in the life-death binary of its twin pilots the cruel state of our race, and the worst of all losses any sibling can face.

Yet the most terrible of all is the Phantom. The *Curse of Yriel*, that fought so bravely upon Dûriel, is aptly named. The spirit circuits of such war-sculptures course with the energies of dead warriors, and alas, the living are entrapped there beside them. Triplets, that rarest of Isha's blessing, must submit themselves to Khaine to command a Phantom. Exarch-steersmen, they are lost in life and in death to all that is good and joyful.

The dead battle at our sides risking damnation. Such is the thinness of the thread that binds the fate of our kind still into the skein.



Sonic Lance (*The Shout That Kills*)

Borne by the Glittering Scream, revenant of Iyanden. Her pilot fought with bravery, a thousand tears we shed upon her wraithbone tomb. Alas for the children of the eldar, who will sing no more.



Pulsar (*Deadly Star-beam*)

To each a sibling, that is the manner of the revenant Gemini squadrons. Ariadien, steersman of the Sound of Sunlight was brother to Neidaria. His woe is the echo of our greater woe. We share our pain with him, for it is all we have left to share.





Gaunt (Hounds of the Ravening)

By the million they come. Weak singly, yet in multitude bringers of death, the Hounds of the Ravening run before the great weapon beasts. Warriors are misled by their teeming numbers, making of them easy prey for less nimble creatures.



Genestealer (The Kin-thief, Hider in Plain Sight, Hearth-lurker)

Beware! Few evils of the voidspawn exceed that of the Kin-thief. The Great Dragon consumes all, and bends everything of life to its purpose. Not even love is safe from the Dragon's exploitations, as the abominations sired by these fiends so sickeningly display.

Gargoyle (Twisted Flesh Wing)

Cunning is the art of the voidspawn; neither land nor sea nor air is safe haven from its creatures. Many were the eldar hunted down and slaughtered as Dûriel died, unable to escape these terrors from above.



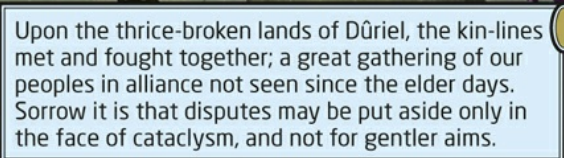
Tyrannid Warrior (Puppet-archon, Bladed Slave)

The masters they may seem, but the masters they are not. The skein of the hivemind twists thickly about them. Beware their cunning; a greater evil stares out from their eyes.



Carnifex (Mighty Ground Shaker, The Claw That Slays)

How the ground shakes beneath the tread of the voidspawn weapon beasts. Mighty they are, in strength and fortitude. To slay such is great glory to our warriors, to be slain by them the terrible fate of our people.



PROLOGUE

War's Call

The voidspawn creature clattered to a lifeless halt, the stump of its neck hissing. Prince Yriel of Iyanden landed lightly next to it in a crouch, head bowed, one hand upon the blood-slick firestone paving, the other holding his power sword out behind him in the posture of Death Brought With Precipitate Cunning. Before the last twitches had left the creature's six limbs, Yriel had artfully killed another, then a third, until there were none left within his reach.

Shuriken fire whistled behind Prince Yriel, massed volleys fired by the surviving Eldritch Raiders. Voidspawn shrieked as the rounds hit home. There were shouts and the cracking buzz of power weapons hitting chitin, the soft rattle of alien bodies falling. One last scream, and the plaza of Red Moon's New Birthing was clear.

'Yaleanar! Yaleanar! My shadow!' shouted Yriel. 'Secure the entrances to the plaza!' He gestured to the three grand archways leading into the square with his sword.

Yaleanar, a gaudily armoured warrior whose back was busy with pennants, snapped back a quick nod and ordered the remaining Eldritch Raiders into defensive positions. The last stragglers were running into the plaza.

Too few, how many have I lost? thought Yriel in dismay. His bold voids-men were dying for him.

The archways opened onto an intricately decorated pentagon a thousand paces across. A clear-sided tower stood over the plaza, ten thousand paces tall, walled with transparent composites that afforded views of the stars and decorated with a thousand statues of Ulthanash. And on the far side, the forbidden shrine. The place he had sought. Or had it sought him?

He strode towards it, the tug of its call impossible to ignore.

None but those of the direct line of Ulthanash might enter the shrine, a number of eldar reduced now to Yriel himself alone. But Red Moon's New Birthing was for all. It had been a place for those new on the Path of the Warrior to come and meditate on Ulthanash's fate, to pray that they would not fall to Khaine as he had. So it had been for ten thousand passes, until five cycles ago, when Khaine had come calling upon the Red Moon in person, and offered up his own dedications.

Blood coated everything. Dead eldar lay in piles, the corpses of their mindless enemies around them. Shattered psychoplastics skidded across the smooth floor with every tremor of the war-wracked worldship. Broken wraithbone ribs bled light. The fighting had moved deeper into the craftworld long before Yriel had landed. The aliens they had encountered had been of the lesser types, a feeble rearguard, but still he had lost a quarter of his corsairs getting to the shrine.

Iyanden shuddered bodily, rocking the prince. Yriel nimbly redistributed his weight.

He looked up to the gate of the Shrine of Ulthanash, a shimmering wall of energy held between the arms of an alabaster arch set with runes of bronze and iridium. It was marvellous, this power of the ancients on display. Calamity strode the halls and causeways of Iyanden unopposed, but the shrine remained imperturbable.

Waiting for him.

Yriel had a grave choice to make. The Crown of Ulthanash, rendered in red gold and jade at the apex of the arch, seemed to glower down at him.

To walk under it, he thought, is as good as placing that crown upon my head. I will crown myself with nothing but his curse, the king of fools, last scion of Ulthanash's line. That is not an honour I wish for.

On the outside of the rippling field stood Captain Yriel, corsair: fickle, sometimes callous, always full of rage, lauded and feared in equal measure. On the other side, at the heart of the shrine, another Yriel awaited, and the manner of that Yriel was unknown to him. This Yriel, proud Yriel, Yriel the pirate, was free to make the choice between the two, as free as he had been to choose to return at his birthplace's time of need, as free as he had been to abandon the restrictions of the Path in the first place. To pass through the shining wall and enter the Shrine of Ulthanash, or to let his home die, turn away from those who had dishonoured him and remain the exile pirate king?

‘Choose choice, or choose to relinquish choice forever,’ he said. ‘There is no departing this path. And it appears for all my efforts, there is no escaping the Path.’ He laughed. ‘How delightfully absurd, how dreadfully irritating.’

He remained where he was, lost in thought. Shouts came to his ears, more screeching. A wave of aliens tried to break through the Eldritch Raiders' defensive perimeter. There were not many of his voidsmen remaining, deadly warriors all who had followed him to the edge of the galaxy and back. They fought expertly. He was sure that no more would fall here, now they were in a good position. But they were ready to die for him.

To die, so that he might vacillate.

I am lost, he thought. Lost is the word for it, in thought and in deed. I have been for a very long time.

He pinched at his slender chin with armoured fingers, as if this were a choice such as those on the Path of Dreaming might make, a phantom decision to prepare him only for more phantom decisions, from which he would awaken excited but untouched by consequence.

He dithered. He, Yriel, decisive and bold, wavering in the face of responsibility. Insight flashed in him like lightning, although in truth it was but the first strike of a storm that had been gathering for many passes. What if he had abandoned Iyanden not because of his wounded pride, but because of his inability to bear the burdens placed upon him?

This is what he thought: *For all my prowess, am I a coward?*

‘My prince! You must hurry!’ shouted Yaleanar. There came the loud, staccato banging of a scatter laser, multiple bolts causing the air to heat explosively. Another chorus of screeches, this followed by uneasy quiet.

Iyanden rumbled. The winds of far-off decompressions tugged Yriel's robes. A foul taint came fleetingly onto the air. The infinity circuit screamed in outrage as the hive mind assailed it. Crystal shattered somewhere distant, wild screams chasing after the delicate sound.

I have rushed here. Why do I delay? he thought.

Because I have not made this choice, another part of him countered. *I have not come here of my own volition. Coming here was not my choice to make. It never has been. The dead hand of Morai-Heg grips the threads of my destiny tightly, dragging me pace by painful pace to face the duties demanded by my heritage no matter where I hide.*

He shifted his posture.

I have been brought here by what is hidden within the shrine, but it cannot make me enter.

Yriel's mind was heavy. The pain of the embattled infinity circuit was his pain, the implacable wall of the Great Devourer's intellect opposing it threatened to crush his spirit. Through this psychic tumult still the shrine's ward had pulled at him. Freedom was not the lot of any eldar, not since the Fall. He realised that now.

They call me proud, arrogant, he thought. So be it. I will not let fate take me on unequal terms. Coming to the shrine was not my will. Entering it shall be.

‘Yaleanar? Where is my shadow?’ Yriel had lost two-thirds of his fabled Hundred Ships destroying the voidspawn’s fleet. But faithful, deadly Yaleanar lived. A bad voidsman, but a great warrior. He ran across the plaza from the corsairs to the prince and saluted, armoured fist clacking upon his breastplate as he dipped his conical, tiger-striped helm. ‘My prince.’

Yriel looked over the warriors crouched in cover by the plaza’s entrances. ‘A fine spread, my shadow.’

‘We have lost no more. We are secure here.’

Yriel smiled sadly. ‘What would I do without you?’ He sheathed his sword.

‘Die, probably,’ said Yaleanar, the humour Yriel loved so much evident as always despite their circumstances. Yaleanar had such marvellously insolent body language that he had better-mannered persons simmering with outrage within the microcycle.

‘Oh, do take away your helm,’ said Yriel irritably. ‘If yours is the last face I see, I do not want it to be the grille and eye-lens in my memory.’

Yaleanar complied, lifting the tall helmet off with both hands and shaking out hair coloured a subtle lilac. Intricate patterns were painted on his face.

‘You are going to do it?’

Yriel shrugged, hands moving in gestures indicating equivocation. ‘I am going into the shrine. If I take up the spear or not is another matter.’ He trailed off, sinking back into his thoughts.

An explosion rumbled nearby. Alien shrieks closed.

‘Yriel? I am sorry, my prince, to hurry you, but you must, well,’ Yaleanar grinned, ‘hurry.’ He replaced his helmet.

‘You will await me here?’

‘Where else would your shadow be other than right behind you?’ Yaleanar hesitated. ‘If you do not return?’

High over them a flight of eldar attack craft sped through the void, their outlines rippled to fragments by holo-fields. Biological projectiles chased the fighters, green bio-plasma sending them on at speed. A fighter was caught and exploded silently. Bright light flared on the plaza. Guilt stabbed Yriel. He was losing his composure. Another death on his conscience. This would not have happened had he remained autarch-admiral.

‘If I am gone longer than a tenth-cycle, do as you think best. Fall back to the ships, or fight on for unsung glories. The choice is yours, my shadow. Either way, the final death of our kind will be snapping at your heels when Iyanden falls. Fly to some forgotten corner of the galaxy, and still fate will find you, as it has found me.’ He drew in a shuddering breath. ‘I left the path, Yaleanar, in my pride and my arrogance. I came to see destruction’s beauty. Dishonoured here, I exerted my will upon the stars, and for what? Who was watching me, who marked my cunning and my audacity but my own vanity? Is this my punishment, Yaleanar? Is this what my pride has wrought?’ He lifted an ichor-stained hand and swept it around the dome. It was as heavy as stone, weighted with guilt.

‘My prince,’ said Yaleanar. He grasped his friend by the shoulders, an intimacy Yriel allowed no one else. ‘We are all prisoners of the skein. What could you do but follow your own thread?’

Yriel was not listening to him. Tears streaked the filth on his face and dripped to the floor to mingle with the blood of his countrymen. ‘My passion for adventure has gone. I left the path and lost my way.’ He looked up at the gates again, determination entering his voice. ‘The way has found me.’

With those words, he stepped through the shimmering curtains guarding the shrine. No one else

could have done so and lived, but he was Yriel, last of the immemorial line of Ulthanash, who strode the heavens tens of millions of years ago when the eldar race was young and the numberless days of glory had not yet begun.

The exiled prince had come home.

Dynasties of silence reigned over the chambers of the shrine. Dust lay thick upon the floor. Yriel followed a single line of footprints – his own, made the first and only other time he had visited his ancestor’s temple, over an arc before. No other eyes had lit upon the pre-Fall masterpieces that lined the walls in shadowy alcoves since; no heads had bowed to the mighty idols whose upheld arms supported the ceiling.

Dead gods with dead gemstone eyes, thought Yriel. Meaningless relics, the ephemera of a vanished civilisation, protected by stasis fields for no one to see. And yet, he had to admit, they represented something; something pure, something that he had the power to save, should he so choose. Yriel passed them all quickly; the compulsion of Ulthanash was on him again, drawing him deeper into the shrine.

Battle-sign had made no mark here, for the doom of the shrine kept war from its halls both in the material plane and on the mess of potentialities that made up the skein. Past sealed portals and the tattered banners of extinct houses Yriel went. In one place he found the footprints of another, smaller than his own. He traced these with his eyes, knowing he looked upon the last mortal traces of his mother, a woman he had barely known. There had been more such footprints on his last visit. Dust had blurred their outlines. In time, they would be gone.

He wrenched himself away. He soon found himself in the small domed chamber at the heart of the shrine. As he remembered, it was dominated by a circular dais. Twin statues of maidens, twice life size, knelt either side of a pedestal upon the dais, their faces covered by their hands. Delicately rendered tears seeped through their fingers as they wept an eternity for what had been lost.

A cone of light illuminated a wraithbone cradle on the pedestal. Resting within it was a long, leaf-bladed spear. Yriel’s mouth went dry as, for only the second time in his long life, he looked upon the Spear of Twilight. Ulthanash’s weapon, immeasurably ancient, trapped in a bubble of frozen time. Through the stasis field that held it, the spear’s fell nature could be felt as an oily darkness on Yriel’s soul. The air around it was somehow thicker, the light of a sinister quality. The weapon of Ulthanash was cursed: anathema to those not of Ulthanash’s House, and slow death to those that were. It had filled him with horror when he had seen it as a youth. It filled him with horror again.

A voice spoke to him from the darkness of the shrine. Female, mocking.

‘Why have you come here, Scion of Ulthanash?’ A woman came forward, her outline blurred by a dathedi field as she walked around the dais. Yriel had the impression of a mirrored face mask beneath a bright cowl of yellow and purple diamonds. A Shadowseer, a mistress of illusions. One of the Harlequins.

Yriel found his voice. Her purpose here he could not guess at, but he knew his own. Confronted by the spear and the fate chosen for him, in freedom’s absence his pride returned. ‘I seek the means to deliver Iyanden from the Great Devourer. I will not be challenged here, not in the shrine of my ancestor. I come to take my birthright.’

‘Is that all you seek?’ Laughter ran through the voice, as bright as sunlight on rippled water, or on blood.

‘You mock me?’ he said.

Swift movement, a blur of trailing diamonds lost in the dark. The voice spoke from somewhere else.

‘I am Sylandri Veilwalker, last of the troupe that came to the aid of the people you abandoned. All my friends are dead, and I laugh yet. Cegorach mocks all, prince and fool alike, and especially foolish princes,’ she said. ‘Answer me, last of the line of Ulthanash. My question is a fair one.’

Yriel paused. Was there more? Was sacrifice his only aim? He looked deep inside himself, past the veils of shame and guilt.

‘No, it is not all,’ he admitted. ‘I have failed those whom I swore to protect. I would atone for my error, if such a thing were any longer possible.’

Laughter rang out. ‘Then take up the weapon of your forebear. He too was led astray by pride, but found redemption in battle and, soon after, his death.’

Yriel took a step, stopping before he reached the dais. ‘You are a seer. Grant me a boon and tell me: will I perish, as did he?’

‘Would my answer alter your resolve?’

Yriel cocked his head and laughed in his turn.

‘You laugh too, I see. A good tonic to all ills, even death.’

‘I laugh because there is an irony to my situation, being pushed into servitude by the servants of the last free god.’

‘The choice is yours.’

‘I would fain it were not,’ said Yriel. ‘The hour is late, the time of desperate measures is at hand. I do not think knowing the hour of my death would change anything, for we must all die.’

‘Then, young prince, choose your fate in blissful ignorance. The skein is not set. Can you not feel it? Here, all things are possible, just for a moment. A rare moment. You will experience no other like it in your lifetime. Here is your chance to decide for yourself.’

The weapon called to him, like to like. Both of them were poison to those they protected. For the briefest fragment of time, he did not move, allowing himself an indulgence, a last savouring of choice.

The spell broke. ‘We are well suited to one another, you and I,’ he said to the spear. He strode forwards, up the single step onto the dais, and into the cone of light. Without hesitation he thrust his hand into the stasis field. It slowed, and pain needled his skin as chronaxic dissonance set up and his arm was pulled into a different reference frame of time. He thrust the harder. His fingers moved so slowly, until his hand closed around the smooth shaft of the weapon and the field snapped off.

He lifted the spear, holding it up in front of him. The blade sang, the shaft vibrating. Raw power flooded through him, a remembrance of the untamed eldar psyche of the elder days. He had sought to recapture that vigour by abandoning the strictures of the path and living as a corsair. He saw he had only achieved a base caricature. More pain came with this epiphany, a snag at his soul, a cut that would never heal. A chill emanated from the spear along with the power and the hurt, one that in days to come would consume him utterly; of this he was as certain as he was that the heart beating in his chest was his own.

He cared not.

Another explosion rocked the craftworld. As if the shrine were no longer protected now the spear had been claimed, the lights went out. Yriel’s face was lit from below by the blue lambency of the spear’s blade.

‘You are mine, and I am yours,’ he said. He smiled, although his doom was upon him. He felt a sense of purpose he had never experienced before, and he knew without a doubt that this was *right*. He hefted the spear and then spun around, gauging its weight as he ran through a series of lightning-fast combat stances.

He stopped, arms outflung. The spear rang. He laughed; a raw, wild sound.

‘It is time for us both to be about our purpose.’

The Fortress of the Red Moon was falling. Already the upper spires that stretched into the void had been cast down upon the craftworld, or infested and sealed off by forcefields.

At the feet of the fortress below the energy domes, where mighty bastions soared over once-beautiful wilderness, battle raged most fiercely. Iyanna Arienal stood behind a dyke of alien corpses that stoppered a breach in the wall. The bodies of fallen eldar not yet reclaimed lay tumbled at its feet, blood mingling with alien ichor, cracked yellow armour abutting shattered chitin. Iyanna tried to ignore the glimmers of unclaimed spirit stones still bedded into the psychoplastics and mind-smithed metals of the dead’s wargear. There had not been time to collect them, and she feared there never would.

The tyranids were upon them again: a horde of aliens as far as the eye could see, crashing over the blasted parklands that fronted the slighted walls of the fortress, swarming around the rubble of fallen towers. Smoke rose in the middle distance, a funereal column marking the position of the broken Avatar of Khaine. When the returning fleets of outcasts had destroyed the voidspawn’s craft, Iyanna had felt a brief surge of joy, quickly doused. Their ships gone, the tyranids in the domes had fought with unbounded ferocity, and when the living idol of the murder-god had fallen before them, so had Iyanna’s hope.

The tyranids charged, a seething mass of multi-limbed monstrosities of bone and red. They switched direction with one purpose, like a flock of birds in flight, the mind that was generated by them and governed them all a baleful presence of inconceivable magnitude upon the skein. It squeezed at her, making her mind, already weary from communion with the dead, feel as if cast from lead.

‘Fire!’ she called. She focused her mind, conveying what her eyes saw to the silent ranks of wraithguard arrayed alongside her. Now more than ever they needed her guidance. Earlier in the battle, the spirit stones of those freshly slain had been plucked directly from their bodies and melded with new, unfeeling forms. Not for them one moment of the infinity circuit’s peace. The first ghost warriors roused had been fierce: those who had died while in the grip of the paths of Leader and Warrior, or outraged souls of sure purpose. These last were civilians all, innocents on the paths of gardeners and jewellers, poets, carvers, cooks and musicians, often slaughtered in terror. Their woe at their predicament was bitter in Iyanna’s mouth.

‘Fire!’ she called again. The air rippled with the discharge of distortion weaponry. The wash of the weapons’ energies, fatal to any living being that attempted to wield them, sickened her to her bones. She saw the wounds they made on reality vividly with her second sight, fleeting glimpses into the horror of the warp where She Who Thirsts glutted herself on Iyanden’s disaster. She could not draw back from it, the ghost warriors needed her guidance, and so she faced the death of flesh and soul equally and unflinchingly.

Where the weapons’ deadly beams terminated, pricks of light as bright as stars appeared along the line of voidspawn. They twisted in on themselves, expanding with flares of purple and green ghostlight, briefly-lived portals opening up onto the hell-dimensions of the Othersea. Where the distortion weapons hit directly, voidspawn exploded, torn apart by the forces at work within them. Others were pulled off their feet and dragged wholly through the veil that separated this world from the next. Hundreds were sent into the world of nightmares this way. The sense of horror built until Iyanna thought she would collapse, and then the portals slammed shut. Iyanna could still sense the enemy on the other side of the thin veil of reality. Torn from their hive mind’s great rope of being, the creatures briefly showed as feeble fibres on the skein, before winking out.

The distortion weapons whined as their power cells recharged. Iyanna brought new targets to the wraithguard's attention.

The aliens came on undaunted, as unafraid of the warp as they were of physical death. Ranks of Guardians atop the broken parapets opened fire, alongside the last of Iyanden's Aspect Warriors. Their fury raged unchecked. After cycles of ceaseless fighting, Khaine had taken most of them and they fought hard. But there were too few, so pitiful in numbers. The dead outnumbered the living many times over.

Iyanna dipped into the skein, seeking a future she could exploit. She was almost as skilled at this as the farseers, but could see no way to influence the battle. The consciousness of the hive fleet was a thread like no other, a huge, braided presence made up of billions of individual fates. Individually, the minds of the tyrannids were nothing, animal spirits. But as a rope is twisted from many strands, and a cable twisted from many ropes, so the hive mind of the Dragon was made. Its presence dominated everything, smashing possible futures aside with its singular purpose, making psychic contact with the other seers all but impossible. The infinity circuit was tormented by it. Iyanden was under psychic as much as physical attack.

The tyrannids reached the walls. Uncountable numbers of the lesser creatures clambered over their heaped dead, springing upwards on powerful legs. The greater species came close behind. In their midst was their leader, the vast hive tyrant that they could not bring low: the swarmlord. For the hundredth time, Iyanna looked into its fate. On the skein it showed up as a knotted ball, a confluence of lesser destinies. As much as any one of these monsters could be regarded as representatives of the hive fleet's collective mind, this one was the Dragon incarnate. Slay it, and the bindings of the hive mind's thread would unravel.

They had tried so many times to destroy it, and had failed at every attempt. Their last gambit had been to send Khaine himself in open challenge. But the hive mind had no concept of honour, no need to prove itself to its followers, in the same way that an eldar has no need to prove himself to his finger. The Dragon's living tanks had barred the way, a hand sacrificed to fend off the blow, and down the Avatar had been dragged.

Iyanna brought the attention of the dead to rest upon this creature, and willed them to shoot it down, but the dark energies of their ghost weapons were blocked once more by the swarmlord's towering guard of monsters. Where there had been a dozen of these titanic beasts, now only three remained, but this thinning of the swarmlord's living shield had come too late. When the Fortress of the Red Moon was destroyed, there would be no more organised resistance, and Iyanden would be consumed.

Wearied beyond comprehension, the eldar fought on. Weapon-beasts waded through the tide of lesser creatures, again to assail the main gates to the fortress or spitting boluses of bile laced with toxins into the defenders. From riven bastions high above, bright lances shot killing stabs of light, but for every creature dead, two more took its place.

The gate was long rent asunder. A new barrier blocked the way through its arch. A double wall of the dead, alien corpses heaped without dignity; and behind this redoubt of flesh, the spirits of eldar fought on, rehoused in wraithbone. Against this barrier half a dozen giant beasts went. The wall of bodies collapsed, the corpses toppling in obscene flood. Wraithblades stepped forwards, crystal weapons flashing. They attacked as one and in silence, psychically charged blades cutting through the bony armour and cartilaginous cladding of the monsters.

Then Iyanna's mind went elsewhere, calling upon her ghost warriors to open fire again.

There came a flash of terror as a spirit stone was breached and the eldar soul within sucked into the waiting maw of the Great Enemy. Iyanna would have wept, had her heart not been cased in icy fury.

She would see as many of these creatures die as she could before her own soul perished. She directed her ghost warriors to rake the walls free of climbing aliens. The effect on the fabric of the fort was catastrophic, but there was little else she could think to do.

Focus. She had to keep focused, form, mind and being. Her soul was a pale candle suspended between the skein and the now, on one side the ravening terror of She Who Thirsts, on the other the blank malice of the Great Devourer. Focus kept her safe from the depredations of both. It kept her from slipping away and joining the dead.

A shout went up from throats hoarse with screaming. To the rear of the parklands a disturbance rippled through the horde, close by the broad tunnelway that had led to the Oceans of Ceaseless Tranquillity; empty like so much of Iyanden, the seas all boiled away into the void.

‘Aid comes! Aid at last!’ The tyranid assault on the walls faltered as the impenetrable mind of the hive fleet turned to regard this new annoyance.

Iyanna stared towards the source of the cries, her sharp eyes scanning the tumult. Jetbikes powered out of the tunnel. Weapons fire flashed. Bright banners flickered amid the bone and red mass of the aliens.

Another voice rang out. ‘The Eldritch Raiders, it is the Eldritch Raiders! Prince Yriel is come, Prince Yriel is returned to the halls of his fathers!’

Iyanna cast out a desperate message from her mind in the obscure language of the seers. ‘The Great Dragon has many scales but a hollow heart. Pierce the breast and they shall fall away.’ She stumbled with the effort, the alien consciousness swatting aside her mind’s assay.

The eldar upon the wall, dead and alive, fought with the mettle of hope and despair combined.

Yriel saw Iyanna’s thought-sending as a single, burning rune hanging over the centre of the mass of aliens: the Dragon. The words of the spiritseer sang in his thoughts against the tuneless roar of the hive mind. ‘That way lies the leader, it is him we must slay! Slay him and they will falter! Make a path, make a path!’

Yriel hung by one hand from the rear portion of a light sky-runner, pointing the Spear of Twilight at the heart of the alien throng. The spear’s tip crackled with baleful energies, the weapon’s spirit enraged by the presence of the aliens on the craftworld. Yriel drank deep of its hatred, its power lending him enormous strength. The impetus of their charge had driven them deep into the horde attacking the carnelian walls of the Fortress of the Red Moon, but his raiders were few and their assault faltered. ‘Onward!’ he cried. ‘Onward for the House of Ulthanash! Onward for Iyanden!’

Yriel revelled in the fight. He had abandoned the path years past, allowing the extremes of life to soak his psyche. He did not turn from the horror of bloodshed, for he had long ago embraced his dark side. His soul was upon a knife edge, overbalanced further by the fell nature of the spear. Tottering over damnation’s abyss, he laughed, the grimness of his home’s predicament swept away by the glory of the moment, the romance of the final charge, the vision of the fortress saved. Both downfall and triumph were of equal value. His sharp eldar senses drank in the spectacle of carnage, and found it pleasing: the snap of his gonfalons in the wind, the poignancy of the eldar’s final stand, the light of artificial stars gleaming from glossy carapaces, the smell of burning and flesh putrefying, the dusty scent of ruptured wraithbone, and over it all the thick, acerbic stink of the Great Dragon’s beasts. Everything was cast in greater contrast through the medium of the spear, heightening already potent sensations. He was filled to the brim with the powers of his ancestor, intoxicated with new-found godhood.

‘Onward, my brave reavers! Onward!’ he cried. He held aloft the thrumming spear, and the sky-

runner plunged on.

Open transports skimmed in the wake of his sky-runner. Corsairs, once of several bands but now wholly his, fired from the railed sides, their shuriken and las-bolts slaying many. Gargoyles attacked them and were driven back, the skimmers dodging their clumsy claws. Harpies and harridans flapped, too slow to catch them. The weight of living ammunition hurled skywards could not help but bring a few craft down, sending skimmers into the teeming infestation like great arrows, but not all.

Yriel's pilot ducked and wove. Sprays of sharp-toothed grubs and ichor splattered against the hull, the plating hissing as acid ate into it. Through the cockpit shield Yriel heard the urgent chimes of alarms. 'Onwards, Kalaea, take me to their heart! Do not fail me now!'

The sky-runner sped true. A serpentine monster reared up in front of its sharp prow, but the craft swerved, and resumed its course. It banked into a great curve, slowing just enough to allow Yriel to leap in safely. As he jumped, the stubby wings of his corsair's flightpack flicked out, decelerating him rapidly. He landed lightly upon the gory corpse of a fallen giant. Before him the swarmlord loomed, taller than a wraithknight and greatly more massive. Its eyes glittered at him with malign intelligence.

'Great Dragon!' Yriel called, holding aloft the Spear of Twilight. 'I come to slay you, as my forefather Ulthanash slew the wyrm Draoch-var with this very blade!'

Three huge creatures lumbered at Yriel, directed by the psychic command of the leader-beast, but he leapt aside from their swipes, the spear granting him unparalleled reflexes. One and then another fell, pierced by the pin point lance beams of the prince's followers as he bounded closer to his prey.

Roaring, the swarmlord attacked, driving down a claw twelve paces long at Yriel. He back-flipped, the wind of its passing stirring his hair. The tip of the claw slammed down into a carcass, slowing the hive tyrant for the merest heartbeat as it tugged it free, but it was enough. The prince landed on his feet. Smoothly he drew back his arm and cast the spear of Ulthanash at the creature. The spear screamed a polyphonic wrath-song as it hurtled through the air, passing in an eyeblink to pierce the jaw of the swarmlord, drive up through the soft mouth into the swollen brain case, and emerge, gleaming, from the top of the armoured skull.

The swarmlord toppled, lifeless. Yriel yelled in exultation, feeling more alive than he had in many cycles. He had become jaded by his life as a corsair. But this! This was the theatre of life full in the round!

The niggling pain he had experienced when he had picked up the spear became more intense. The spear, lodged in the skull of the leader-beast, glowed brighter and brighter. Its hunger burning, the spear sucked greedily upon the limitless psychic banquet of the hive mind.

The spear-tip blazed, bright as a solar flare, the chill of its link to his soul turning to incandescent agony. A pressure built in his head, pain so acute he thought it would crack open. The world became a radiant tableau of hard whites and black shadow under the light of the spear's feeding.

Prince Yriel gripped his temples. Something gave in his left eye and a wash of liquid heat filled the orb of it.

Falling to his knees, he screamed.

The light ceased. The hive mind retreated, its oppressive presence becoming again a distant threat. With no other of the higher creatures remaining, and the hive fleet destroyed in Yriel's drive back to the craftworld, there was nothing to link the voidspawn to their gestalt soul, and the conjoined intellect of those upon Iyanden dissipated altogether.

The swarm faltered. The assault collapsed as the creatures lost their unity. Some milled about, some fell catatonic, many died at the sudden severance. Some, reverting to savage, simplistic instinct, attacked their fellows.

With one blow, the tide had turned. The hunters became the hunted. Iyanden was saved.

The Spear of Twilight stood proud of the swarmlord's blackened skull. For one hundred paces around was a wide circle of smoking bones and black earth. All soft matter had been atomised. At the centre of this circle, unharmed, Prince Yriel lay curled in the ash.

Yriel was upon a beach. A hot and merciless sun burned at his skin, a calm sea was in front of him. He wished to dive in, to cool himself even if he could not quench his thirst, but as he approached he saw the sea was not of water but of blood. He turned away only to find that he could not move: his feet were trapped in the sand. Bending to free his feet, he saw each grain was a miniature, screaming skull.

He stood again, perplexed. A long while he remained there, until a mighty wind whipped up a swell, bringing with it the rich scent of ripe meat. The sea drew back from the shore as a red wave rose over him, the thick, glistening face of it blood, the cap frothed with skulls.

The wave crashed upon him, and Yriel surfaced from his sleep, tipped from nightmare by a rush of fury. He sat up in his bed with a cry, silken sheets stuck to his muscled torso with his sweat. He kicked at them to free his feet, tangled while he dreamed.

His nightmares were becoming more frequent and more vivid. He growled in frustration when his feet would not come loose and he trapped himself further. The urge to rip at the sheets built, the wave about to break. He saw the wave still in his mind's eye, his dreams intruding into his wakefulness. He slapped his hands to his face; fingers clasping at his temples, he tried to grind away the image from his eyes with the heels of his hands. After a moment, it passed, and Yriel sighed raggedly.

He lay back on his pillows, forced his heart to slow, regained his poise. The seers had taught him meditative techniques to purge himself of his irritation and pain, and although not entirely effective, they helped. He let the rush of his blood in his ears soothe him, until it calmed, and the wave sank back into the churning seas of his emotions. He opened his eyes again, and saw from only one. His fury had become annoyance. Anger was his constant companion, though whether his own or that of the spear, he could not tell.

Shakily, Yriel unwrapped his feet and slid from his bed. He was weak. His limbs shook; this palsy upon waking was becoming a regular occurrence, following hard on his nightmares. Always, his right hand tingled.

He needed to calm his pains. He went to a delicate vanity table where he once kept his paints and pigment changers. His days of vanity were behind him: he cut a grim figure now, his hair, clothes and skin unadorned by eldar standards, and several decanters crowded the table instead of flasks of perfume and the devices of beautification. Yriel snatched at one, high-necked, full of deeply purple nightvine liqueur. He kept his head bowed as he poured the drink into a goblet, so as not to look in the mirror. He had subconsciously taken to avoiding his own reflection, some part of him not wishing to see his ruined eye, nor the sallow skin it glared from. An angry red sun in a sickly sky his eye was, too reminiscent of the beach of his dreams. His blindness was a reminder of the power of the spear, a lesson he had barely survived.

The glass of the elegant vessel rattled on the lip of his cup as he poured. Nightvine was potent, supposed to be taken in moderation, but Yriel served himself three fingers' worth and gulped it back, a thin trickle spilling from the corner of his mouth. He wiped at his face with the back of his trembling hand, and poured himself some more. The shaking in his arms and legs receded, and he sipped at his second drink with more decorum.

Yriel looked out through the double doors of his bedroom. On a stand in the drawing room of his private chambers the spear rested, lit within a cone of stark white light. Yriel slept always with the

door open, for he could not bear to be out of sight of the spear. The weakness he felt grew the further he was from it. If it went from his sight, he was gripped by panic, sometimes murderously so. He would have slept with it by his side, but the seers had told him it would devour his soul all the quicker, and for the time being he retained will enough to heed their warnings.

The light was a stasis field, and the Spear of Twilight was dormant, but it was forged in the elder days of glory. It was not bound by constraints on time and space, and it never truly slumbered. Its regard was upon him, made sluggish by the time-inhibiting energies of the field, but vigilant still.

Yriel stared at it longingly for several minutes. He turned from it with a hiss of disgust. Not for the spear, but for his own desire to hold it.

The hour was late, his palace silent. Few were his living servants, vast his domicile. The breeze through his open windows was cool, and that helped. Feeling the need for further restoration, he followed it. Cradling his goblet, he passed through gauzy curtains to the curved balcony of his room, and let the perfumed winds of the dome of the House of Ulthanash dry the sweat upon his skin. Little sound came to his ears: the chirp of nightcallers and buzzing calls of darkmoths only, no song beneath the trees, no lights in the glades. The parklands were dark. The whole dome was quiet as a sepulchre. His people had suffered less than others of the Iyandeni, but they were cowed. Cowed by the Triple Woe, by their rejection of him, by the failures of his kinsman Elthrael to guard the craftworld, by death and the damnation of those they had raised to fall again.

But most of all they were cowed by the sombre presence of the ancestors who walked among them. The dead refused to sleep on Iyanden. Many ghost warriors remained at large even in peace. The flames of these revenant spirits' souls burned lower than in life, and yet the mightiest of them shone brighter by far than those of the greater part of the living. Ulthanash's House was much reduced in number and in vigour, and with the evidence of his people's dwindling standing right in front of them, it could not be denied.

Still Yriel enjoyed the quiet. Far from silent, the dome possessed a velvet soundscape made up of a million small things growing. He had missed that, during his exile; the monolithic presence of his ship was no substitute for the infinity circuit or the myriad elements of ecology, free of any purpose greater than to individually live, creating something glorious in concert as they did so.

The liquid in Yriel's cup rippled. A flock of birds soared from their roosts in the trees outside, calling in dismay. A tremor ran through the wraithbone skeleton of the worldship, bringing with it a flash of hot anger. An answering pulse of bloodlust came from the Spear of Twilight to tug at Yriel's soul.

'War is coming again,' he said. His tongue felt thick at its root, as though swollen. Although alone and speaking out into the night, he addressed his words to the spear. 'War is coming, the Avatar of Khaine stirs.' He looked over the parks. At the distant edge of the dome, the first light of artificial dawn glowed ruddy as blood. He gripped the smooth balcony rail, its semi-organic stone warm under his hand. 'And I am not sorry for it.'

Yriel could not decide whether to laugh or cry. In the end, he did both.

CHAPTER ONE

Grim Counsel

The same night, in Iyanden's Dome of Crystal Seers, Taec Silvereye sat cross-legged. He winced as the tremor shivered the skein and material worlds alike, his scars creasing awkwardly around the orb of metal that had replaced his left eye.

He pulled himself back from the skein, and looked around the half-ruined grove. The leaves on those few crystal trees still standing here tinkled. Wrath hung heavy over Iyanden.

He had been correct, then. The Avatar stirred, war was coming, and sooner than he had hoped. The question remained, whence came the threat?

This problem had exercised Taec for the best part of three cycles, since the sense of foreboding had stolen up on him. He could not divine why, and it had only grown. He had come to this hidden grove near the edge of the dome alone, compelled by this sense of doom that he dared not share. Before the Triple Woe, Taec had been something of a maverick. His predictions were seen as obscure and alarmist and dismissed by the Council Elder, Kelmon Firesight. But he had been proven correct. Kelmon was dead, slain after pursuing a false future to the ruin of Iyanden.

Vindicated and elevated to Council Elder, Taec now had the opposite problem. His every word was hung upon and dissected for hidden meaning, his least concern about the skein provoked panic. He had ceased to say anything, but his posture and gestures were as diligently interpreted. He had withdrawn from society, going into seclusion willingly where before it was forced on him. Taec had become increasingly aloof, but with good reason. He would not bring his fears to the rest of the High Council and seer council until he was absolutely sure where the threat came from.

The Avatar stirred. He still did not have the answer. Time was running out.

Taec sighed heavily, and closed his eyes. He regained his focus, leaving behind the concerns of form. Glad he was to do so; he was old now, and the Crystal Transformation of Morai-Heg was quickening. He sank into the warm embrace of the infinity circuit, the source of Iyanden's power, its communications system and its compound soul. Made up of the millions of eldar who had died here over the arcs since the Fall, it was a spiritual refuge against the eternal torments of the Great Enemy.

The circuit spread out around him, as intricate as a circulatory system. The bright flames of the living moved along it. At the edges – a nonsense really, Taec's mind forced upon the circuit a form he could understand, the infinity circuit had no true edge – the circuit's capillaries and lacy vessels drew together into a handful of arteries that connected Iyanden to the greater eternity matrix linking all that remained of the eldar's fractured domains.

Warp spiders clustered around Taec's astral form and made their strange greetings. Further out crowded the ghosts of eldar gone before. Their shades were pictures made of flame; solid forms coalesced momentarily, before the dance of their energies attenuated or flared, wiping away any semblance of their lost bodies. It once was that Taec rarely encountered a spirit with cohesion enough to be aware of him. Since the Triple Woe, they dogged his footsteps always, petitioning him with their inchoate desires. The infinity circuit had swollen with the huge numbers felled in Iyanden's recent battles, and the worldship throbbed with their power. They did not fade, their anger and multitude allowing them to cling to being where once they would have slept. The tranquillity of the circuit was

gone. Iyanden was gripped by rage.

+This is not the way that it should be,+ he thought to them. +Return to your rest.+

They wavered, and drew back, but did not depart. Ordinarily they would have dispersed at his command, but these were not ordinary times.

From a pile of runes by Taec's side in the dome, five rose into the air. They presented themselves in a line before the farseer's face for approval. He did not open his eyes, but saw them nonetheless.

He nodded at the first four in turn, consenting to their selection. The first was his name-rune, his power focus. Two syllables combined into one ideograph to spell out his first name. Worn by use, its wraithbone was grey with age. Through this he could draw upon the power of the Othersea with little risk to his eternal essence. The other three runes were specific aids that would help him in divining the truth of his foreboding. The Scorpion, the revealer of hidden secrets; the Seeking Shaft, Kurnous's arrow; the Flame of Asuryan, the world-rune of Iyanden itself. His name-rune stayed in front of his face, rotating gently. The other three lifted up to circle his head.

The fifth rune he regarded with his second sight for some time. The Bloody Hand, the rune of Kaela Mensha Khaine himself. He had not wished to employ this rune, but time was short and he had exhausted all other options. Khaine's sign glowered at him, filling his mind with the stink of blood and hot iron. He decided to let it hang there, out of synchronisation with the others. He would not deploy it yet.

Taec looked past the shades in the circuit, past the trceries that linked the living and the dead of Iyanden, out beyond the eternity matrix, and onto the skein. The warp spiders were seemingly aware of his task, and corralled the dead, keeping them back so that they would not obscure his view. He watched the future, ignoring those who had passed before their time.

The beauty of the skein never failed to move Taec, and now, when the burning hand of Khaine hovered in his mind's eye, it moved him all the more. The threat of destruction added to his appreciation. The skein defied description. The eldar tongue, for all its complex shades of nuance, could not encompass it. Even psychic communication and shared recollection could only hint at the skein's glories, for all that was passed over was the seer's subjective impression of it. Only pure mind could comprehend it, and then only while it was upon the skein, for when form and mind were one again, memories of the skein became flat.

But to be in it! All of reality was laid out before him. Threads twisted into yarns woven into tapestries depicting universes of possibility. Shards of infinitely shattering mirrors, each fragment showing the same event in different perspective; ripples alive with images on the surface of a lake, its depths also ablaze with scenes that were, could be, and had been. There were many ways of seeing the skein.

He deployed his first rune: the Scorpion. In the dome, it spun a little higher over him, breaking orbit with its fellows. The Scorpion had been the mainstay of his scryings these last cycles. It revealed nothing new to him. If anything, the skein grew more complicated. He had had no vision, seen nothing. His instinct was unerring, and had brought him here, but it was precious little to go on.

Next, the Flame of Asuryan.

Currents of potential ran crosswise, breaking the lines of fate, causing eddies and causal loops that twisted smokily and died. Under the influence of the rune, new threads forked at weaknesses in Iyanden's destiny, each one branching and branching again, some heavy with the promise of destruction. All these fates were weak, improbably distant, and most collapsed as Taec regarded them.

He thought out for the wraithbone shapes of other runes, among them Vaul's Anvil, the Tress, the Humbling Silence – half a dozen all told. With these he would weave a cage about the Bloody Hand, to

direct its energies to his own ends. Khaine's rune demanded precision, or it would show only what it desired to show, and that was mostly the seer's own demise.

Taec spent several minutes crafting his runic binding, a dancing pattern of runes that circled a central point over his head, orbits stately as an orrery. Satisfied, he allowed Khaine's rune to take its place at the centre of his creation.

Released rather than psychically impelled as the other runes had been, Khaine's mark blazed upwards. Upon the skein it threw a fiery, sanguinary light. Taec was surprised that rather than shrinking back from it, the angry ghosts on the circuit beseeched it for vengeance. In the crystal dome, the rune glowed red-hot at the centre of its runic prison, raging against Taec's entrapment of its energies.

Brought by Khaine's hand, a thousand images of war flickered before Taec. He picked over them, examining them, bringing one into focus with the aid of his runes, dismissing another. Several frayed to nothing, banished from possibility by his scrutiny. His sense of impending disaster intensified, but nowhere could he find the cause.

Frustrated, he pulled back, letting time run on, seeing the skein break and reform under the influence of a trillion unremarkable events.

He listened to the ghosts. Their clamour for vengeance was unprecedented. As if in reply to their petition, another psychic pulse perturbed his meditations, sending through the skein a slow wash of disturbance. New possibilities erupted all around Taec, none the ones he sought.

Vengeance, he thought. The ghosts call for vengeance.

He called up Anaris, the Prize of Vengeance. The rune was a stylised miniature sword, depicting that with which Khaine slew Eldanesh. Another dark symbol, a portent of revenge. In the dome it orbited the world-rune of Iyanden, spinning on its axis, point down.

A twitch in the skein, or in his soul. Manifested as pure mind on the skein, there was little to distinguish Taec from the fates he observed: they were one. His attention focused on Anaris intently, and the point swept up away from him and shot off ahead, hurtling into unknown futures. He followed hard, travelling the darkest of fates, those that saw his depleted home aflame for a fourth time; and the influence of the Bloody Hand brought many that saw his own end. Taec felt some of the pain at the deaths of these shadow selves as he chased Anaris down his chosen thread of destiny. Elation built. For all his poise, Taec was as excited as any huntsman who spies quarry.

Anaris slowed, point quivering, at a pulsing nexus where many lines of possibility converged; an inevitability, then. As he approached, Taec saw a red world in the throes of death.

A glimpse, deep red and bone white, alien armour grown not worn. A thick skein woven from many braids whipped into view on the far side of the nexus.

He had seen such a thing before.

With mounting trepidation, Taec pulled Draoch-var out from the bulging rune pouch by his meditating form. The Dragon. The rune had accrued many meanings over the arcs, and had gained a new one recently. It stood for the Great Devourer, the Star Ravener, the Hunger from the Void. The tyrannids, which the eldar called the Great Dragon.

With Draoch-var he brought the Parting of the Ways. Modified by the Parting of the Ways, Draoch-var represented the hive fleet Far Ranging Hunger, the one the humans called Kraken.

Well Taec knew the signs of the beast: a tendril of Far Ranging Hunger had almost destroyed Iyanden seven passes before. This was the second incident of the Triple Woe, and – in denying Taec's prediction of it – Kelmon Firesight's greatest folly. The skein was still scarred with that happening. Iyanden's population had been reduced by seven-tenths, and its physical form had not yet recovered. It

might never recover.

Khaine's bloody hand rotated over scenes of swarming aliens.

Crowding behind him, the ghosts of Iyanden saw what Taec saw, and they were further enraged.

Taec irritably demanded their silence, for he had seen something new and troubling. Amid the bone and red of Far Ranging Hunger's weapon-beasts he caught flashes of white and purple.

More voidspawn, those the eldar called Starving Dragon and the humans Hive Fleet Leviathan.

Taec looked closer, subtly manipulating the skein, but could see little more. The great mind of the tyranids blocked his sight, the psychic roar of it hampering all attempts at divination. He saw, again and again, the same scene, hordes of horrific beasts bounding over a dusty plain. An echo of beauty clung to the planet's dead world spirit. An eldar world, an old one. A name, Dûriel, came into his mind, and then another – Valedor, given to it by the trespassing mon-keigh. A True Star system despoiled by human usurpers, then despoiled again.

Taec looked through funeral smoke, black and thick with death. His body twitched in recognition of the bone and red, so deep was the horror at the loss the latter had inflicted upon Iyanden. It leaked through his trance, bringing with it a memory of a swiping claw, agony, and the loss of earthly sight in his left eye.

He suppressed the echoes of pain, concentrating his mind on this future. On a whim he modified his cycling rune pattern with the Twin Birds. It joined the others circling his meditating form. On the skein, its component parts Hawk and Falcon split, becoming aethereal, and headed off along the tangled futures. Even here, at this nexus, time was a confused jumble, many paths crossing and ending. The thunder of the hive mind, a billion billion alien voices shouting simultaneously, obscured all.

Hawk and Falcon rejoined, and he followed. A coming together.

The Avatar bellowed, his fury dancing across the timelines. A wall barred Taec: the Shadow in the Warp was directly before him. He wondered if it could sense his probing, if it had any inkling he were there. The strands balked at the dense alien being, ran around it, as if these lines of time and space were in fear of it. The skein twisted, went within the nexus; few strands escaped.

Taec was not to be denied. Summoning all his will and channelling it through the rapidly orbiting runes, he looked deep into this pivotal moment of time, smashing aside the blankness of the hive mind.

What Taec saw froze him to the core.

Two breeds of voidspawn came together as a world died; they fought in savage mating, Dûriel's dying lands fertile fields for their joining. Hive fleets merged and new forms of death were their get.

'Far Ranging Hunger joins with Starving Dragon, two become one, two become one!' he half-sang to himself. Taec watched as the immense minds of the two fleets reached out towards each other, groping blindly across the streams of probability. The components of the hive minds were spiritually puny, whisper-thin lines generated by bestial minds. But with so many twisted together, they made a mighty cable of fate, dwarfing all other threads on the skein.

As the twin cables of the hive fleets' consciousnesses drew near to one another, their strands unwrapped. Their writhing tendrils reached, grasped, and the two pulled into conjunction. As one they were monstrous. Taec had a glimpse far back along their ancient path. As Far Ranging Hunger's fleets made many splinters of one larger consciousness, so the wholes of Far-Reaching Hunger and Starving Dragon were themselves only tendrils of something so vast it was beyond Taec's scope to comprehend.

The psychic shock of the joining reverberated down through time. Sudden visions of many world-

deaths crowded near-past, present and future. With an avertiginous rush, the ultimate doom of the eldar loomed into view over Taec, as a black and impenetrable mountain. This certainty of extinction was pricked by few lights of unreadable hope. Behind the black walls of the race-death lurked the pervasive presence of She Who Thirsts. Her lusts washed at Taec's wards as the sea washes at the feet of cliffs, seeking to erode their foundations and bring them down.

Taec blocked the Great Enemy, muttering verses of focus to bring that part of his mind tasked with guarding his essence to greater alert, pushing the soul-threat from his mind. She had not taken him yet, and would not do so today.

No, what concerned him here was not the doom of the soul, but of the flesh.

He followed the eventuality of the hive fleets' merging, watching the landscapes of possibility unfold through his third eye. Images flickered, the multiple paths of fate layered atop one another. He fought his way through confused futures, to discard the middling and inconsequential differences that clouded the truth, looking for a clearer vision.

Many futures sprang from the nexus, all dire. The psychic backwash was intense. Blood and war. Creatures made stronger by the genetic inflow of ork, human, and eldar, perfectly forged for the death of not only Taec's kind, but the entire galaxy. The stars of hope in the black doom winked out one by one, the few threads of the skein stretched out to them unravelled. There was nothing beyond the blackness but the laughter of his people's twisted daughter. The shades of the dead clamoured, pushing at the warp spiders. Their minds brushed his like cobwebs.

Another tremor rocked the skein and physical world both, bringing with it a tide of hatred and anger. The dead were invigorated by it. Taec despaired. So much rage was in the circuit now – where was the noble Iyanden of the past?

The hands of the departed grasped at his astral form. They meant him no harm. They would speak. Long practice as a farseer kept panic at bay. He redoubled the guard on his soul, but let the energies that touched him pour through the crystallising flesh of his earthly form. Around his body in the dome, more runes shot into the air from his pouch, burning with sudden heat. The orbits of those runes already airborne became faster. Each burned brighter and brighter, until a constellation of miniature suns circled him.

Taec suppressed his anguish as his mouth opened without his volition, driven by the necromantic energies of Iyanden's overfull otherworld. The words of the dead seared his tongue, each one molten with the fires of wrath.

'The Voidspawn shall be cast into the abyss,' he said, and the voices were of many, and none was his own. 'To a dying flame shall the hungry ones be drawn.' His body spasmed, learned though he was in the ways of the skein. His skin crawled. 'There to meld with their kin. There to quicken the Great Change.'

A final flash, glimpses of many things. A lone eldar stood in silhouette before a red sea. A second red sea of molten rock. Two flaming hearts, one consumed by fire, the other emitting cleansing flame.

A blazing pillar roared up in front of Taec. He stood upon a shaking mountainside. A world burned around him. Taec reached for a giant's hand and slipped. Plunging into searing lava, his body and his waystone were destroyed together.

He fell into the next life, a third sea of maddening energy. There the fires did not go out.

The Dark Prince laughed as Taec's soul slipped into his grasp. The Bloody Hand of Khaine turned.

Psychic energy blasted out from Taec. He gasped, coming out of the skein quickly. Vitreous leaves rattled in the grove, setting up discordant, tinkling melodies in the aftermath of his scrying.

The runes orbiting him flared, then clattered upon the clear stone.

Peace returned.

Taec swallowed. His limbs shook. His thin, ancient skin burned. He looked down.

Five runes were before him, smoking and black, the Dragon Draoch-var at their centre. The Flame of Asuryan lay some distance from it, and between them was set the world-rune of Biel-Tan: the Rebirth of Ancient Days. At the end of the line was the Dying Fire, and a last rune, obscure and dark in portent – Llith'amtu Khlavh, the Knife That Stays The Blade.

A sixth caught his eye, away from the quintet of principal runes, but lying within the measure of influence. The Balance of Asuryan, canted. It lay on its side, imparting ambiguity to all. He looked for the other runes. They were all around him; some he had chosen, some he had not. They added inflection to the others. *Perhaps*. Most had come down too far for a sure reading. The crude rune denoting mankind, the Asurya, the Broken Tree Of Paradise Lost, and more.

Taec swept the first up, holding it in his hand. Draoch-var. This, at least, was clear.

'The Great Devourer is not done with Iyanden,' he said. Sorrow welled in his breast, of an intensity hard to bear.

A voice came to him, as from a great distance. The crystals of the dome thrummed as the soul of Farseer Kelmon Firesight whispered in his mind.

+Or Iyanden is not done yet with the Dragon.+

Taec nodded his agreement. Wearily, he pushed himself to his feet. He saw what must be done, but the others might not. The last century had been hard on his people. Three times had Iyanden been directly attacked: the Triple Woe. First, the Battle of the Burning Moon against Chaos, which had led to the destruction of House Arienal and the shaming of Prince Yriel, then the ravages of Far Ranging Hunger, finally war against the orks and another invasion of the craftworld's sacred ground. Iyanden's fleets were all but spent in wars with humans, orks, necrons and the infernal beings of the warp. Despite the great sorrow and fury of the living, there was little further appetite for conflicts far from home. In such times they did not seem... *pressing*.

Convincing Prince Yriel to fight on the far side of the galaxy would be easy; he remained wild and warlike, despite taking to the path again. The rest of the High Council might be difficult to convince. Iyanna certainly would not be lightly turned from her occult quest. She teetered on the brink of obsession, that one, and was becoming dangerous.

He needed a clearer reading. He needed aid.

Taec moved awkwardly as he pulled gloves over hands greying with the early signs of crystallisation. His limbs were stiffening. His time was drawing to a close. Soon he would set root here, amid the broken statues of his predecessors. He reached out his hand to his staff, floating some metres away. At his bidding it flew across the room to him, slapping quietly into his palm. He leaned on it, letting it draw him strength from the soul of Iyanden; quieter now its message was delivered, though heavy with expectation.

Unchecked wraithbone extrusions surrounded him, the product of the overcharged infinity circuit, swollen as it was with the souls of so many million dead. Throughout battered Iyanden the bonesingers coaxed the growths back, but here at the interface between Iyanden's spiritual and physical aspects they would not be tamed. The signs of war were everywhere in the Dome of Crystal Seers, even as elsewhere they were smoothed away. The vitrified bodies of ancient seers were smashed, their pieces left where they had fallen. In places the stumps of shattered crystal trees outnumbered those whose branches still spread to frame the stars. The floor was pitted and cracked. And in this part of the forest the signs of destruction were not so pronounced; where Kelmon had perished the crystal had turned black, and no scrying could be made there. In the Dome of Crystal

Seers the desolation of the worldship was plain for all to see and so it would remain forevermore.

‘And yet war has not done with Iyanden,’ he said.

As if in answer, another tremor rolled out.

‘The Avatar stirs.’

Taec took a sky-runner across Iyanden. His celebrity was such that he was noticed wherever he went. He was so shaken he could not bear the eyes of his fellows on him, and avoided the public spear-cars and transitways.

House Haladesh was close to the Dome of Crystal Seers, both being towards the aft of Iyanden, but the way between the two had become as crooked as that of the skein. Many of the lesser domes were still without atmosphere. Perhaps in less troubled times their like would have been let loose to float away into space, and new ones raised in their place. But Iyanden in flight was far from any star that might consume them, and the council were wary of leaving a breadcrumb trail for the Great Dragon to follow. Furthermore, so great had the damage been to the craftworld, that those bonesingers who oversaw the skeleton of Iyanden feared that to lose so much mass from the remainder at once could lead to unforeseen gravitic stressing. And so the broken areas of Iyanden remained attached, grim reminders to a people who needed no reminding of their suffering.

In places where many had died, bizarre wraithbone forests had sprung up, the uncanny trees each seizing an unclaimed spirit stone. These were haunted areas, where spirits had turned wicked in their pain. Taec avoided them. Transit tubes were broken, doors healed shut with thick growths of wraithbone like scars upon wounds. In parts, power was erratic, and the fluctuating artificial gravity of the craftworld tossed his skiff about as if a tempest raged. In other places too much energy was expressed, and those lights that had not exploded shone like the trapped suns of the domes.

And everywhere there was ruin. House Arienal was a blasted wasteland, scorched lifeless by cyclonic torpedoes in the Battle of the Burning Moon, first of the Triple Woes. The psychic shock at so many deaths had been of such magnitude that all but one of the Arienalani had died, their spirits fleeing into their waystones the instant their kin perished.

Taec sped over blackened remnants of palaces and parks. Twilight reigned here, light coming only from the stars and from cracks in the fabric of the worldship wherein the raw infinity circuit sparkled. In the ruins of a palace he saw a gathering of wraithkind, but no other movement. Even the walking dead of Arienal were few in number, and the whispers of unquiet spirits were all around him.

How Iyanna Arienal had not been driven mad with grief was a mystery.

Talks on the restoration had begun shortly before Far Ranging Hunger had attacked. The seals had been reinstated in preparation, but now, in all probability, the dome would stay ruined.

He left the shattered house by the forward tubes, thrusting down a highway that once was full of bright, darting craft, but was now traversed by only him. He passed into the Endless Forest, seven great domes run one into the other to create a huge wilderness. The forest harboured artful ecosystems engineered from the life forms of a hundred thousand worlds. The Great Dragon had fought hard for this delectable morsel, and the scars of its assault were to be seen everywhere, the earth scraped down to the raw wraithbone core in places. The bonesingers and wilderers would be occupied for many arcs to come.

The signs of war became lighter as Taec entered House Haladesh. The council, with him as its reluctant head, had directed restoration efforts to be concentrated where the most eldar still lived. He flew over rebuilt villages empty of people, through domes whose biomes were being laboriously reconstructed. Eventually he saw other eldar, small groups at first, and then in increasing numbers. If

anything his sense of isolation grew as he came across them.

Taec came to Urhaithanalish, House Haladesh's main city, set in its own dome at the junction between nine others like the heart of a flower. Near its centre he alighted from the sky-runner. He strode with purpose through an empty tunnel from the landing site. All was pristine, no mark of war in these parts. House Haladesh had been spared the worst of fate's caprice, and what damage there was had been largely sung away. But there were no scions of that house abroad here. Always populous, the numbers of Haladesh's folk were still great compared to the others of Iyanden's peoples, but many had died, and lesser roads such as the one he trod were oftentimes free of traffic.

Taec reached a wider way that took him to a market square, and there something of Iyanden's old glory was evident. Eldar of all ages and paths went on their business, in thinner crowds than before the Triple Woe to be certain, but the hum of conversation settled Taec's troubled spirit after the ominous silence of the desolation. Underpinned though it was by sorrow and less vital than of old, there was cause for hope in the chatter, and in the wares displayed in the square by those on artisanal paths.

He found it hard to admit to himself, but he was unnerved. He told himself that the terrible fate that awaited him was by no means a certainty, and that all the runes of Khaine delighted in showing their users' vilest ends. Somehow, he felt that this was different. Ever heedful of his inner feelings, Taec was greatly perturbed. He desired to halt, to take wine and engage in talk of something other than dark destinies, but he did not. The other eldar did not bother him, but he knew they saw him, and that many itched to approach him.

And so the single indulgence he allowed himself was to proceed on foot at brisk pace. Time was of the essence, but he required time to think, to calm himself, and to formulate his words well. He drew upon his experiences upon the Path of the Playwright, dim though his recollections were, as he pushed on through Haladesh. Simplicity, he thought, not adorned phrases. One had to be direct when speaking with the dead.

He passed from the city into Haladesh's lake and woodlands. As blessed as it was, in Haladesh too there were domes laid waste by the wars, although here most had been restored to bare spaces awaiting restocking. He went across arching bridges over deep fissures in the craftworld, protected from the void only by thin energy sheaths. He walked through the tightly packed streets of lesser townships. Thousands of homes were empty in Iyanden; every eldar living could have claimed a palace should he have wished, but many desired close proximity to one another, needing the buzz of life after so much death. Crammed settlements were much in vogue. The echoing halls and domes left empty were wastelands of the soul.

On he went, taking up another public sky-runner to cross Haladesh's large central desert. He swooped over the grasslands at its edge, putting herds of scarlet ungulates to flight, then ran with the birds out over the sands. He passed over the Hidden Gorge, that jewel in the desert's heart, a chasm that split the sands as far as the crystal bedrock of the craftworld. Cliffs of bright rock made up its upper reaches, a wide lake at their head. The thunder of waterfalls pouring from the lake boomed, and Taec looked down into the canyon, misty and broad, thick with the verdure of uncounted star systems. In the deeps a wide river glowed with the light of the exposed infinity circuit at its bed. Then he was over it, and the thunder receded as if it never was, and the sand glared at him. The dome was hot, its beauty was a hard one. In the sands he saw the tents of those who had withdrawn from community, following the Path of Solitude.

Mourning, Solitude, Wandering, Lament, Eulogy, Forgetting, Remembrance, Dreaming; many eldar of Iyanden had taken to these paths in recent days. Others flocked to the aspect shrines, their rage unsleeping after their participation in the craftworld's battles. Aspect shrines long-dormant rose again,

and no bad thing. The wisdom of their exarchs was required lest the kindled fury of the Iyandeni send them off down the dark road of their ancestors, a worrisome future that occupied much of Taec's thoughts.

Taec left the runner by a tether at the dome's edge, and walked from blistering heat into cool galleries. Tiered and dimly lit, they looked out over the void. Iyanden was far away from any system, making all speed across interstellar space from the tyrannid-beset Eastern Fringe. The stars shone coldly upon the craftworld, flintily unsympathetic to its fate.

The galleries ran on for several thousand paces. Taec passed lovers whispering in the dark, small groups staring into space, sole eldar weeping in secret nooks. He ignored them all. He listened, form, mind and being, for further stirrings of the Avatar, but the shattered god offered no more disturbance.

'Hoi hoi!' a voice called him. Taec glanced over. A young eldar was sat in a drinking den recessed into the worldward wall of the galleries, a dark place serving bitter wines to doleful drinkers. His voice was mocking, his body language spoke of callowness and cynicism. 'Taec Silvereye is abroad in House Haladesh! What business has he here? With whom will he speak: the living, or the dead?'

The youth laughed, as if he had made an outrageous jest. His laughter was tinged with hysteria. It was a sound Taec had become too accustomed to of late.

As Taec passed, a young woman hushed the youth. Their souls were bright fires, wrapped around each other. Twins, a rare beauty in these times. The other drinkers, the flames of their essence darker, looked on unamused, disturbed from their miseries. Taec hurried onwards into areas empty of the living.

By this way Taec came at last to the Mistmaze Spire, the Ghost Halls of Haladesh.

Wraithblades, their helms marked with the runes of House Haladesh, stood guard over the spire's sole remaining gate, a small portal large enough for a wraithlord to pass through but no more. All other gates were closed over with wraithbone at the behest of the dead.

The wraithblades faced forward, arms out at their sides so that their sword tips crossed and barred the way. This position a living being would find hard to maintain for any length of time, but the wraithblades were still as statues.

Taec reached out to the wraithkind with his mind. Their souls were dim, flames turned low; watchful nonetheless.

A dolorous voice reached into him, dry and quiet as wind in a tombyard. Taec's soul chilled at its touch.

+What business have you here, here in the halls of the dead?+

'I seek counsel,' Taec said aloud. 'I wish to speak with Wraithseer Kelmon Firesight. War comes again. The final doom of all the eldar is upon us. I would avert it.'

No response came. Taec waited patiently, for the dead are beholden to no clock but their own.

'You may pass, Taec Silvereye,' they said as one. Their swords lifted, crystalline blades rasping on one another. The blank wall of the gates developed edges and its petals drew back.

And so Taec passed from the lands of the living into the realm of the dead.

In appearance, the Ghost Halls were as any other hall within the houses of Iyanden, complexes of interlocking domes and chambers, some small, some vast. Ecospheres of many kinds were found within, as were towns, workshops, great palaces, apartment spires and humble homes. In manner, they were unlike anything that had ever been seen upon Iyanden before, or any other craftworld for that matter. Within the ghost halls dwelt not living eldar, but the revived dead. Drawn back into their waystones and plucked from the infinity circuit, the dead were placed inside wraithbone bodies to bolster Iyanden's reduced armies. It was an ancient, if distasteful, practice. The wraithkind ordinarily

returned to their sleep once their task was done, but sustained by the overcharged infinity circuit, many refused to return to their slumber, and this truly was unprecedented.

The wraithkind walked the halls of the craftworld, unnatural things neither of life nor of death, the numinous caged by wraithbone artifice. In battle the warriors of Haladesh gave as selflessly in death as they had in life, but their sense of purpose ceased with battle's silenced clamour. They were caught between the two worlds, and in Iyanden's fleeting moments of peace they spent the cycles endlessly re-enacting what little they could remember of their past existences.

Taec saw this shadow play of life all around him inside the Mistmaze Spire. The utterly silent forms of wraithguard trod its ways. The wraithlords, the greatest of their number, remembered well what they had once been and moved with purpose. Many were abroad in the craftworld, reassuming the roles death had forced them to lay down. Outside the ghost halls they were treated as equals, albeit coolly. Even the greatest souls still had one foot in the infinity circuit, for all their vitality.

The minds of the lesser wraithkind were but collections of compulsions, barely perceiving the world around them. Their eyes looked upon vistas of mind, not of form.

The dead were not as the living.

Taec walked past an audience of wraithkind silently watching a stage upon whose boards giant, robotic players did not move. He saw the huge hands of the resurrected cup empty glasses and eating utensils. They knocked them carelessly against the long heads of the units that imprisoned their souls as they attempted to eat and drink. In bio-domes, crowds of wraithguard stood stock-still in fields of many-hued grasses; others walked to and fro, wearing grooves in the soil as they repeated over and again some small action that the soul recalled perfectly, but in which Taec saw no meaning.

Most of the dead he saw were of the lesser kind. The handful of wraithlords abroad in the Mistmaze Spire spared him no thought whatsoever. All but one. Taec was acquainted with him: Teradryan the Lyric. The farseer was wise enough not to disturb him. For his part that exception only turned his great, eyeless face to look at Taec to follow his progress as he walked by, and then returned to whatever occupied him.

The spire was dimly lit. A cliché almost, thought Taec, but there is no cliché without truth, and the dead had little need for light. However, where infinity circuit nodes, the touch interfaces the eldar used to commune psychically with each other and the craftworld, were set into the wall, the space around them glowed with hot light. Ghosts flocked to their ancestral homes rather than accepting forgetfulness in the lethe of the circuit. Through these interstitial points the bodiless looked outward, the power their spirits contained overloading the devices they touched.

Taec had sympathy for Kelmon. This state of affairs was so unnatural no one should be surprised he misread the skein. No one could have predicted this.

War had come and war had gone, and the dead walked. All remained in order. The mechanisms of the craftworld kept the Ghost Hall pristine, aided by the living servants of the wraithkind, those who had taken a new branching upon the Path of Service as the Tenders of the Dead. As the dead served the living in war, so the living served the dead in peace. They cleared away the shattered objects the wraithkind left in their wake. Eyes ringed with ritually streaked make-up, heads shaved and expressions dead, they were as silent as their charges.

The atmosphere was heavy. If that outside the ghost halls was sorrowful, within melancholy reigned unopposed. Taec's mind was suffused with it, and it would not be shaken off.

In a dome of purple vegetation, beneath a permanent twilight, was a grand palace of soaring roofs and unlikely minarets. There Taec found Kelmon.

The dead farseer's wraithlord body was seated upon a throne carved from a single giant pearl. Seven

large skulls were set above it – those of the serpentine voidspawn that had slain him. Wraithbone runes, enormous in size, were scattered over the floor. Kelmon was surrounded by dead courtiers who prosecuted their repetitive business in total silence. Living there were also – three on the Path of Service stood on Kelmon's left, a spiritseer in full mask to his right. The spiritseer was deep in conversation with Kelmon as Taec arrived, the wraithseer's enormous head dipped towards her, a giant listening to a child. She stopped talking immediately she sensed Taec, and all four living eldar bowed their heads to their leader and withdrew.

‘Welcome, my friend,’ said the wraithseer. His voice was sonorous and somnolent, almost free of inflection. Nor did he move as he spoke. Shorn of all nuance of gesture and tone, the words of the dead were unlovely. ‘You have come, as I foresaw.’

As he had earlier decided, Taec did not wait upon ceremony. The dead maintained focus on the affairs of the living for such short duration, even ones so mighty as departed Kelmon.

‘The Avatar stirs,’ he said plainly.

‘A tremble in his slumber. He sleeps again,’ countered Kelmon.

‘Once his sleep is disturbed, it is over. He will come to full wakefulness soon,’ said Taec.

‘That is so. What is it you would know, Taec Silvereye of House Delgari?’

‘You have seen what I see?’

A long pause. Silence was a province of death, and Taec had strayed deep into it. The courtiers continued their ghostly rituals, over and over again.

‘Yes,’ said Kelmon. ‘I have seen. A red world, Dûriel, a maiden ravaged and now devoured.’

‘Then I would know this, wraithseer, you who were once my colleague and friend. Can we afford to act? I fear not to, but I equally fear action. What see you? Can we afford to wait and hope for a better turn of events? I hope fervently that it is so, but doubt very much that I will receive the answer I long for. You, mighty Kelmon, you have seen what I have, doubtless more clearly. Your eyes are not clouded by the world of the living, your view is unimpeded by flesh. Tell me that I am right, that my castings do not lie, and so I might go forward along this skein without guilt.’

Kelmon sat forwards. The arcane technologies of his body were silent, and that underscored his eeriness. ‘There is always guilt, farseer. No path can be taken without it, nor without regret. You call me friend. I was never your friend while alive, and I regret it mightily,’ he said. ‘I ignored you, ridiculed you, and was a fool to do so. If I could change what was, I would, but I cannot. I cannot offer my friendship now, for what use is the friendship of the dead? No warmth and laughter will you find here, no support or timely rebuke. And what is friendship to the dead? All is dust and eternity, with a gaping maw at time's end.’

Taec bowed his head.

Kelmon waved a slow hand. ‘Your respect is not necessary. I can grant what you request, a second reading of your own vision.’ A number of the runes in front of Kelmon's throne lifted off the ground. He looked at them as they turned in the half-light of the hall. The silence went on for a long time.

Said Kelmon eventually, ‘I see war, and ruin. The mating of two dragons brings the birth of a new and greater. The legions of steel rise in number, She Who Thirsts follows in the wake of the young races. The time of ending is at hand. All this you have seen.’

‘What can we do?’ asked Taec.

‘What we always have done – scry, foresee, avoid, survive.’

‘And in this instance? What is your specific guidance, Kelmon? Is my vision correct? Do we risk all for Dûriel?’

‘You ask the wrong questions, as I once did. Do not do as I did.’

Taec thought, formulating his next words with care. ‘What if we act? I cannot foretell, the mind of the Great Dragon obscures all. Doom and death is all I can perceive.’

Kelmon’s long head swung slowly to and fro, as if his smooth faceplate had eyes and he could see as the living see. ‘The bonesingers have done their work well here. This hall was ruined, and you would never know it. It is unmarked, seemingly unchanged. But it is not. It was destroyed, and the psychic shock of its destruction is still there. That is the hall I perceive, not this phantom. For all our arts, we cannot sing the living back to life, try as we might.’ The wraithlord gestured at his slender body. ‘In other halls the dead preside in airless sterility. I am fortunate indeed.’ Kelmon laughed bitterly. Taec shrank involuntarily back; the laughter of the dead is not a thing to be heard by the living. ‘Time heals all, they say. It heals nothing, I say.’

Taec leaned on his staff. ‘I remember how, before the Triple Woe, that even at this late hour the corridors of the Mistmaze would echo with song, I mourn its loss, Wraithseer Kelmon.’

‘Your sympathy is noted.’

‘How can I not sympathise? Your people are mine, even if you never were aware of that.’

Kelmon dipped his mighty head in acknowledgement. ‘I say I was a fool. What do you think, O greatest of our number? Tell me, Taec. You are no fool, not as I was.’

Taec stood tall. Boldness was required, and honesty. And Kelmon in death was not the same eldar as Kelmon in life. ‘If we do not act, no matter the risk, then the stars will be emptied of the eldar race as surely as Iyanden has been emptied.’

‘Great is my shame, greater than the pride I bore and that brought our home to ruin. I will not make the mistakes in death I made in life. Thankfully, yes, my vision is clearer than yours.’ He pointed a long finger at Taec, an oddly direct gesture for the unliving. ‘You are correct in your words, action is our only recourse. This cannot be allowed to happen.’

Taec sagged, relieved and terrified in one.

‘But I cannot see as well as you might like.’ Kelmon stood, his blank helm-face, emblazoned with the infinity rune and the sigil of House Haladesh, staring down at Taec. ‘I will say this, Taec Silvereye. If we ignore this fate and turn aside, many are the Iyandeni lives we will save, but in the short term only.’ He pointed at the runes orbiting his great head one after another. ‘A thousand more passes we might persist, until the Great Dragon withers the galaxy unto desert, and the young races be consumed. Long before then, the Eye will open wide. The Womb of Destruction will give birth to countless foul children, and the great doom of the eldar will feast upon all our spirits. Chaos will corrupt the remainder of the sentient, before passing on as all wildfires must. The threat spent, the soulless ones will rule an empire of dust until the stars die. Know this: the great war finally we shall lose, and all will have been for nothing.’

Kelmon looked off into the distance, over the heads of his dreaming courtiers. ‘The Avatar has stirred. Kaela Mensha Khaine thirsts for further battle. This is our cue; we ignore it to the peril of all eldar. We must act, you are right. We must act.’

‘How, what course must we take?’

‘I cannot see the full truth,’ said Kelmon, and for a moment his voice took on some of the pride and power he had had in life. ‘Not past the wall of thought that surrounds the Great Dragon. I am blinded by its mind as much as you. If it is as you fear, that Far Ranging Hunger is abroad once again, then let the spiritseers help. The dead taken by the Great Dragon are not gone, not entirely. A trace of them remains, a patina of horror on the animal souls of the Great Dragon’s voidspawn. This can be followed. If our prophecy is true, then so guided by the suffering of our dead shall we see the future we have glimpsed entire.’ Kelmon became strident, his voice taking on many of the characteristics he

had possessed in life – over-confidence and pomposity might have been among them, but there was no denying his wisdom. ‘We require a conclave. Many seers, acting in concert, the Athelin Bahail – the Mind Choir. That will see us to the truth of the matter, and open up the skein so that we may draw our plans. The Mind Choir will set our course, for good or for ill.

‘You are head of the seer council, Taec. You must summon them.’

‘Then you must come with me, be a part of it.’

‘The living no longer listen to me,’ said Kelmon.

‘I am living, I listen. They will also. Come, I need your aid.’ Taec held out his hand to Kelmon, a reflection of what he had seen in his vision.

This time, their fingers met.

CHAPTER TWO

The Fate of Worlds

Silk robes whispered so gently Neidaria caught the sound of them after her brother; his ears had always been the sharper. She turned to follow his gaze, and saw a regal figure stride past where they sat in the Oasis of Tears.

‘Hoi hoi!’ Ariadien shouted out. ‘Taec Silvereye is abroad in House Haladesh! What business has he here? With whom will he speak? The living, or the dead?’

‘Ariadien!’ Neidaria gasped, scandalised. ‘Have respect, that is the Silvereye. I cannot bear the shame of you.’

Her brother, slightly drunk, shook off her hand from his arm and drained his goblet of wine. The Silvereye ignored them, and passed on. Ariadien smiled and poured himself more wine from the jewelled flagon on the table.

‘And why should I not shout out, sister? Our woes stem from them, from all the seers and their councils, or should I say the lack of their good counsel!’ He toasted his own wit to the occupants of the dark bar. They ignored him.

‘What do you know of it?’ said Neidaria, hunkering down to the table. There were few other eldar around them, and they glowered at Ariadien.

‘Know?’ he said, far too loudly. ‘Know? As much as any eldar, as much as you. Better to have followed the path Yriel set, break the progress of war with war, as the courses of fires are broken with fire. He delivered victory against Kallorax at the Battle of the Burning Moon, and they drove him out for his troubles, and then we had trouble aplenty. The first of the Triple Woes was the prince’s doing, they said, and the second caused by his absence. Nonsense! Do you not see, sister dearest? Kelmon Firesight led us, and Kelmon Firesight was wrong.’

What Ariadien said was common opinion enough, but Neidaria had little interest in the politics of drink. ‘I would rather not know war,’ she said. Ariadien cupped her chin and tilted her face up to look at him, a gentle gesture, and though drunk his face was full of kindness.

‘Aye, but we must fight, must we not, you and I? Because the council chose our path for us, not we our own. And why?’ He took another drink of wine. ‘Because they would not listen to sense, and sent away the prince, then revelled in the follies they ascribed to him and set our path for greater conflicts than he ever brought. Today, the Avatar stirs again, his war-drums opening a new movement in the symphony of their follies. Have you not felt his rage boil in the infinity circuit? Tell me sister, if our kind were greater in number, would we be upon the path we have been set? I do not think so. And why are we Iyandeni so few in number now, why?’ he hissed. ‘Why of course, ’tis the council.’

Neidaria said nothing. She had often thought this herself. The whole worldship was in the grip of martial mania; all eldar were required to drill and practise with the weapons of war, not only those eldar bound to the paths of the aspect shrines. Many others could set aside their guns and their swords for most cycles of the pass and still proceed along their chosen path. Not she, not her brother. Titan Steersman was a path as complex as any other. Piloting a pair of Revenants in perfect synchronicity required endless exercises. There was no time for other things for them, as they had been repeatedly told. It was duty, their teachers said. It was slavery, she felt.

‘You are more accepting of our fate, brother; when the path we have had forced upon us suits you far better than I, why complain? You want to fight. If not for me, you would be a pilot, I am sure. A pilot you are, steersman of a great machine, not so distant from your heart’s desire,’ she said sullenly. She hated to be so surly, but denied her chosen vocation, an ennui had settled into her that she could not divest herself of.

‘True, true,’ said Ariadien. The light was so dim in the bar that his face was ghostly white. She thought a moment of the Dark Kin, and was revolted with herself for comparing her brother to them, no matter how tangentially. ‘I do not like being told what to do any more than you, dear sister.’ He put his goblet down unsteadily. The truth was that he worried for her. On one of his less bitter days he would have said so. Today was not one of those, and only their close link allowed her to feel what he felt. ‘Far they are supposed to see, but did old Kelmon spot the Triple Woe, or even the start of it? The merest part, the first? The Battle of the Burning Moon, where Kallorax destroyed all poor House Arienal and our saviour was sent away in shame.’

‘The Great Devourer was not the merest part, but the greater,’ said a voice from the darkness.

Ariadien turned around in his seat. ‘And so I said. Who cares for orks or reavers when the jaws of the Dragon are snapping closed? Unstopper your ears so you might eavesdrop more effectively. Who are you, to speak to me so?’

‘Your elder, child. I have walked a dozen paths. You? On your first, I think. You should ask yourself: who are you to speak to me so?’

Ariadien was not cowed by the stranger’s words. ‘Marvellous,’ he said, using a particularly insolent form of the word, his shoulders set in a way to rile the calmest eldar.

‘Don’t provoke him!’ said Neidaria.

The stranger tipped his glass towards Ariadien. ‘Listen to your sister, she is wiser than you. I am Gelthelion the Wave Shaper, although I leave that path soon. Khaine calls me to him. I try to wash away his blood here, but wine will not do. I know, the stars know, and now you know. Tomorrow I go to the shrines, to see which will choose me. I will take up arms again and revel in killing.’ Far from looking imbued with fury, Gelthelion appeared thoroughly miserable at the prospect.

Neidaria was suddenly afraid. ‘Should you not be in a shrine already, to keep your dark impulses separate from...’

‘...you?’ Gelthelion snorted and leaned backwards.

‘How are you here, then?’ said Ariadien, having the same thought as his sister, as is the way of the twin-born.

The older eldar, a grey smear in the purple gloom of the bar, stared at them with eyes like black pits. ‘Because it is not the first time. You have nothing to fear. I have my war mask already, and Khaine’s pleasures are shut behind, keeping me from striking you down for your impudence. I will not put it gladly on again, and yet I must. I must.’ He did not say why, but his manner revealed loss he could not speak of aloud. ‘You should leave, leave all who come here to the quiet that will fall in your absence. This is no place for you. Leave us to our sorrow, there are better venues for gaiety. Come back when Khaine takes your heart too, as he surely must, then we will welcome you. All Iyandeni will fall to wrath in the end, now that death has come to claim us all. But not now, young one. Be gone.’ He turned his head away, face down: a sign of obvious dismissal, laden with threat.

Neidaria yanked her brother to his feet before he could come out with some idiotic reply and dragged him out of the drinking room. When he made to complain, she kicked him hard. The subtle expression on her face told him all he needed to know; they were in danger. At his sister’s prompting, he glanced around without moving his head, looking into booths with his peripheral vision. There were

several such as Gelthelion lurking in the dark, trying to damp down Khaine's fires with wine and darkness.

Judging by the sparks in the eyes of the older eldar, they were failing.

Within the Dome of Crystal Seers, Taec took his place amongst his fellows. The forty-strong seer council of Iyanden were gathered together in three concentric circles. Not often were so many worthies gathered at once. Both the living and the dead attended; the circles were set so that the crystal forms of eight seers gone before were incorporated. Their spirits had been coaxed from deep in the circuit, and the statues glimmered uncannily.

Seven of the most active of the wraithseers had left their ghost halls to lend their strength to the seeing. Kelmon was among them, and Ydric the Wise, as was gifted Teluethiar, dead many arcs since. Their powers had diminished as their connection with the world had diminished, but with the blinds of life removed, their witchsight was far clearer than that of the living. These seven, all within the towering shells of wraithlords, formed the innermost circle. The nineteen greatest living seers sat in a circle around them, spiritseers and far-seers alternating, some places occupied by the crystal statues of those ancestors that yet remained whole. In this circle, Taec sat.

The remainder of the seers formed a broad circuit outside. This third circle would shape the seeing, but would not see. They were younger seers, and those of paths less concerned with foresight: warlocks, wayseers, dreamsingers, bonesingers, Isha's Maids, and those fresh on the witch path sat in small groups around the periphery, sinking into trances and readying themselves should their psychic gifts be needed to shore up the efforts of the council. At a discreet distance, the autarchs, princes and other potentates of the Iyandeni watched the ceremony from a raised pier of wraithbone.

Yriel was among them, the doom about him so thick that all eldar, whether seer or not, could taste it. As one of the High Council with Iyanna and Taec, he had been apprised of the situation before all others. Already decided on the fight, he impatiently awaited the seers' judgement to sway those of his peers less eager for conflict.

Below the pier stood another wraithlord, this one unlike any other, its body coloured deep orange detailed with yellow. The head, limbs and tabard were emblazoned with the runes of an extinct aspect shrine: the Fire's Heart, smashed to flinders by the cyclonic torpedoes of the Chaos raiders Yriel had so singularly failed to stop. This spirit was Exarch Althenian Armourlost, bodyguard and constant companion of Iyanna Arienal, the Angel of Iyanden.

Iyanna left her consultation with Althenian, and walked to her place by Taec. She did not sit. Like all the seers, she wore ornate robes, over which were laid the delicate, geometric patterns of rune armour. An eldar maiden on the Path of Service stood behind her, carrying Iyanna's ghosthelm. Iyanna was as beautiful as the songs said, but her face was cold, carved from frostmarble. Unassuageable grief had frozen her heart.

'Taec Silvereye is our most gifted seer, the greatest of the Iyandeni, if not of all eldar,' she said. Her voice was quiet, that of one who is used to dealing with the dead, but her manner was forceful, and all present listened intently. 'He has seen that which we have not seen. Wraithseer Kelmon has seen it also, a message from our dead kin – slaughter and blood, the time of our ending brought upon us quickly. We, together, will set free our minds from the cages of flesh and seek the truth of what is said, to see what the dead would warn us of. Much we have suffered, we sorrowful few of Iyanden. We will not suffer again, not while it is within our power to predict and prevent.' She took her helm, and held it in arms outstretched above her. 'Today we gather as if girded for war, for to look through the shadow of the Dragon is to go into battle.' She placed the ornate helmet over her head. It hissed as its

seals moulded themselves to her flesh. ‘We begin.’

Iyanna sat down beside Taec. Runes rose up all around the circles – a hundred, two hundred. They sailed gracefully to their stations above the seers, orbiting one another in the complex minuets of fate. Under the stately precessions of the runes, the seers within the second circle joined hands. As one, they slipped into the world of the infinity circuit.

The infinity circuit was in spiritual tumult, full of so many recent dead, many of whom were vibrant with rage at their deaths. It throbbed with power; a bitter irony that Iyanden’s halls were so empty, and yet the world itself had become so potent. Many centuries would pass before the dead’s energies would fade and they passed into peaceful slumbers. The dead clustered around the seers as they sank into the skein, phantoms who glowered at them, demanding action, release, vengeance! Taec was aware of something half-formed moving in the depths. Iyanna insisted this to be Ynnead, her new god and the salvation of the eldar. Others were sceptical.

+Make way, make way!+ Iyanna’s soul-voice called, as beautiful as she. +Clear a path, O dead, let us see what you would show!+

The throng of the dead paid heed to her, for she was known to them, and they parted. The skein opened before the seer choir.

+We seek the spoor of the Great Dragon. We seek those who were taken,+ said Spiritseer Hestaria. One of the fifth rank, as the spiritseers reckoned such things among themselves.

Taec felt sorrow as they groped through the void, seeking the residual psychic anguish of those eldar who had been absorbed by Far Ranging Hunger during the Battle of Iyanden. Sensitive to all things beyond the veils of the dead, the spiritseers found the trail quickly, when Taec, counted amongst the greatest of farseers, could sense nothing. So the path differentiated those of talent into the roles best suited to them.

Taec let himself be carried by the minds of the spiritseers. Across vast distances they travelled, cutting through the warp where the bounds of reality have no meaning. Taec saw the world-as-is – that of the material realm – sweep by. Stars, planetary systems, clusters of light where stellar nurseries clotted gas into new life. After a time that could have been a pass or a cycle, he caught the trail that the spiritseers followed: the pain and sorrow of eldar souls drawn thin, warped to fit new bodies. The implacable presence of the Dragon’s shadow hung over it all. A rush of anger at this sight buffeted his soul, Iyanden’s fury finding an outlet through him.

The seers followed this slick of pain ever quicker, until starlight streaked and the blackness of space coloured with stretched light.

They stopped. A collective cry went up from the spiritseers. One by one Taec felt their presences drop away.

In front of their warp senses, a world spun, and it was dying. The fleets of the Dragon had converged here. As in his vision, the world was red with death, the creatures who feasted on it purple and pale coloured. Beyond the curve of the planet’s night side was another fleet, another aspect of the Dragon. Smaller, swifter, more dispersed, these vessels too made their way towards the beleaguered world. With the heart of the perturbation in the skein before him, the blocking of the hive mind had a lesser effect. Taec, bolstered by his comrades, saw clearly.

+The mating of the Dragon,+ he said, and the chorus of seers moaned in horror. +Two become one, to destroy all in their path.+

Taec led the seers back down Dûriel’s thread, and there they saw the past. A verdant world, lovingly brought to life by their ancestors, a sun tamed. A system of beautiful garden planets, inhabited by the eldar of the days of greatness.

A True Star yet far from the hub of the empire, the eldar of Dûriel were untouched by the depravity that grew in the eldar heart, but they were not free of the consequences. Taec flinched at the echo-memory of the Fall, eldar dropping dead where they stood as the birthing of Slaanesh wrenched their souls from their bodies.

Its people consumed, empty cities stood eerie, much like Iyanden now. +So the cycle repeats,+ thought Taec.

+Its name was Dûriel,+ came Iyanna's voice, many others speaking with her.

+Lambent flame,+ said Kelmon.

+To a dying flame shall the hungry ones be drawn,+ spoke Farseer Teuthis.

+The prophecy, the prophecy!+ said Wraithseer Ydric.

Time moved swiftly. The rude ships of mankind came to Dûriel. They settled. Doggedly, they set about the ruination of the world's beauty, tearing down the ever-living cities of the departed eldar, tipping the balance of nature with their ugliness and filth. Billions dwelled in the system, each verdant world polluted unto death, and still mankind swarmed in verminous multitude, crowding their ugly cathedrals, raising praise to their corpse-god.

War, death, disease – the cruelties of man inflicted on his fellow men. Seas dried, forests died, mountains were toppled. And now this. Leviathan came, a terrifying swarm of ships grown fat on the life-codes of orks and men.

The scene flickered, ripples from the pain of Iyanden. Taec saw himself and the others not long after the battle, when they were pursued still by Far Ranging Hunger's vessels. The hive fleet pursued the crippled craftworld doggedly, until he and the remaining seers had channelled the rage and the pain of their world through their minds, ripping the fabric of space and time and casting this second tendril of Far Ranging Hunger into the hell-dimensions of warp space.

Taec saw himself, he felt his own satisfaction. He, like the others, did not think it an unjust punishment for Iyanden's suffering. Pride. It always began with pride.

+Here, we will start here,+ said Taec.

Seer voices mumbled over one another, each scrying as best they could, an overlaid babble, mingling with the thoughts of Iyanden's unquiet dead.

+Consequences, always there are consequences. Move here, the skein will ripple there,+ Farseer Ukallior spoke. As he did so, the skein quirked, multiple futures leaping into life before settling back into the one Taec sought.

From out of the warp Far Ranging Hunger's tendril came, the last of their kind, cast out far into the galactic south by an intermittent warp phenomenon on the edge of the Dûriel system: one the humans called the Vortex of Despair.

+I sense the hand of the Great Enemy,+ Taec said grimly. +This was no chance ejection.+

Taec guided the others, the majority of them working to keep the Great Dragon's shadow clear from the seeing. He looked forward. +Far Ranging Hunger comes from out of the tides of the warp; first it fights, and then it merges, as I have foreseen,+ said Taec. He relived his vision of death and destruction, sharing it with the company, although his own fate he kept hidden.

Further forward into the future. Tyranids of new and terrible kinds rampaged through the stars, unstoppable, growing stronger with every conquest. +The genius of Iyanden, the mental power of our kind, wedded to the resilience of the ork, fed by the seething mass and vitality of humanity.+

+Doom,+ said Kelmon.

+Disaster,+ said Jaekherian Castdart.

+Extinction!+ said Iyanna. +It is not yet time! The new god is not ready. This cannot come to pass,

or all will be lost.+

Dissent clouded their conjoined minds. Not all believed in Iyanna's obsession.

+It will not,+ said Taec. The council decided unanimously. The skein immediately rearranged itself, the super-tyranids dissolving back into a sea of possibilities as something else took their place. War, such as had not been seen in long ages; the green and white of Biel-Tan beside the yellow and blue of Iyanden. A host of resurrected warriors. A fiery end.

Taec gasped as fire burned him. He alone saw this, that he was at the heart of Dûriel's end. In terror, he watched his spirit stone crack and heard again the triumphant howl of She Who Thirsts.

They came out of the skein, the third circle seers singing them home. Taec rose and turned to face the pier whereupon the war council stood. Yriel leaned forwards onto the railing. Hollow-eyed and wan, there was a fell look to him, his red eye sinister. He held a fruit in his hand, and he bit into it nervously. Juice dribbled from his chin.

'What is our action, what does the council decide?' the prince said.

Even as the memory of agonising death and his damnation threatened to overwhelm him, even as he knew their decision could bring his vision to pass, Taec spoke decisively. 'The seer council is unanimous. Iyanden will fight.'

Yriel nodded, a small movement. 'And the Lady Iyanna? You and I have been at odds often. What say you? Will you support me in this war?'

Iyanna got to her feet elegantly, and unclasped her helm. She shook out the long braid of her hair and stared her rival in the eyes. 'Unanimous means unanimous, Prince Yriel. You will have your war.'

Yriel clenched his fist in triumph. 'Ready my fleet. We strike now.'

'Wait!' called Teuthis, also rising. The rest of the council followed suit. Standing with a rustle of robes, the seers and wraithseers all turned to face the pier. Runes criss-crossed the air around them still. 'The danger is far from here. Dûriel the world is known by the human usurpers as Valedor. It is not our fate to strike the first blow. It is too far. Even were we to depart now, we would not arrive in time. We must call for aid.'

'A play for time? Who? Who will aid us? The times of our mastery of the stars are long gone, or have you forgotten?' Autarch Yaleanar spoke, Yriel's chief lieutenant and also of the House of Ulthanash. Yriel's shadow, he was called. His words were often hard; it was no wonder he had left the craftworld to pursue the life of a corsair. Wild as his master, thought Taec, and still not fully tamed by the path.

'Biel-Tan. It is to Biel-Tan we must turn,' said Iyanna. 'They are not far from dying Dûriel.'

Yaleanar snorted. 'The warmongers? Allies they were once to us, but they long ago eschewed our wisdom in favour of spending their lives and blood freely.'

'And yet it is they who persist, and we who teeter upon extinction,' said Iyanna.

Yaleanar leaned on the railing next to the prince. 'They are so bloodthirsty, my lady, that my lord Yriel appears restrained by comparison. If it is to them we go, then we truly are without all hope.'

As Yriel moved to talk, a great howl of rage interrupted him. On and on it went, a roar of terrifying magnitude, lengthy as the waning of the stars, furious as their birth. Every eldar on the craftworld felt it, no tremor this time, but a full-blooded, atavistic shout that touched the hearts and souls of them all.

Lights coloured red. The craftworld shook. The fury of Khaine pounded in the temples of every Iyandeni; an undeniable call to war.

The roaring stopped, leaving in its wake a more terrible silence. The eldar looked to one another, shocked.

'The Avatar awakens,' said Yriel, when the shockwaves subsided. He took another bite of his fruit,

uncouthly talking around the pulp. 'We have no choice but to fight.'

All present saw that he rejoiced. 'The fleet will depart,' said Yriel, cruel pleasure in his eyes. 'Getheric, Ybrann, Doloroana Startreader! Go ready your crews and your squadrons. We will leave before the cycle is done and make all haste to Dûriel.'

The three commanded bowed. 'Yes, my prince.'

Yriel spoke further, giving orders to the rest of the war council, and sent word that the exarchs of the shrines should gather in the Hall of Autarchs. 'A full third of the autarchs will remain behind, to prepare defences in case of an assault upon Iyanden in my absence.'

'Who?' asked one.

'We shall draw lots,' said Yriel. 'It is the only fair way. I would deny no Iyandeni the opportunity for vengeance.'

'Twice now has Iyanden nearly been overrun while our armies were elsewhere. Even once-reckless Yriel had learned his lesson,' murmured Iyanna.

Yriel was sharp-sensed and heard her.

'I have learned my lessons, angel. Have you?'

'I support your cause, do I not? Let us be allies. We are successful when our blades are uncrossed and pointed in the same direction.'

Yriel gave her a curt nod. 'Away, autarchs! Away to battle!'

He and the rest of Iyanden's war-leaders strode along the pier and out through an opening that led from the Dome of Crystal Seers.

Taec's anxieties grew with the passing of the cycle, fearful of the consequences of failure at Dûriel to the eldar race, and fearful of the cost of success to himself. A psychic message was sent out by the seer council to Biel-Tan, courtly worded in the old eldar tongue known before the Fall. As Iyanden's artificial night approached, the reply, faint and disrupted by the Shadow in the Warp, came: the war council and seer council of Biel-Tan had gathered immediately, but had fallen at odds, and no decision was forthcoming.

'Biel-Tan will not throw its lot in with Iyanden easily,' said Teuthis.

'I did not expect them to,' said Taec.

'Still, you are perturbed that they do not,' said Teuthis. 'I sense it.'

Taec did not reply.

After further discussion, Iyanna sent a message of her own. The psychic impression of a single rune: Kurane Dullae. Extermination.

'Ours, or theirs?' asked Teuthis wryly.

'Both,' said Kelmon before Iyanna could speak. 'She seeks to stoke the fires in the warriors' hearts. Ever it is the way of the Biel-Tanians to seek the utter destruction of their foes. This will work in our favour.'

'And equally I seek to drive home Taec's message, that this mating of the Dragon will spell disaster for all eldar. They are belligerent, but do not lack for wisdom,' said Iyanna.

The message had some effect. Taec felt the skein shift as new possibilities opened up. He cast a handful of rune-forms in the air, and watched them morph into distinct shapes. He studied them closely. 'Do they accept, I wonder? The runes' orbits are uneven, their meanings clouded.'

'I have a similar reading, Silvereye,' said Kelithia, a female farseer almost as old as Taec.

'And I too,' said another.

'The skein twists, it will not be read,' said Kelmon. 'As it always does when matters of great import

are at hand.'

'Then we must wait for Biel-Tan to reply,' said Taec. The runes settled in the open palm of his hand. He put them into his pouch.

They waited until the dawn began before departing.

Biel-Tan still had not replied.

Iyanna entered the causeway to find her companion Althenian waiting. He stood in the near-dark, arms folded. Unlike so many of the other wraithlords, Althenian's movements had a certain vital energy, his voice a wry humour and quick anger. He was dead, and yet not dead, a peculiarity of his exarchhood. She hurried to his side.

This part of Iyanden was recently rebuilt, and none of the living had yet returned. The spiritseer's constant sadness intensified; this area, unrecognisable now, had not been far from where her family's house was located. All had died bar her during the Triple Woe, incinerated by the torpedoes of the Chaos fleet.

'It is ordinarily I who issues the summons, Althenian,' she said. She rarely made light these days. Only Althenian ever heard her attempt levity.

'Glory to see,' he said. He came down to one knee so that he could better address her. Althenian was kind like that, at least to her. Perhaps his engagement with the world of life came from the fact that, as an exarch, he was a warrior foremost and invested in the life in the fight. Or perhaps it was because his soul was made up of many souls, a spirit pool of all those who had been him since the original Althenian's birth on some forgotten world, millennia ago. The presence of so many souls as one, those that had never been merged with the peaceful afterlife of the infinity circuit, meant that Althenian rarely needed her guidance.

She thought that if anyone could see them, they would be amazed. Althenian was notoriously fiery of temper, even for an exarch, but such tenderness from one in the grip of the murder-god was surely a sign of the bond between them. Althenian never ceased to amaze her; he was a stack of impossibilities wrapped in wraithbone.

There had been other exarchs temporarily dressed as wraithlords, those from dormant shrines. Now there were no dormant shrines, but Althenian's would not rise alongside the others. Althenian's shrine had been destroyed and his armour – his immortal body – had been lost. His long sojourn in wraithbone had changed him, of that she was sure.

Hesitantly, she nuzzled his giant thumb with her cheek; a brief action that could be construed as accidental.

'I show you, something here please follow this way, O great lady.'

'You are a strange one, Althenian,' she said, the ghost of affection warming her cold words.

'Strange? Unique,' he said. 'Few like me in all of time, now not one.'

'You are proud of that.' She smiled tightly. She sensed that whatever Althenian wanted to tell her, she was not going to like it. 'What is it you want to show me?'

Althenian reached out a massive, sculpted hand and rested it upon her shoulder. His fist could have crushed her to a paste. She had nothing to fear. Althenian's control of his tomb was beyond that of other wraithlords.

'You are like no other, it is true,' she murmured.

He stood soundlessly. 'Come this way,' he said. 'There are real wonders to see, a promise.'

She followed after him as he walked down the oval corridor, the pale blue of its minimal lighting glancing from the fire-dragon crest mounted upon his head.

As they proceeded, the corridor took on an unfinished look. Where lights should be were only depressions. Nobbles and burrs protruded from unsmoothed wraithbone. She felt a soft push of psychic energy, different to that which she employed. She called and shepherded; this was the sensation of careful hands deep in soft clay. A singing came, sweet and mournful.

‘Bonesingers,’ she said.

‘Bonesingers, there are many in these parts, all working,’ replied Althenian.

They approached the singing. Bright white light bathed the next section of the corridor, and there they came across seven female singers from whose soft lips the songs of making emanated. They were lost in their work, deep in the trance of the path. Iyanna turned from the bonesingers’ work as Althenian’s torso twisted so he could look at her.

‘Beautiful, but this section is not yet done, a thousand paces, the way ends, abruptly stopped it grows, all grows. To the end, we must together proceed, there to see.’

Iyanna moved closer to her guardian’s towering form. ‘I do not know this area well, even though I grew up close by.’

‘No reason, to venture here I suspect, and made new. Here service, a few surface access points, aspect shrines.’ He paused. ‘Five of them, the shrines of House Arienal, no child’s place.’

He stopped before a nondescript door.

‘We are here, within is my new destiny, come see it.’ He placed his mighty palm flat against the door panel. It was barely tall enough to permit his entry. ‘I allow you, rare and unusual honour. Few may pass. Portals of Khaine, sanctuaries of war, for those called. I take it, you understand me clearly, Iyanna?’

Of course she understood. Althenian was ancient, and in the habit of patronising her. It was the one thing that annoyed her about him, but her annoyance was swamped by a surge of apprehension. Her heart beat so quickly its pulses blurred into one. She nodded.

‘Very well, the door opens for me, not to close.’ The door reacted to his spiritual signature, wraith-stuff parting on an invisible seam and rippling back. ‘Was my shrine, or “is” as it is new, old also. Exarchs reborn, the flesh of new worshippers, Khaine’s pure fury.’ He shook his head. ‘Unexpected, that my shrine undergo the process, strange these times.’

He ducked his head to pass through. Iyanna followed, her cheeks hot.

Inside was an endless space, a huge habitat dome whose edges were so distant they blended with the floor in a hazy band of off-pink, unfinished psychoactive plastics. Far off in the distance was a towering monolith of black stone, the dome’s only feature. ‘Welcome lady, to the Shrine of the Fire’s Heart, unfinished,’ he said. ‘Life empty, needed again and reborn, Isha’s grace. Khaine’s desire, the workings of Iyanden, destiny. Soon rebuilt, water and of life to return, warriors. Fire burns, the sea-drakes are to return, I return. Fire’s Heart slays, the enemies of our people, with heat’s fury.’ He sounded eager, if such a thing were possible for the dead. ‘One more thing, that you must see in this place, Iyanna.’

Iyanna nodded, feeling faint. She knew what that might be.

They walked to the monolith, a long way across the spongy, unfixed floor. They talked a little of the coming war, Althenian grimly delighted at the prospect of wreaking vengeance on the Dragon that had devoured their kinsfolk. ‘Fitting be, one dragon slays another, right this is,’ he said. Iyanna’s answers became shorter and shorter as they approached the ziggurat. Their conversation died away. The dome was wide and high, the sides of it of translucent orange panels arranged in seemingly random patterns, the top third a shimmering energy field also of reddish hue, but to Iyanna the place was oppressive. The spirit of Khaine had already begun to seep back in.

‘My chambers, sanctum this was and will be, all made fresh,’ said Althenian. ‘I did not, think to see return again. We enter.’

The temple was finished. In stark contrast to the reborn dome that housed it, it had an air of great antiquity, although Iyanna knew that it had not been here a pass ago. The pattern of it had been retained by the group consciousness of the craftworld, and under the prompting of the bonesingers, remembered back into being.

‘Inside here,’ the wraithlord said. ‘In here you will see something, noteworthy.’

It grew hotter as they went deeper, until Iyanna’s skin glowed with sweat. Ruddy light bathed them as they reached the temple’s heart. They went into a square room with sides that sloped upwards to a sharp point. In the middle of the floor was a pool of molten metals. From this something like a statue, also of red-hot material, was being extruded. It had the look of a rough mannequin, perhaps a deliberately primitive sculpture; there were schools of art that followed that style, after all.

Iyanna realised it was not. There was a crested helmet. Once that was noticed, the other elements fell into place like the image in a thought puzzle.

Armour.

‘I have never seen the likes of this,’ she said. ‘The activities of the dead are pronounced here.’

‘Dead smiths work. As my shrine is reborn anew, so my garb. Iyanna, armourers and artificers, slain together, work together, directed by our craftworld, to remake. See yourself, that is my sole intention, and know first. This will be, my last battle in this form, I am free,’ said Althenian. ‘Not long now, I will tear forth the waystones, from this body. Replace them, in their proper mounts again, I shall live!’

Iyanna stared at the suit of exarch armour, growing from the very flesh of the craftworld. She tried to maintain her composure, but could not. Her own emotions were buried deep, a place she could not look, for to open the lid on the portions of her mind wherein dwelt the deaths of her entire house, her mother, father, siblings, everyone... She could not face it. Other parts of her had been trapped there, making her seem cold-hearted and distant to all others. There was only one exception, one being with whom she felt herself. Never could she hide her feelings from Althenian. Their bond was too strong. ‘But...’ she said. ‘I need you.’

Althenian looked from her to the armour. ‘I know this, since you called me from slumber, our link is strong, a good thing. Iyanna, it sorrows me to leave you, fate calls loud. This must be, Iyanden’s need is great, it is fate. Many old shrines, long-dormant, are awakening, mine also. Ynned stirs, Iyanna thanks to your strength, battle calls. The final war, survival or death’s hard choice, is coming. I must serve, and this form will not serve me, to this aim. This is truth, before the greater rebirth, I must too, be fresh reborn, it is the truth and the way, Khaine wills it.’

He knelt down again, his head slightly inclined as if he were looking into her eyes. The stylised dragons on his face screamed silently at her. ‘I have much, to thank you for my lady, please know this. When my shrine, my armour were lost to me, you saved me. This body, crafted for me at your command, was your gift. You called me, back into the light of life, I fought on. Eternity, I thought to spend powerless, but not so. Life’s sense gone, a small price to pay to fight, at your side. The wrath of Khaine, dimmed by death and made light, peace for me. You brought it, and although wracked still by war, peace was mine. Thanks to you, these have been good times of joy, pleasant time. No longer. A candidate approaches, a new soul. One of Khaine’s, who burns with vengeance’s fire, fate provides. He comes here, soon he will don this armour, to serve Khaine. I with him, in flesh shrouded Khaine will work, through us both. More will come, I will gather followers, to my side. A hot bane, we shall be of all our foes, as is right. Iyanna, I thought to say this to you, one to one. As a gift, for once I am restored, I will change. This old soul, will not be as he is now, I regret.’

‘I will lose you,’ she said.

‘That is so. We have all lost much lately, all of us,’ he said. ‘Fate decrees, you lose more than most, Iyanna...’

A change came over Althenian’s voice, the rhythmic, ritual pronouncements of exarchy giving way to something approaching normal speech.

‘I do not know what to say.’ He enfolded her in his long arms and held her to his unyielding chest. ‘I am sorry, but it must be this way.’

Unseen by all others save Althenian, at the heart of a shrine dedicated to endless violence and embraced by a dead killer, Iyanna Arienal wept.

‘No, no no!’ shouted Uskariel-Iskarion, his twin voices, subtly different to one another, layered one over the other. The wraithknight strode across the combat dome to stand between the *Silent Scream* and the *Sound of Sunlight*, the mounts of Neidaria and Ariadien respectively. The motile plastics of the practice drones came to a halt, losing some of their shape as they half-melted back into the adaptive floor. ‘You must think as one, be as one. Only then will the complementary aspects of your Revenants be in accord with one another, only then can you perform the dance of destruction. Again! You must do it again.’

‘Testy today, are we not?’ said Ariadien.

The wraithknight’s blank helm swung sharply to regard the *Sound of Sunlight*’s cockpit. Ariadien got the uncomfortable impression of eyes staring straight into his own, although the wraithknight had none, and his own face was hidden behind the Titan’s faceplate. He dropped his gaze instinctively, his Titan shifting under him as it mirrored his discomfort.

‘You are twins, the bond between you is like the bond between no other eldar. Only you can follow the path of Warstrider Steersman, only you! It is an honour, a great one, but you mock it, Ariadien. There is cynicism and arrogance where there should be duty.’

‘Am I not to be proud of this honour?’ said Ariadien.

‘Of course!’ snapped the wraithknight. A dissonance crept into its voice as its living and unliving pilots fell out of synchronisation with one another, vexed by Ariadien’s attitude. ‘But such outright disrespect is a disservice to your house and your ancestors.’ The wraithknight’s anger abated, and it strode around the war machines. Its head came up to the chest armour of the twins’ Revenants. From his vantage, Ariadien saw it as being small, almost comically so, although in actuality all the war machines would have dwarfed an eldar on foot. ‘You have no choice on your path, I appreciate that. So it was for us also. Do not wallow in despondency. There is glory on this path, and satisfaction. Is that not what the path gives us all, however we select its routes? Embrace your fate for the survival of our home.’

‘I will try,’ said Ariadien.

The wraithknight made a noise of irritation. ‘We do not understand, Ariadien. You are proficient, and joyous in your battle. Why do you chafe under our authority?’

Ariadien’s mind strayed to the crystals in his sister’s rooms, those containing her poetry. He walked the path willingly, she did not. He could not tell this to Uskariel-Iskarion, that his anger stemmed from the pain his sister suffered at being denied her chosen path. They would probably have understood; they too were twins, after all. Ariadien was ashamed, as annoyed with his own attitude as the wraithknight was. His tutor was correct, he did enjoy being a steersman. His feelings – anger at himself, at the path, at his sister for stopping him enjoying their role – were complex and not easily untangled.

‘You will not answer? So be it. You have one cycle until you must depart. You will soon face the monstrous children of the Dragon in open combat for real.’ The wraithknight flung out a fist, sweeping it to encompass the active plastic representations of monsters, ugly things all. ‘They will not be as forgiving as we. Now, again!’

At a thought impulse from Uskariel-Iskarion, the pseudo-aliens came alive, and with a pang of guilty pleasure, Ariadien’s pulsars swept round to target them. His sister, her form splintering into a bewildering parade of doppelgangers as the *Silent Scream*’s holo-field engaged, sprinted forwards.

‘Better!’ said Uskariel-Iskarion. ‘Much better.’

CHAPTER THREE

The Road to Valedor

Taec did not sleep that night. With Biel-Tan silent, Taec and Kelmon were hurriedly appointed to lead a delegation to the craftworld. Biel-Tan plied the void in the galactic south, much closer to Dûriel than Iyanden, and such a journey took time. He and Kelmon would take a swift void-runner through lesser conduits to Biel-Tan, to arrive cycles before the Iyandeni would reach Dûriel. With luck the Biel-Tanians would join with them, and be in time to aid their Iyandeni cousins. But of a holding action to buy Iyanden time ahead of their arrival, Taec had little hope.

Taec spent the time leading up to their departure in a glass-walled observation lounge at the very pinnacle of the Chambers of Starlight, the silent form of Kelmon beside him in the gloom. They watched as the shoals of ships that accompanied the craftworld manoeuvred themselves towards the Spider's Gate. This was Iyanden's main webway entrance, a sphere of swirling energies towards the stern of the craftworld held in place by ancient machineries.

The *Flame of Asuryan*, Yriel's flagship, had already left its dock. Resplendent in blue and yellow, the battleship was of sleek line and great length. Three sets of enormous solar sails swept back from the rear of its hull; a twinned pair above, two mounted dorsally at steep angles to either side. Despite its great size, the Void Stalker was nothing compared to Iyanden, and seemed toy-like in comparison to the worldship. Sails billowing with aetheric energies, it waited with its prow towards the webgate, charging its engines from the meagre starlight of interstellar space. Taec sensed the impatience of the vessel's spirit core to be away.

There were many ships, their numbers bolstered by the Wraithborne, a squadron of vessels crewed entirely by wraithkind and spiritseers from the House of Valor. The docking towers of Eternity Gate, Long Swift Voyages with Fortuitous Endings, Lost Wandering and the others were crowded with transports taking on the army of Iyanden. Periodically the gate flared as fast-running scoutships and ranger craft departed, or reinforcements arrived from distant outposts.

'Yriel must take the long road to Biel-Tan,' said Taec. Following in Kelmon and Taec's wake, Yriel would come to Biel-Tan and pass through their webgate into real space. Yriel's fleet would then traverse the void to attack the hive fleet of Far Ranging Hunger in orbit around the stricken world. The army was to press on by yet wider routes. 'He will arrive after us. The fast ways are too narrow. The army will continue on without him, directly to Dûriel's terrestrial gates, there to await the Biel-Tanians, if they are to join us. With fortune on our side, we will ensure Yriel has a warm welcome when he docks at the Rebirth of Ancient Days.'

'We can only hope, the skein is obscured,' intoned Kelmon in his funereal voice, the first time he had spoken for half a cycle. 'All over Iyanden, we prepare for war. The ritual to bring the Avatar of Khaine to full wakefulness has already begun. His ship awaits his coming.'

'Will the ritual conclude in time?' said Taec, surprised. 'The last time the Avatar was roused, three cycles were required.'

'So great is his fury, he will not wait. A young king has been selected, the exarchs chant their songs. I feel his urge to depart. He will set out with the last of the fleet.'

Although high up in the spire and away from the mass of the population, Taec could feel the

passions of the eldar provoked by the Avatar's stirring. In aspect shrines, eldar set aside their compassion and revelled in their bloodlust. Guardian hosts headed to the public armouries, the numbers of volunteers far outstripping the equipment available. There, they were put into lesser war trances by the autarchs to shield their psyches from the extreme emotions of battle. Hot blood painted on their faces, their more delicate sensibilities were disengaged by many tenth-cycles of meditation. Taec was troubled by this.

'I fear many of the people, exposed to the full force of war, will fall under Khaine's spell. The aspect shrines will be swollen with recruits and the streets emptied, ere this conflict is done.'

'These are deadly days,' said Kelmon. 'Iyanden requires such sacrifice. Better fight as a warrior than a gardener. The proper time for peaceful activities will be when peace returns.'

Taec shivered, mindful of his own vision. How many others faced a similar fate as he?

'We will still need gardeners, Kelmon. And artists, poets, servers and the rest. If we are to dedicate ourselves wholly to slaughter, what hope is there for our people? One cannot live on blood alone. Death is but one part of life. We must not neglect the other paths.'

'With the Dragon perfected, there will be no art to make and no fields to plant,' said Kelmon. 'Listen! It is not only the living that thirst for vengeance.'

Taec followed Kelmon's psychic impulse. They dipped into the infinity circuit. Small bursts of pain resonated from the Chambers of Resurrection as the dead, called forth by spiritseers, returned to their spirit stones. The doors to sealed ghost halls cracked asunder from blows within and the wraithkind strode out to take their place in the armies of Iyanden once more. Taec was saddened by this, but the dead appeared unworried by the concerns of the living for their souls' welfare; they came gladly.

Taec shifted his stance, the curve of his legs and spine expressing sorrowful disapproval. 'How times change,' he said, 'and not always for the better.' He stared out at the vast expanse of the craftworld, so huge that even from the top of the spire the edges were indistinct. Iyanden was vaguely kite-shaped. A long prow swept back to the broadest section two-thirds along its length, the worldship's lines then turning back abruptly to the rearmost point. The stern was capped by the Dome of Crystal Seers, hanging out over the void. As the craftworld's beam broadened in the centre, the overlapping domes, palaces, monuments and bubble habitats piled atop one another in increasing height to make a sculpted mountain range of bold curves and artful blisters, everywhere adorned by the glorious artifice of its people. There were few structures in the galaxy larger than the craftworlds, and Iyanden was among the largest of its kind. A marvel of eldar technology, a defiant statement of hope's triumph over despair, of order over anarchy. And still it was but the dimmest shadow of the eldar's ancient achievements, and a broken, war-scarred one at that.

'The last time I looked out from the Chambers of Starlight, Iyanden was perfect. Now look at it,' Taec said. 'Mankind, the forces of Chaos and tyrannid alike have had their way with it. Iyanden is a maiden ravaged, her beauty despoiled.'

'The bonesingers will heal her,' said Kelmon. 'All we need is time.'

'Ah,' said Taec wearily. 'But who will people it?'

'Time again will fill its halls. Are you not tired, old friend?' said Kelmon. 'Perhaps you should rest.'

Taec sighed, a mellifluous exhalation that carried within it the music of his own despairs. 'You call me friend now, and I am glad.'

'When you spoke of the danger presented by the Dragon, I would not listen, nor would the council. The runes showed me pride and destruction, but I was too proud to recognise destruction brought down on us by my own pride, so convinced was I of Yriel's arrogance. I was in the wrong. I should

have listened to you. Friends we are now, united in joint enterprise.’

‘Do you not grow tired of repenting your mistake, wraithseer?’

‘Why should I? The dead have no regrets. Anger, hatred, love, joy, pale remembrances of these survive the transition, but something as shaded as regret does not – not undiluted. It is easier to admit my errors now.’

Taec looked up to the towering wraithseer, the blue domed head that housed the eldar’s soul, the wraithbone runes that hung in rich profusion from his slender limbs. ‘Does pride not survive death either?’ he asked.

‘It does, it is not solely a vice of the living,’ said Kelmon, and turned away. ‘But I have little to feel proud of.’

‘At least you do not become tired, I suppose,’ said Taec ruefully, for Kelmon was right, he was weary.

Kelmon made a strange sound, like the waterfalls in the Hidden Gorge. ‘You are wrong. I am always tired. Death is weariness, death in life is toil, but death’s sleep... That is the rest that none desire. I remain awake.’

They maintained their vigil until morning came and, assembled, the main body of the fleet began passage through into the webway.

As soon as the call to war went out from Prince Yriel, the army began its muster at the Starward Towers, the dockyards of Iyanden. Neidaria and Ariadien were among them, riding the *Silent Scream* and the *Sound of Sunlight*. They flanked the Phantom Titan *the Curse of Yriel*, a new name for an old machine. Upon Yriel’s return, the spirits of the Titan had taken this title in honour of the prince and his victory. The Lariani, its triplet exarch pilots, had agreed a little too enthusiastically for their decision to be tasteful. A display of sycophancy, thought Ariadien, or maybe not. Perhaps Uskariel-Iskarion was correct, and he was growing cynical.

+Perish the thought.+ Neidaria’s voice came to his mind with great force, their natural psychic sympathy boosted by the infinity cores.

+Ow! Not so loud,+ he shot back, then rallied himself. It would not do to appear anything other than insouciant to his sister. +I wonder if their votes really count? Do you think they bully the triplets, the ghosts in the machine? The spirits of the Phantom are more numerous and more vociferous than those in ours.+

+Stop it, Ariadien. Your levity is infuriating!+ Which was his intended effect, and his juvenile satisfaction enraged her further. +You know as well as I they think as one.+ She was silent a space. +I do not think I would like it, to be entrapped so.+ Ariadien felt her fear over the link. +We can come and go, at least.+

+Oh, they can leave,+ said Ariadien. +But choose not to, that is all, sister. They are like the knights, free to do as they please, but, not desiring freedom, staying locked within their machines, supping upon the sweet, poisonous honey of the battle-trance.+

A round dozen wraithknights formed an honour guard to the Titans, all such of those rare machines that Iyanden had to offer. It was to these that Neidaria really referred, not the *Curse of Yriel*. As Ariadien had said, the living pilots of those machines rarely walked abroad outside their armour. It was as if, forever sealed into the chest cavities, they were eternal co-pilots with the souls of their dead twins, and would not willingly leave them. Uskariel-Iskarion, twin brothers and once pilots of their own Titans before Iskarion’s death in battle, were of that kind. Neidaria never referred to them directly, but she had a horror of ending up like them. The bars of a prison are far worse when forged

by oneself, she often said. Ariadien sought to distract her.

+See, Neidaria, look at the assembled host of Iyanden. Isn't it beautiful? Surely worthy of a song or three.+

She had to admit that he was right. He felt that too, and was relieved as her emotional state turned to amazement and her mind to composition. The serried ranks of golden-yellow armoured warriors, their helms deep blue and emblazoned with the marks of their houses, was an uplifting sight. It was cathartic, thought Ariadien; here was a sign that Iyanden was not beaten, and that it would have its revenge.

Grav-tanks by the score hovered slowly forwards, moving off to this ship or that as directed by the marshals of the docks. Four thousand Guardians marching in blocks followed them, peeling away to board the ships owned by their houses. Nine hundred Aspect Warriors marched behind them. Fully two-thirds of Iyanden's remaining martial might went out to war.

There was sorrow in the spectacle. The Guardians were arranged by house, and it was pitiful how few members some groups contained, especially as the eldar of those houses worst affected by the Triple Woe were most likely to have volunteered. Ariadien did not doubt that some of those groups of warriors represented practically every living adult member of their kinband.

The aspect shrines too hid pain in glory. There were many warriors, each shrine was swollen by new recruits, and many older shrines, long-dormant, were recently reborn. That so many eldar had succumbed to the rage of Khaine was a terrible thing.

+It is a temporary damnation,+ said Neidaria, catching her brother's thoughts. +They will purge themselves of rage in battle, and emerge purified.+

+Not so temporary for some,+ replied Ariadien, glancing at the exarchs in their elaborate armour. +See them walk so proudly at the heads of their shrines. They are too blinded by glory to see their own damnation.+

Most tragic of all were the ghost warriors. Nigh on three-score wraithlords strode with the army, and many times more wraithguard and wraithblades, their long heads swaying in eerie unity as they followed the lead of the spiritseers. Ariadien had his Revenant zoom in on Iyanna Arienal, the Angel of Iyanden. By her side strode a wraithlord, coloured in flaming oranges and deep reds, a pair of dragons facing each other upon his helm. The exarch Althenian Armourlost, a rarity among rarities.

+A monster among monsters,+ he caught his sister think.

Ariadien barely noticed Althenian, staring at Iyanna through the eyes of his Revenant. He freely admitted he was enraptured by her beauty. She was so perfect it stirred something visceral within him, even though her face was hard and her aura – picked out by the psy-amplifiers of his mount – dark with melancholy. She was the warden of the dead, and to her the ghost warriors looked for guidance. +There are so many of them,+ he thought to his sister. +Think of the burden!+

The serried ranks of wraithkind were not the full number of Iyanden's dead. With each cohort of ghost warriors came caskets floating on anti-gravity fields. Elaborate script covered each one, proclaiming the names and deeds of the spirits contained within; nine spirit stones inside each. What was intended for the stones, Ariadien did not know.

+Nothing good,+ said Neidaria. +There is nothing good left at all any more.+

Finally, it came the turn of the Gemini squadron, the Phantom and their escorts to board their transports. The wraithknights each went off to the ships of their houses, but for the Titans a special vessel awaited: a cruiser, into which went also many of the army's leaders by lesser doors and ways. For the Titans the rear of the ship was open, revealing a womb-like cargo bay with transport cradles for the three of them.

The *Curse of Yriel* went in first. Moving gracefully, it sat itself into its throne-cradle, back to the prow, the shield vanes projecting from its shoulders sliding into recesses in the wall behind. These closed tightly, holding the Titan firm. Elegant wraithbone arms came forward, taking the Titan's weapons from its hands and stowing them either side of the cradle. Hands freed, the *Curse of Yriel* gripped at its throne's arms as straps worked themselves out from the wall to hold it in place.

Neidaria and Ariadien followed, taking their places either side of the Phantom. Facing each other, they too were restrained in similar manner, and the doors to the vessel shut. Darkness came, then soft blue light. Ariadien sighed, and began the deactivation process, passing his hands over control studs and jewels.

+What now, brother?+ thought Neidaria.

+It's a long trip, sister,+ said Ariadien. +I'm going to get a drink.+

Before Neidaria could reply, Ariadien slipped off his command circlet and placed it within its dedicated recess where it was whisked away. The psychic amplifier removed, the telepathic contact with his sister dulled, going from clear thought to the simple awareness of her presence and mood he had experienced since they were born. He caressed the final runes; the giant fell dormant and its face mask slid upwards into the helm, opening the cockpit.

He stepped down onto the steps reaching out from the wall before they had engaged fully with the Titan.

For the time being, Ariadien was free.

Taec paced impatiently back and forth across the bridge of the void-runner *Imbriel's Embrace*. The ship was designed to travel narrow tunnels in the webway, a small ranger vessel with capacity only for two dozen passengers, but it was quick.

'Our voyage will last over two cycles, farseer,' said the captain from his cradle. 'Why do you not rest yourself? You have much toil ahead of you.'

'We have so little time!' snapped Taec. The steersmen, the only other two eldar on the bridge, glanced back at him with undisguised surprise. Taec composed himself. 'I apologise, captain, my way of speaking has become short. I spend much time in the company of the dead.'

'I understand your impatience, farseer,' said the captain, his masked head cocked to indicate both compassion and irritation. '*Imbriel's Embrace* is the fastest craft in the fleet, and we take the most direct path to Biel-Tan. I cannot make the passage any swifter.'

Taec halted and gripped his staff, leaning on it for support. The crystallisation was not painful, and did not inhibit his movement directly. Rather, it was the sensation of numbness that afflicted his limbs that made him awkward. A tingling coursed through the glassy areas of his transforming flesh, but otherwise he felt nothing.

'I am distracting you,' said Taec, his words inflected with the forms of profound apology. 'I beg your pardon once more.'

'There is no need, I assure you.' The captain turned back to his displays, passing his hands over glowing instruments like giant opals when the ship required adjustment.

Through the ship's eyes, they watched the endless, undulating tunnels of the webway projected in a space to the front of the bridge. Golden energy delimited the labyrinth, burrowed through the membranous non-space that separated the material world from the warp. Branches led off from the tunnel, some large enough to accommodate the ship, others so small only those on foot could pass. In places wraithbone gates closed tunnels, dire warnings written upon them, or walls blocked sections entirely. Taec's sensitive mind felt the pull of the warp on the other side of those fragile limns. The

wicked presence of She Who Thirsts was forever beyond, peering in at morsels she could not take as a gyrix peers into an ornamental pond full of fish.

Taec stared into the tunnel a while, lost in the rolling procession. 'I will leave you to your task, captain,' he said. 'I will not trouble you again. Please inform me when we approach Biel-Tan.'

'As you wish, farseer.'

Taec rejoined his party, sat in sombre mood in the ship's simple lounges. Fifteen others accompanied him and Kelmon. Autarch Yaleanar and his aide Herethiath stood for the war council of Iyanden. The rest of the autarchs travelled with Prince Yriel or with the army. Three spiritseers also came with Taec's group. Away from the thrumming infinity circuits of Iyanden, Kelmon grew sluggish. His mind wandered from the world of the living. Without the ministrations of the spiritseers, Taec struggled to keep his dead colleague focused upon the matters at hand. The rest of the group was comprised of a party of rangers, eldar who had chosen to become outcast. Taec heard the dialects of several craftworlds and Exodite colonies when they spoke, but they did so infrequently. There was no conversation besides the infrequent talk of the rangers. The frivolity that characterises eldar at rest was absent.

Taec spent the remainder of the journey reliving his vision, going over every fragment of imagery. Each time he thought on the fire of his demise, he quailed within. But he could not discern how this came about, nor what it truly betokened.

And so it went, one cycle, then two, then three. Days spent in frustration, nights spent sleepless. Food was ash in his mouth, conversation irritating and frivolous.

On the fourth cycle, the captain called Taec to the bridge.

'We approach our destination. Behold,' he said, 'the Nexus of Remembered Supremacy To Be Regained, the primary gateway to Biel-Tan.'

Imbriel's Embrace emerged from their small tunnel into a cavern wrested from the membrane twixt the worlds. Its sides were full of tunnel mouths, the exit points of other ways into the webway. Other craftworlds kept the way to them secret; not proud Biel-Tan. The portway to the craftworld sported a massive gate, thousands of lengths in height and breadth, and coloured bold green and white. Two gargantuan wraithbone statues faced one another: on the one side stood howling Khaine, sword clasped in both hands upright in front of his face. On the other was Asuryan, his proud head bowed in sorrow. He held aloft his scales, their balance off. It was said that the balance moved, and that when the time had come for the eldar to reclaim their empire, it would be level once more. That time would be a long time coming, looking at their cant. The gateway's frame carried on over the figures, flowing from their backs to form an ostentatious arch scored by hundreds of thousands of runes. It bristled with weapons emplacements, cunningly incorporated into the design. At the very top stood the world-rune of Biel-Tan, a heart in a Y-shaped cup: the Rebirth of Ancient Days.

Dozens of ships plied the space in front of the gate, sleek traders, far-runners, and void ships. The tunnel appeared to go on indefinitely behind the gate, vessels coming through from the real space side suddenly appearing as if from nowhere.

'I see no warships,' said Taec with a heavy heart. 'Biel-Tan does not ready for war.'

The captain ignored his indiscretion. 'I have a docking berth assigned, farseer.'

'Proceed, then,' said Taec. 'We shall see what the Biel-Tanians have to say for themselves.'

Imbriel's Embrace went through the gate, a tiny dart in comparison to the massive structure. One moment they were in the webway, the next in the void, Biel-Tan passing under their keel. Where Iyanden was kite-shaped, Biel-Tan was a long, sleek dart, its stern split in a swallow tail. Iyanden's form owed much to personal expression, Biel-Tan's everything to symmetry and the prosecution of

war. Everywhere there were statues of Khaine and the other gods' warlike aspects. Massive fortresses studded its length, the weapons they bore not hidden as on other craftworlds, but exaggerated proudly. Biel-Tan was a world that spoke of reclaiming a lost empire at the point of a sword. Taec could hear its warlike soul shouting defiance at the stars.

The captain spoke to the dockmasters of the craftworld, and presently *Imbriel's Embrace* pushed through a forcefield to approach a docking tower equipped with thousands of quays.

Taec and the party from Biel-Tan disembarked, leaving the long ramp of *Imbriel's Embrace*. Shockingly, they were met by the guns of three aspect shrines, a single farseer at their head.

'What folly is this?' said Taec. The rangers accompanying them brought up their own long rifles, their outlines fading as the cameleoline in their cloaks engaged.

The farseer addressed them in the curt accent of the Biel-Tanians. The movements of his body underlined the character of all his kind, curt, imperious and aggressive. 'Folly? Wisdom! Here you come, and no further will you go.'

Taec narrowed his eyes. He recognised the psychic imprint of this seer. 'Do I speak with Farseer Altariéc?'

'You do.'

'We have conversed many times before in amity. I protest! This is no fitting manner to receive our embassy.'

'This is the manner in which we greet those we cannot trust,' said Altariéc baldly. He addressed the Aspect Warriors with him. 'Iyanden calls us to their aid, do they forget our alliance is a thing of past times? Broken, so I recall, by their own unwillingness to commit to the struggle to restore our people's glories.'

'You were too aggressive, too soon. We share the same purpose still, I assure you,' said Taec. 'The time will come when we will march onwards to restoration together, and all the other craftworlds besides.'

'Your assurances are worthless. How many enemies will they fell? There are wars that should have been fought from which you turned, and yet wars that should have been avoided that you fought.' An unpleasant sense of bitter amusement passed through his posture. 'Those you seem to have suffered greatly from. Why should we listen to you?'

'A confluence of probability has formed. Now is the time to act in concert,' said Kelmon. 'Put up your weapons and let us pass.'

'You would have us fight, Wraithseer Kelmon, engage that which threw down the bastions of Iyanden, the greatest of all the craftworlds?' Altariéc said this disdainfully. 'Reckless.'

'It is my shame to have counselled war whilst I lived. The result is all around you. Shame binds my soul. I am shaped by it,' said Kelmon. 'I repent my pride, and bring only wisdom to you.'

'You remain reckless in death then, if you still preach war. Where is your shame? This world of Dûriel was lost to us long ago. Let the Great Dragon complete our task for us, and remove the human blight.'

'The dead are not reckless. What you have seen cannot come to pass, you know this,' said Taec.

'And you come here, the Silvereve, come here and beg for our aid in your struggle. Great as Eldrad Ulthran, they say. Greater, perhaps. No!' Altariéc slammed the butt of his staff hard on to the floor. 'What trust there once was between us is gone. You and we, the greatest of craftworlds, together we could have stayed the slow death of our kind. It was foreseen!' He levelled the point of his staff at the Iyandeni. 'Scried on the skein by the minds of the seers of both craftworlds, and yet your kind turned aside.' His voice grew dark, the air grew thicker with his wrath, the light bled away by his displeasure.

‘I know of those seeings,’ said Taec calmly. ‘I was told of them by Uriethaniel Goldenhand, he who instructed me upon the Path of the Seer, now passed. He told me the reading was not so clear cut, that glory could have been the result, it is true, but that suffering to both peoples would be the more likely result.’

‘Your seers were wrong,’ spat Altariec.

The wraithseer spoke. ‘Kelmon the Admonished I call myself, not the far-sighted but the short-sighted. Yes! Even Kelmon the Fool. I was proud, and I was wrong. I have sworn never to be so again. We must act now.’

‘You are wrong again, once-Kelmon,’ said Altariec. ‘My own foresight has warned me. This battle cannot be won. We will lose many warriors. Who can afford to, when each life is so precious and each fighter needed?’

‘Prince Yriel does not think it unwinnable.’

‘The pirate king?’ scoffed Altariec. ‘Pride brings ruin, no one is better placed to know this than the Prince Yriel, for his pride ruined you all.’

‘I know this better,’ countered Kelmon. ‘Even more than the Exiled Prince. It was my pride, not his, that proved Iyanden’s downfall.’

A figure hurried onto the dock, elaborately garbed, one far along the path of the seer. He took in the scene on the quayside, his dismay palpable.

‘Farseer Taec Silvereye?’

‘I am he.’

‘I was not informed of your arrival. Altariec, as the elder farseer on Biel-Tan at this time, why did you not tell us?’

‘I wished to deliver my displeasure to them myself,’ said Altariec.

‘Then it is good the infinity circuit told me you were here. I am Farseer Dahtarioc.’ He turned to regard Altariec’s guard of Aspect Warriors, their weapons levelled at the visitors. ‘Why do you berate our kinsfolk so? This is most unbecoming, unforgivable, for Altariec to greet you in this manner! Are we the brawlers of Commorrhagh? Stand down your arms, warriors of Biel-Tan! You have our hospitality, O Taec Silvereye of Iyanden.’

The Aspect Warriors, two shrines’ worth of Dire Avengers and one of Fire Dragons, looked to their exarchs. These held up their hands flat, fingers spread. The weapons dipped.

Taec hid his relief in courtly words. ‘And we gladly accept it.’

‘You have come alone? We expected your armies,’ said Dahtarioc.

‘Our warhost makes its way to Dûriel directly. Prince Yriel comes here, to take the star-road to Dûriel where he will destroy the voidspawn in space. We will attempt the attack even if Biel-Tan will not stand beside us.’

Dahtarioc was taken aback. ‘What makes you say this?’

‘We received no reply to our plea. I see no warships.’

‘It was sent, farseer, it was sent. We decided in majority, the seer and war councils both, to aid you. Only Altariec here and his followers disagreed. We move with all haste towards Dûriel.’

Taec slumped a little with relief. ‘Do not allow Biel-Tan to approach the Dragon itself, that was Kelmon’s error. I pray you will not make it yourselves.’

‘No,’ said Altariec. ‘The fools are not that foolish. Biel-Tan moves nearer so as to close the distance, nothing more.’

‘The craftworld will be in no danger,’ said Dahtarioc.

‘We cannot be sure of this,’ said Altariec.

‘We can be sure of nothing, the shadow is on everything! It has been decided, farseer,’ said Dahtarioc. He spoke more civilly to Taec. ‘Perhaps the shadow of the Dragon consumed our reply? We have had much trouble with our communications, so strong is the alien mind-voice now that it casts a pall over the webway and warp together.’

Taec nodded hesitantly. ‘Perhaps so. I sense the shadow, it is deep and dark and clouds all thought. We were forced upon an astral journey before we could start our scrying. This means then that you will aid us? If that is so, I come to press you still, for Biel-Tan to attack immediately. The chances of success if we wait for the Phoenix Host are slim.’

The word *phoenix* carried many complex meanings, and Taec chose to reveal the name of their army purposefully. It was a concept that lay at the heart of Biel-Tan’s philosophy. Dahtarioc smiled.

‘Ancient days will be reborn. It is good to hear it from the lips of the Iyandeni once again.’

‘Yes, even if the fire of Asuryan’s shrine is doused.’

‘It will burn again, farseer. We will light it with the bonfires of war. Come now, rest. You have no reason to press us.’ He reached out his arms and performed a complex bow of true greeting. The physical nuance it added to his words appeared odd to Taec, but its meaning was clear. ‘The assembled warhost of Biel-Tan departed for Dûriel half a cycle ago under the command of Autarch Aloec Sunsphear,’ said Dahtarioc. ‘We go to Dûriel with all speed.’

Taec was aghast. ‘You attack alone?’

Altarioc slammed his staff upon the floor. ‘And there you have it! Idiocy! Poor counsel! No good will come of this, you will see.’

CHAPTER FOUR

The Swordwind Strikes

The Shrine of the Patient Blade lived up to its name. Aspect Warriors of all kinds gathered on the plateaus surrounding the valley slopes, but the Patient Blade, led by Exarch Thurliarissa, had been first to descend into the den of the enemy. A half of this planet's cycle they had hidden, awaiting their prey under the spore-choked skies of Dûriel. A parade of alien monstrosities passed them by, and they had not stirred. The squad felt the awful touch of the hive mind as much as any eldar, their psychically sensitive minds open to its terrors. But death was their ally, her presence palpable, and their faith in Khaine reduced the warp shadow cast by the fleets' minds until it was as threatening as a cloud in front of the sun.

A signal. Tulian had their prey in sight. Thurliarissa pulsed the command to move and they slipped carefully through the boulders and scrub of the valley sides. They had all memorised the shape and the thought forms of the creature they had been sent to kill, and wisely so. A Dragon in Shadow was a difficult prize to track. It moved as stealthily as they moved, a ghost, its chameleonic skin making it a little more than a shimmer on the land. The exarch had deep respect for this creature; its genetics were artfully engineered, perfectly adapted for its role as scout, sentry, and terror weapon. A lictor, humans called it. A superlative hunter, this cycle it was the hunted. Thurliarissa was intent today's rising sun would be the last it ever saw.

Her Aspect Warriors broke cover, emerging from hollows in the rocks. Following the wavering outline of the lictor, they ran over the scrubby hillside in the stance of Death To Giants, for giants they sought.

'Strike swiftly and hard, the claw closes on our prey, bring death mercilessly,' Thurliarissa spoke to the squad. The crystal psychic pick-ups in her helm were useless, for all but the strongest psy-signals were blocked out by the flat, raging presence of the hive mind, and she was forced to speak over radio. Silently, they spread out into the form requested, nine of them in a curved U – a moving pincer preparing to snap shut.

The lictor caught wind of them just before the trap was sprung, the tendrils on its face twitching, somehow tasting their presence despite their armour's sophisticated baffles. Thurliarissa had heard they could sense electromagnetic radiation, and cursed the psychic roar of the hive mind for forcing such crude communications on them. It spun around to meet them, shedding its camouflage and rearing up to its full height, four times that of an eldar. Scythed talons five paces long arched over its back, a mockery of the curved sting of the scorpion. These were all too ready to meet the blade of Dariathanar as he leapt and struck.

The Dragon in Shadow caught Dariathanar's whirring chainsword on the armoured upper surface of its claws, turning its torso up and back to pitch him off-balance. It smashed at the Striking Scorpion with its lower hands, slamming him backwards half a dozen paces. Dariathanar clattered against the stone and lay still. In her helm Thurliarissa caught sense of his injuries: not grave, but he was stunned. Seven of her Striking Scorpions remained. She would chide Dariathanar for his rashness when they returned to the shrine.

Wordlessly, she signalled her warriors to attack as one, not alone. They moved swiftly around the

creature, sending artful fusillades at it, their chainswords swirling through the air in complex death patterns. Quick as they were, the warrior beast was swifter, moving with speed that was breathtaking. Wherever their weapons went, a claw moved to intercept them and turn them away. Shuriken embedded themselves in the mountain's rock where a short instant before the lictor had stood. Embattled on all sides, it was on the defensive, but they could not slay it, no matter that they outnumbered it.

Thurliarissa saw an opening and moved in, her warriors parting in their deadly dance to allow her through. She ducked under a claw that chopped towards her, switching postures. Stances that looked ungainly and uncomfortable away from battle enabled her to slip around the lictor's blows. Ferion got too close, the lictor reacted, and the point of its claw buried itself in his chestplate. Ferion struggled upon the spike, his waystone's light brightened, and he hung limp.

Ferion's death bought Thurliarissa victory. She opened up with the shuriken pistols built into her chainsabres. Twin streams of sharp discs smacked into the creature's heavily armoured thorax. It screeched as they penetrated its chitin, finding their way into the soft organs beneath. Thurliarissa bounded forwards as it staggered back, arms apart in the stance of the Claw's Embrace. She swung her forearms together with force, targeting the Dragon in Shadow's knobbled neck. The teeth on the ancient weapons screamed as they cut through the creature's spine, and its head rolled from its shoulders and fell into the dust. The Scorpions moved aside as it died, the tall, lanky carcass spouting bright fluids as it collapsed to the floor.

Thurliarissa panted, praise to Khaine on her lips. She communicated the squad's triumph to Inner Command. It was her great pride that Sunspear had once fought under her, in an earlier life. 'The Patient Blade fights well, the scorpion's prey is dead, this zone is now clear.'

Praise came from Sunspear, then new orders.

She stopped to pluck Ferion's waystone. Marking the position of his corpse for later retrieval, she led her squad onward, down into the reeking forests of the valley.

The Godpeak was Dûriel's highest mountain, and the site of the world's ancient webway portal. From his command position upon the cliffs fringing the summit, Autarch Aloec Sunspear of Biel-Tan sent his thanks to the Patient Blade. He consulted his viewing orb's map of the Godpeak and the valley stretching out from its southern side. Faint shimmers showed the positions of eldar hunting squads, and he nodded in satisfaction. Ever since the Battle of Iyanden had reduced Biel-Tan's erstwhile ally to a haunted ruin, Sunspear had studied the Great Devourer, certain that its attention would one day fall on his own craftworld. He had determined that the Dragons in Shadow operated as an early warning system for the swarm, among other things. He was confident that with the lictors dead, his force would be able to move in unopposed and take the creatures of Far Ranging Hunger by surprise.

So confident was Aloec Sunspear that it would never occur to him that he might be wrong. After all, he so rarely was. Sunspear was not arrogant, nor was he afflicted with hubris. His expertise was a simple fact.

This steely self-belief was the core of an unbending personality. Aloec was a commander without compare, determined and ruthless on the battlefield, some would say humourless off it, as he found laughter in few things other than victory. Mocked by his more flippant colleagues, he would retort, 'And what is there to laugh about, in these dark and dismal days?' Although like most Biel-Tanians, he believed with utter conviction that the eldar's time was coming again, he harboured no doubts as to the odds that they faced.

His mouth was therefore permanently downturned, his eyes flat and calculating. It was whispered

that he should not be upon the Path of Command at all, but was marked by fate to be an exarch, and that Morai-Heg's ghost would make him pay for his defiance of her intentions. Three aspect shrines he had passed through, the Patient Blade, Regrets Rendered Molten, and Flickering Extinction, and the exarchs of them all said differently. He had endured the ritual of Rhaan Lona in each without incident. No matter what his peers thought, Khaine had deemed him worthy.

Sunspear wore a tall scorpion helm. His armour was the white of Biel-Tan, and a rich green cloak patterned with thorns of gold hung from his shoulders. His stern demeanour was hidden by the helm, and his exceptional height – he was tall by the measure of his people – made greater by his towering crest. A grey sash hung with the runes of Dire Avenger, Striking Scorpion and Fire Dragon crossed his chest.

‘The eyes of the Dragon are put out.’ His words were conveyed to the whole of Biel-Tan's army over radio. An inconvenient consequence of their foe's nature. If he was affected by the crushing horror of the hive mind's psychic roar, his followers could not perceive it.

The autarch turned from the swirling clouds of pollutants and spores that obscured his view of the valley. His command post occupied a flat shelf of rock several thousand paces below the summit of the Godpeak. The rest of the Inner Command were with him – the farseers Forlissiar, Kellian and Serriestalar, the quartet of warlocks that accompanied them, working hard to shield the farseers from the collective psyche of the swarm, and Autarch Hethaeliar the Fourth-Blooded, his second-in-command.

Sunspear's personal transport floated several paces away, the Inner Command standing around it, all utilising gestures that suggested deep communion with the army's various elements. Autarch Hethaeliar hailed him, her languid voice intimate in his ear-beads. ‘Lord Sunspear, the Vyper squadrons are reporting in.’

‘I open my ears to you, swift hunters,’ said Sunspear in the formal mode.

‘Autarch, creatures of both swarms are present in large numbers.’ Images flashed up on Sunspear's viewing orb. The orb was projected by his helmet lenses directly onto his retinas in such a way as to make it appear as if it were in the air in front of him, a useful illusion. Flawless pictures of tyranids and broken cities paraded past his eyes. A smattering of the aliens were of red and bone; in the main they were purple and an unhealthy white. ‘The majority of Far Ranging Hunger are to our north, heading at speed towards your position.’

‘They have detected us?’

One of the farseers, Serriestalar, moved his head sideways, one hand up, the other palm down and descending. Not yet.

‘Starving Dragon roams the plains and the dead seas to the south, with greatest concentrations around the human cities and other population centres,’ continued the Vyper pilot. ‘Far Ranging Hunger moves towards them. It is incidental that you are in their path. As far as is discernible by us, you are undetected, my autarch.’

‘The humans, what was their fate? How fare the first despoilers of twice-despoiled Dûriel?’

‘You seek allies, autarch?’ interjected Forlissiar. Of all the three seers in Sunspear's Inner Command, he had been most opposed to the plan. He was firmly of Altariet's camp.

Forlissiar wished to goad him by suggesting that the lumpen humans could aid them. Sunspear ignored his mockery. The Vyper leader continued his report.

‘There are no signs of the humans anywhere remaining within five hundred thousand paces of the Godpeak. They have been destroyed and are being devoured. The majority of this world's biomass was concentrated within the settlements of the humans. Our outrunner squadrons passed over three of their

smaller cities. They are deserted of inhabitants.'

'This area, it is free of their activity?'

'There is a crude geothermal power station to the north-west of our position, that is all.'

'What is its status?'

'Empty but for blood, autarch. The Godpeak may be extinct, but the area remains volcanically active. The plant's systems, though primitive, appear to have gone into failsafe shutdown. A fleet of humans flees the system from the world they call Ector, they will pass near here in half a cycle's time.'

Sunspear tensed. He would have dearly liked to scatter their remains to the stellar winds for their crimes in this system.

'They will have to wait for their punishment. We have no time, nor the strength to destroy them,' said Kellian softly.

'Show me Starving Dragon,' Sunspear said. The images projected by his helmet changed to show concentrations of the purple aliens.

'As yet it is unaware of us,' continued the Vyper leader. 'Resistance has been quashed, the tertiary phase has begun.' Fat creatures that were little more than bags surrounded by legs vomited torrents of bile into shallow pools excavated by strange, shovel-faced drones. Spines grew out of the ground, and from his studies of the Great Devourer, the autarch knew they would be sucking the mineral and organic wealth from the soil and rocks. The spines would grow throughout the next dozen cycles, to be milked and then devoured towards the end of the consumption phase. Others, those around the digestion pools, would grow into immense capillary towers, the means by which the biomass of the planet would be assimilated by the hive fleets. Swarms of small leaping creatures picked up every scrap of biological matter and devoured it, while larger workers stacked corpses in front of the smoking cities of mankind to be consumed by immense eater beasts.

'They prepare to concentrate planetary resources,' said Sunspear. 'We must strike before the swarm begins to consume itself and returns its matter to the hive fleet. That is the point of danger for us. Far Ranging Hunger's creatures will be swept up by the greater swarm of Starving Dragon and our own life codes added to bolster the arsenal of the Great Dragon.' He pursed his lips, then lifted a hand, fingers fanning out. This gesture of confidence-in-knowledge would be visible in the squadron leader's own visual feed. 'Now tell me, what news of our own cities? I am curious.'

'See for yourself, my autarch.' The orb showed weathered stumps of wraithbone. 'The usurpers demolished them, and those few ruins that stand still have been abraded by time's passage.' More pictures clicked by, dry seabeds, desert where there had once been rich grassland. Dûriel's forests had survived, including those in the valley and hills below the Godpeak, but in a sorry state. Dead trees, felled by pollution, leaned drunkenly on one another; in places all were dead, nothing but rotting stumps and weed species remaining. Everywhere the vegetation was sickly, ravaged by off-world diseases and the salt blowing in from the dried-up sea beds. This was not the work of the Great Devourer, but of mankind. 'The human squatters have managed our property carelessly. There is nothing but despoliation here. They were unforgivably thorough.'

Anger quickened Aloec's heart. The seers, Altariet chief among them, had warned him his gambit was unfavourable, but he had nurtured a hope that once the voidspawn had been driven off, Dûriel could be saved for the future of his people. The seers accompanying him saw his disappointment and sorrowed for it, although they had known it could be no other way.

'Their rapaciousness disgusts me. They take a paradise and make it a wasteland,' said Aloec. 'It is a mercy that they fell before the Great Dragon, for my revenge upon them would have been a hard one.'

Sunspear looked upwards to the pinnacle of the Godpeak, periodically obscured by the shifting red clouds of spores. Upon the very top were the broken remains of webway pylons, so ancient that the fragments of wraithbone looked indistinguishable from weathered stone. ‘They may topple our monuments,’ he said grimly, ‘but they have not the faintest understanding of our mastery. Final deployment may begin!’ he proclaimed. He unsheathed his chainsword and raised it high.

Above the shattered summit of the mountain, the clouds glowed bright as the chief webway gate to Dûriel opened. A slash of light swelled, then dilated into a sphere. Swarms of grav-craft shot through it, soaring off to hide themselves among the clouds. Dozens of smaller portals – temporary gates off the main conduit brought into being by wayseers – opened one after another where webway beacons had been secreted by eldar scouts, disgorging the armies of Biel-Tan unseen to positions all over the mountain.

‘You have lain dormant!’ said Sunspear to the gateway. ‘Too long you have waited for your true masters, for one hundred arcs! Today, your masters have returned!’ Sunspear looked again to the valley. ‘And we are too late.’

‘Autarch?’

The eldar that had spoken was a ranger, swathed in the heavy coat of his kind despite the sultry heat of the dying world. He wore no insignia, save a small badge depicting Iyanden’s world-rune. No marking told of his path, for his clothes told all. Sunspear smiled unkindly under his helmet. He knew the values of the outcasts well, but it never failed to amuse him that for all their rejection of the restrictive eldar way of life, they all affected exactly the same dress.

‘You say we are too late.’ The ranger shrugged. His topknot quirked with the motion. His helmet was off, his mouth covered with a filter mask, his eyes hidden by dark glasses. ‘There are thousands more virgin worlds awaiting the eldar, autarch. I have seen many of them.’

‘The loss of even one shames us all,’ snarled Sunspear, and he turned from the outcast to watch the might of his craftworld arrive to reclaim the wreck of Dûriel.

From a dozen webway gates, sleek eldar grav-vehicles poured forth. Delicate yet deadly Falcon grav-tanks, Wave Serpents, super-heavy Cobras, Vypers by the dozen and jetbikes by the score. Their engines were so hushed, the sound of the spores hissing down onto the rock of the mountain drowned them out. At the Inner Command’s order, the tanks took up formation in the boiling clouds, hidden from eye and mind alike.

On the flanks of the mountain, Dark Reapers took up station. Teams of Guardians guided heavy weapons mounted on grav-platforms into place. Aspect Warriors of close-combat shrines moved down the slope, preparing to blunt Far Ranging Hunger’s inevitable counter-attack. War walkers, nimble as mountain grazers, sprang from rock to rock as they moved into advantageous positions from where they could reap the greatest tally of the dead.

Sunspear watched all this on visual projection, listening in on the minimal radio chatter of his army. It gladdened his heart to see so many fine warriors, even if they were several thousand years too late to save stricken Dûriel.

The streamers of spores and pollutants blew away for a moment, revealing the vista to Aloec’s eyes unaided. From his vantage point, he looked down upon a karst landscape, a range of dumpy, round hills like blisters on the land, deep caves, and sudden gashes in the ground. All was swathed in sick forest, broken up by expanses of bare rock and scrub. The hills spread either side of the Godpeak to frame a shallow valley that once, so he had read in the records of Biel-Tan, had been a most beauteous place: the Valley of the Gods. Its statues and gardens were not even memories, levelled by mankind in unthinking destruction. Only the plants of dozens of worlds growing in weedy profusion hinted that

once upon a time things had been different here.

What maddened Sunspear was that men had not even deigned to settle in the valley. The glory of the gardens ruined, they had withdrawn, perhaps unnerved by the atmosphere of the place; the main cities of men had lain some distance away from where the eldar's old haunts had been, and the nearest lay well away from the valley. Senseless, thought Sunspear. They destroy for the sake of destruction.

All around the Godpeak, plumes of dust rose upwards, thrown into the air by the sharp hooves of hundreds of thousands of voidspawn racing towards the south; deep red and bone, the children of the Kraken.

To the east, the valley opened out to a plain that sloped down to the site of Dûriel's evaporated oceans. The stubby forms of ex-islands poked up from dry flats in the far distance. Where the sun penetrated the cloud to shine upon the flats, there blazed the dazzling white of extensive salt deposits. This wound on the world bore injuries of its own: long, parallel rectangles had been scraped out by human mining machines.

To the south, glinting slicks of liquid could be spied, tiny shapes around them. Organic towers grew like plants, though many thousands of times bigger. These were the digestion pools his Vypers had shown him.

'See, Forlissiar,' said Sunspear. He asked for his guidance deliberately. 'The tyrannids of Starving Dragon have begun upon their digestion of the world's remaining bounty. There, the capillary towers have taken root and grow. We have little time. When will the swarms combine?'

Forlissiar's voice was strained. All the eldar felt the crushing intellect of the hive fleets pressing down upon them, a formless horror wracked by unspeakable hungers. Terror was yet another of its weapons, projected into the minds of its prey. For the likes of Forlissiar, whose psychic abilities were fully developed, the effect was amplified a thousand-fold. Only the coterie of four warlocks, lending their own psychic might to that of the farseers, allowed them to see into the future at all, or indeed to remain sane. 'As far as I can judge it, in the afternoon of tomorrow, autarch. The threads of fate are obscured in many places, but we have persevered. You must strike before then. Eradication will take some time, if it is possible at all. Kellian, Serriestalar?'

The other two seers of the Inner Command joined them. 'Starving Dragon will yet be unaware,' said Kellian in the sing-song voice of a half-trance. 'In this its dominance of the skein will be a blessing, for its ignorance will be plain to see.'

'The dragon will feed, bent to the table, it will see its brother not,' said Serriestalar.

'Good,' said Sunspear. 'Good.'

'Be wary, autarch,' said Forlissiar. 'Your opportunity is slim. Destruction of the Swordwind is the outcome of many threads, as Altariéc warned you. You must be careful. Strike quickly, and withdraw.'

'We have time,' said Sunspear. 'Altariéc is too timid. We will wipe out all the creatures of Far Ranging Hunger and depart. I decree it will be so.'

A stream of information came to Sunspear and the Inner Command, squads moving to rendezvous points or emerging from the webway, wings of Crimson Hunters calling ready, status updates on the deployment. The farseers consulted the runes and each other, Forlissiar voicing concerns all the while, the three of them passing direction on to Sunspear who relayed it to his warriors. He trusted the seers would find the most fortuitous positions for his forces.

The sun sank below the horizon, and still the eldar army came through the webway. Hidden in the cloudbanks, they spread over the continent, taking up position over Far Ranging Hunger's beasts. Vypers criss-crossed the planet at speed, marking out the locations of Starving Dragon's main digestion pools. Most of these were outside the human cities. Grisly images of thousands of corpses

dumped into steaming acid became commonplace on Sunspear's display. Starving Dragon's creatures on the world were vastly in the majority, even if they were only a part of the greater swarm in orbit. Sunspear was not complacent. If even a handful of Far Ranging Hunger's higher creatures were absorbed by Starving Dragon, then the terrible future foreseen by Taec Silvereye of Iyanden would come to pass.

The night wore on. Lightning cracked in the distance and a mighty storm sprang up. Wind blew strongly over the peak, dry at first. Later in the night veils of coloured rain washed the landscape. Sunspear wondered idly if, now men were gone, the planet's balance would reassert itself; if over time the rain would fall to fill the seas again.

Sunspear waved away his aides when they suggested he rest. 'I will oversee the deployment of the last Guardian,' he said. And he did.

The sun rose over clearer skies, the rain having cleared the lower atmosphere of spores, although the higher altitudes where the eldar waited were still thick with them. The last few messages came over the communications network. A Gemini squad of Revenant Titans, the last of the force's heavy elements, emerged from the main webway portal bent double.

The army assembled, Sunspear took stock. His army was the fastest elements of the Swordwind, all that could be gathered and moved quickly through the webway, and was ready for battle. He made a silent prayer to Khaine and Asuryan that it would be enough. 'We come in answer to Iyanden's call,' he said, 'as is right. Now, let us announce our presence to the voidspawn, and redirect the flow of fate.'

During the night, the creatures of Far Ranging Hunger had made good headway. Coming down from their planetfall in the north, they filled the Valley of the Gods, their red and bone bodies lapping around the feet of the Godpeak in parody of the dead seas of Dûriel. Several hundred thousand paces east and west they stretched out, a tidemark on the landscape. Unsuspecting of the eldar craft hidden in the clouds, they pressed on, instinct driving them towards Starving Dragon.

How fitting, thought Sunspear, that their own spores mask the instruments of their destruction. 'Attack,' said Sunspear calmly. 'Scour them from the skein.'

Immediately, several hundred craft plunged from the turgid skies over the swarm, spitting shuriken, las-bolts and the plasma packets of suncannon at the teeming mass of tyrannids. Upon the mesas and hills around the valley, Aspect Warriors and war walkers opened fire, targeting the swarm's leader-beasts. The Revenants ran towards the edge of the rock shelf where Sunspear's command post was situated, and leapt into the air. Jump jets flared blue-white and they hurtled down the mountainside.

All the eldar felt the shock of the hive mind as it was ambushed. As oppressive as they found the psychic entity, the eldar drew satisfaction when they felt it snap and snarl, Sunspear above all others. 'Shaft of Sunlight, proceed to the dawnward edge,' he said. A flight of nine Vypers shot towards a group of monsters scrambling up the valley sides in the direction of a group of Dark Reapers. He made many similar adjustments, reacting to the hive's reactions. Forlissiar, Kellian and Serriestalar were beside him, whispering advice in their cryptic trance voices as they peered down the skein. The swarm moved as one organism, spaces opening around areas of intense bombardment. Sunspear had accounted for this in his plan, laying out fire patterns that would force the aliens into certain groups, then engulfing these bunchings as they occurred. And so the voidspawn fled from the impact of missile swarms straight into clouds of monomolecular wire spun by deathspinners. Caught in the strands, their own struggles saw them sliced into bloodied chunks.

Sunspear picked out weapon-beasts and leader creatures, channelling fire onto them in merciless salvos. Where they fell, the hive mind weakened. He felt the attention of the alien consciousness turn

to him, a crushing sensation – Serriestalar, his mind more attuned to the currents of the Othersea than Sunspear’s, cried out in pain. But there was little it could do. Leader-beasts toppled throughout the swarm, the twisted vegetation of the valley forest offering scant cover against the eldar’s sophisticated targeting matrices. By the dozen they died, chitin plates full of smoking holes. As they fell, the grip of the hive mind on its lesser creatures diminished, and slowly the swarm’s coherency began to disintegrate.

Overhead, Crimson Hunters duelled with the few airborne elements of Far Ranging Hunger’s swarm. Winged shapes fell from the sky, wings shredded. They crushed their kin by the dozen where they crashed. The skies were swept clear quickly, and the fast craft turned their guns upon the creatures on the ground.

‘The reach of the Great Dragon’s mind is much reduced,’ said Kellian. ‘Your strategy is working.’

‘We shall see,’ said Forlissiar. ‘This opening act to the dance will not go unopposed. The swarm reacts again.’

He pointed out an area towards the valley mouth, where a line of sharp karsts broke through the trees. Enhanced images showed tall warriors marshalling the lesser creatures. All over the valley and outside it, the tyranids were turning back to attack their attackers, converging on the valley.

‘An element of my plan, farseer,’ said the autarch. ‘If they do not concentrate themselves here, how shall we annihilate them?’

Sunspear made a sharp gesture, hissing into his helmet pick-up. The warriors were cut down by a unit of Dark Reapers, the trees where they had been billowing with sudden flame.

‘The Great Dragon can react all it wishes, we have the advantage,’ he said. ‘We are the superior species.’

Exarch Thurliarissa dodged a claw strike, disembowelling the creature with a double-handed cross-strike of her chainsabres. The Shrine of the Patient Blade fought around her, chopping down leaping, scythe-armed creatures in droves. The aliens fought without thought, snarling and chittering. No matter how many were slaughtered, they did not fall back. The quiet discharge of the scorpion’s sting, the whirr of the chainblades, the shriek of shuriken competed with the clicks and whoops of the lesser warrior beasts. This was Khaine’s music, and Thurliarissa danced to it. The Patient Blade fought melee specialists like themselves, and outmatched them effortlessly.

Explosions rocked the forest. Fires set by the stellar heat of starcannons burned fitfully on rotten wood. The screams of the aliens sounded from every quarter. The last leaping beast died, its bladed forelimbs knocking together manically as Jolarithel cut it in half with his chainsword. Then they ran onwards, following orders sent to them by Inner Command.

They passed a roaring giant, a hideous thing bent double, a giant pulsing sac held beneath its belly. Smaller creatures surrounded it, similar to the ones they had slaughtered moments before, but with bony guns in place of bladed forelimbs. Squirming bugs drenched in acidic ichor splattered on the Aspect Warriors’ armour as the Patient Blade drove into their enemy.

The giant brood mother of these beasts rounded on the Scorpions. It lurched forwards, shouldering trees into rotten mulch. Apertures on its carapace sent a spray of barbed spines as long as an eldar’s arm arching towards them. The Scorpions dodged, loosing volleys from their pistols at the smaller beasts. Rihanmarisal was hit by a spine, staggered by its impact, but his armour remained whole, and he fought on.

Thurliarissa made for the beast, cutting down three of its children. Its sac pulsed, a wide orifice opened at its front, and a dozen more creatures tumbled out, their white and red carapaces dripping

with fluids. They attacked immediately, and Thurliarissa was driven back. The mother-creature roared, the ground trembling as it came at the Patient Blade. Thurliarissa went into a frenzy of cuts and slashes at the offspring. The beasts somehow sensed that she was the leader and attacked her en masse, but the others came to her aid, dispatching many of the aliens.

There came a hissing, then a loud whoosh and a wash of heat. The mother-creature howled in pain, black smoke gouting from the side of its birth sac. Yellow ichor gushed to the ground, carrying the stiff corpses of unborn broodlings with it. Thurliarissa was occupied with her foes who, though poor fighters, were numerous, and only registered her allies as flashes of orange in the trees.

More blasts – fusion weaponry. Six burning craters appeared in the brood mother's flanks. It reared up shrieking, then collapsed forwards, tried to heave to its feet, and died.

Immediately the lesser beasts fell to writhe on the floor. They keened as they convulsed, their weapons discharging involuntarily. Those that did not die from the shock of their mother's death were executed easily by the Patient Blade.

Quiet fell, the sounds of battle moving away from them. Thurliarissa panted hard.

Warriors came into the clearing made by the creature's death throes. Their armour was lividly coloured, no camouflage for them: the Burning Rebuke, shrine of the Fire Dragon.

‘Sister exarch, I greet thee heartily, in time we come,’ said their leader, Oskirithil of the Sorrows, a lugubrious being who seemed to take no joy in being an exarch. ‘Might I advise, slay the largest first, they are the Dragon.’ He inclined his head at the smouldering brood mother. ‘As you can see, this one is the mother, dead the threat dies.’

Thurliarissa nodded her thanks, and gestured for her warriors to follow her into the trees.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Serpent Beneath

Sunspear watched the tyranids pressing their counter-attack. On the eastern side of the valley they swarmed up the cliffs, attempting to attack the Aspect Warriors and war walkers firing on them from above. To the west more of Biel-Tan's close-quarter warriors had come down to the valley floor to drive the beasts onto their comrades' guns. Sunspear's viewing orb showed the various aspect shrines as glowing runes, his helmet lenses zooming in to their positions at a thought, the individual warriors outlined in bright reds and oranges. Above them flashed jetbikes and Vypers, strafing the ground.

'The Swordwind does its job well,' said Serriestakor, who, as the leader-beasts of the swarm had dwindled, had recovered somewhat. 'Your plan is working. Many are dead at little loss to our own. Perhaps Altariac was wrong.'

'I see nothing to suggest this,' said Forlissiar. 'Autarch, the warriors' might is their weakness, they advance too quickly and are overstretched. Observe.'

Sunspear followed Forlissiar's fingers as they danced over the viewing orb. This one was projected into all their eyes, a shared illusion.

'See here, the piercing arrow digs deep into the flesh of our prey, but the further it penetrates, the more likely the jaws are to shut around it.' He indicated the narrow column of Aspect Warriors. As he described, their formation was like a hunter's arrow. As its flanks grew longer, tyranids massed either side. In the valley, ragged treetops shook with their passing.

'I concur,' said Serriestakor.

'I too. The creatures will fall upon the wind of falling leaves, and shiver the blade. The skein shows it to be correct,' said Kellian.

'The Great Dragon attacks where I desire, this is part of my strategy. But you are correct. It is time to pull back those of the shrines, they have done their work,' Sunspear said to the farseers. 'Group of the Sun's Setting, fall back to your transports and redeploy to the following coordinates,' he ordered. 'Group of the Sun's Rising, intensify fire, hold the cliffs and prepare for reinforcement. Group of the Sun's Anchor, cover the retreat of Sun's Setting.'

Instantly, the flow of battle changed as the Aspect Warrior formation fell back in good order, the column of them growing thicker as the foremost elements rejoined those shrines behind them. Support weapons batteries on the cliffs trained their armaments on the voidspawn massing on either side, and the distance filled with glittering energy beams.

'Flawlessly done,' said Forlissiar dryly. 'I believe you will not lose a single one.'

'That is an exaggeration, farseer,' said the autarch. 'But by all means, please convey your sentiments to Altariac. Seers,' he said, his tone changing to one of more respect. 'Do you yet have an inkling where the spear of Khaine should be thrust?' He touched at a webway beacon hanging from his armour. 'This is one task I will leave to no other.'

'As yet no, autarch,' said Serriestakor with a humble bow. 'I... Wait!'

Frantic shouts and battle-crazed laughter came over the communications web.

'Sun's Rising has encountered something... unforeseen,' said Serriestakor.

'Where? Show me.' The mind-map moved over to the west. The cliffs on that side of the valley

were shallower and less heavily forested. From here the aspect shrines had descended, and at the cliff tops waited their Wave Serpents and Falcons to bear them away to the eastern battlefront. But something blocked their way.

The seers conveyed impressions to Sunspear – earth heaving upwards, the ground boiling with snake-like forms, creatures pulling themselves from the earth.

‘This will happen in moments. The Hidden Serpent,’ said Serriestalar. ‘It has been actively obscured, kept from the skein. The mind of the aliens is powerful.’

‘More powerful than we expected. We are duped,’ said Kellian.

Forlissiar said nothing, but his posture conveyed his thoughts well enough; that of an eldar whose case has been proven.

As Serriestalar predicted, an ambush was sprung. The Swordwind reacted instantly, masses of fire erupting at the point of the creatures’ emergence, the tanks and artillery covering the Aspect Warriors cutting the forest to shreds directly in their line of retreat, but the serpents were many, and they fell upon the Aspect Warriors falling back. Behind them, the greater mass of voidspawn moved in for the kill.

‘My question has been answered,’ said Sunspear. He called for his weapons, his fusion pistol and his diamond-toothed chainsword. He took them from his aides, and girt himself with his belt. He gestured to the four warlocks waiting by the Wave Serpent’s open ramp. They bowed their heads and went within.

‘Let us join the fray. It is time we took an active hand.’

Sunspear’s Wave Serpent rose from the mountain shelf and flew down the flanks of the Godpeak. The rocks blurred as they sped on, arrow-sure. As they descended from the peak, the air grew clearer, the bow wave energy field sparking as minuscule examples of the invading ecosystem’s creatures were annihilated. The pilot, Durantai-Bec, one of Biel-Tan’s very best, jinked around formations of pockmarked quartz, skimming so close to the leaves on the dying trees they bent in the Wave Serpent’s slipstream. Tyranid fire, vicious and messy, sprayed upwards from below, but Durantai-Bec danced past the worst of it, the weapons grubs that hit them shattered to atoms by the power field of the craft.

The Wave Serpent cut into the forest, taking gaps other pilots would think twice before chancing, bringing the autarch and his seer council down undetected near the raging battle at the foot of the western valley cliffs.

Sunspear bounded from the craft, the seers close behind, their psychic weaponry crackling with witchlight. The Serpent rose into the air, the hatch closing, starcannons swivelling in its turret in search of immediate threat.

The direction the melee lay in was unmistakable. The roaring of the voidspawn and the delicate chatter of eldar weaponry came from the south.

‘Follow me!’ shouted the autarch. Breaking into a sprint, he leapt surefootedly from slippery branch to rotting trunk without error.

A whirling combat greeted them. Snake-bodied monstrosities of various breeds assailed a broad front of Aspect Warriors. Squads were falling back to their transports as ordered, a large group of Dire Avengers and Howling Banshees holding the creatures in place. The guard served their purpose well, but their numbers were being whittled down despite their skill. Howling Banshees leapt all over the creatures as the Dire Avengers riddled them with shuriken fire. Although the smaller creatures were felled by the discs once sufficient had found their mark, the larger serpents seemed impervious to their edges. Worse, the psychic shock masks of the Banshees seemed to have no effect upon any of the

creatures.

The autarch levelled his fusion gun and vaporised one of the smaller worms without slowing. He headed for a trio of giants, each several eldar in height. Forlissiar, Kellian and Serriestakor strode forwards, runes circling them. Kellian cast his singing spear into the fray. It looped around, taking three lesser serpents to their deaths in turn. Witchlight blazed from Forlissiar's hands and lightning arced over the bodies of the beasts, leaping from creature to creature and erupting through their chests, felling more.

And then the hive mind turned its attention upon the scene, and the eldar screamed. Sunspear staggered, his spirit crushed. For just a second, he wished to flee and hide from the scrutiny of the terrible being staring at him. He became aware of his own insignificance, he was no more than a particle of food. The hive mind's ancient intellect was as wide as the void, its examination of him was a cold spike through his heart, and his mind was swamped by endless horror.

One of the warlocks collapsed, light pouring from his eye-lenses. He babbled nonsense in a hard alien tongue, and died. Serriestakor screamed and screamed, clutching his helmet. The other psykers rallied themselves, redoubling their psychic defences. It took all their effort just to keep the pressure of the hive mind at bay, and their offence died to nothing.

The Aspect Warriors, their own psychic natures buried deep, were less affected. A few of them faltered under the assault; two were swept up by the spiked limbs of a writhing beast as they stumbled, another swallowed whole by a broad-mouthed horror.

'We can do nothing more here!' said Kellian. He shouted as if his voice were battling a great noise, but the roar was in his mind. 'The skein is hidden from us, we can offer no further aid!'

Sunspear nodded. 'Withdraw!' he shouted.

'I remain with you,' said Kellian. 'Someone must.'

'As you wish,' said Sunspear, then dived into the fight.

His chainsword sang. Only a handful of the smaller serpents remained, but the three giant beasts were unharmed. He attacked one directly, slicing a gash down its side. He sought nearby support, ordering the fire of the tanks atop the cliffs into the animals. The machines locked him into their targeting matrix. Laser bolts and lance beams followed an eyeblink later, hammering into the rearmost serpent. It rose up to a terrifying height. Tail sweeping, it swatted trees and warriors alike aside.

Sunspear sighted his fusion gun at its head and gave fire. The air shimmered and roared in a line between gun and beast, atoms agitated by high-frequency electromagnetic waves. The monster thrashed all the more as its brain was cooked. Sunspear calmly tracked its head, not letting the beam be broken. He leapt over its tail as it swept at him. A scorched hole appeared in the creature's skull, and it crashed down, dead.

Sunspear dashed onwards. He sent a command pulse to silence the bombardment as it threatened the Aspect Warriors still fighting. He leapt nimbly from tree trunk to tree trunk, pushing off from two close together to gain height. As he leapt from the trees straight at a second trygon, he tossed his sword upwards, snatched it back out of the air in a reverse grip, and buried it in the belly of the creature.

The beast howled, its long body whipping madly. Sunspear lost his fusion gun. He deactivated his chainsword's teeth with a thought and clung on to the embedded weapon for grim death. He grabbed at it with his free hand, and planted his feet firmly on the beast's flesh. Bracing himself thusly, he shot his scorpion's sting repeatedly into its side. The monster swung its head back, trying to snap its jaws around the irritation riding it, but Sunspear ducked, activated his sword again, pulled it free and pushed off backwards. He executed a somersault in the air, landing heavily, recovering just in time to

leap aside as six bladed limbs hammered into the ground where he had been standing.

The beast was weakening. Banshees took advantage of its distraction to attack its exposed belly, power swords crackling with every impact. The gut wall gave way under the flurry of blows. There was little viscera; this was a fighting creature, short-lived. Strange organs revealed themselves to the Banshees, who riddled them with laser bolts.

From somewhere behind Sunspear, Kellian's singing spear soared over his head and took the creature in the throat. The serpent flopped over its dead companion, and lay still.

Sunspear caught his breath. The third beast, the wide-mawed one, was dying under a barrage of fusion gun fire coming from a squad of advancing Fire Dragons.

He signalled the Banshee exarch. Unusually, a male. 'Aseterion, where is the rest of the battle group?'

'Delayed, Autarch Sunspear. The ambush slowed our withdrawal, they are under attack.'

'The Great Dragon turns its attention that way, autarch,' said Kellian. 'We have our chance. Bring forth Khaine now!'

Sunspear retrieved his fusion gun and allowed the exarch and warriors to guide him, leaving his map dormant for fear of its distractions.

They came to the edge of a low rise; below them an arc of Aspect Warriors were embattled by dozens of large tyranid creatures. The hive mind was particularly strong here, the density of its synaptic web apparent to the sensitive eldar.

'Here,' said Sunspear. He pulled his webway homing device from his belt. Kellian leaned heavily upon a tree and inclined his head slightly in affirmation.

'Khaine will wreak much havoc.'

'Then this is the correct place,' Sunspear said to the warriors. 'Come, we will aid them, and bring the wrath of Khaine down upon the enemies of Biel-Tan. The Avatar will lead us into battle.'

Sunspear circled away from the fight at the base of the hill, taking his group of Aspect Warriors with him. Kellian remained behind; the might of the hive mind was taking its toll upon him, but he shielded Sunspear and his warrior band from its psychic senses as best he could. They went through the trees undetected, gained the level ground without incident and ran into a clearing floored with hard stone. The forest was unexpectedly still, though the combat rumbled on out of sight. There were no voidspawn present. All had been drawn off in the swarm's attempt to destroy the Aspect Warrior force.

Sunspear tapped at the floor. What at first looked to be a natural stone pavement was in fact made up of shattered paving slabs. He looked around, at moss-covered boulders and lumps in the understorey. On second inspection, many looked formed by sentient hands.

'A garden of the old empire. A fitting place to call forth our wrath,' he said.

With a flick of his thumb, Sunspear activated his webway beacon, casting it into the air. It hovered, spinning, gentle light emanating from it. The light intensified, glimmering like a star as the device was consumed, its power generators forcing open the skin of reality as they burned out.

A long slit appeared in the air, and widened, peeling back the forest scene as if it were upon painted cloth. A nebulous shape of light hung there.

A tremor passed through the ground. Sunspear's heart quickened, his war mask surging to the forefront of his consciousness and threatening to drown his reason in blood.

'The Avatar of Khaine! Blood will flow freely by his hand, death approaches and we serve,' Aseterion whispered, joy in his voice. His mostly female shrine set up an ululating cry, while the Fire Dragons and Dire Avengers with Sunspear declaimed their own complex war chants.

An outstretched hand the size of an eldar's torso emerged from the portal. Hot blood dripped from it, hissing when it hit the mossy paving. The Avatar stepped through the rent in reality, and onto the surface of Dûriel.

The Avatar resembled a stylised statue of an eldar warrior, many times life size, its roaring face crowned with a regal helm. A core of white-hot metal was its body, iron plates that glowed red with heat its armour. In its hand it held a long spear, the Suin Daellae, the Wailing Doom. The weapon sang its wrathful song, and it fired the eldar's hearts with battle lust. The warriors whooped louder as they gathered around it, hands tightening on weapons in their eagerness to spill blood.

'Now,' said Sunspear, his voice hard and savage, 'let us sever mind from flesh, and destroy the ability of our foe to control its body. Onwards, to glory and the restoration of our kind!'

'Biel-Tan! Biel-Tan! Biel-Tan!' the Aspect Warriors chanted.

The smouldering figure of the Avatar leading the way, the eldar fell upon the concentration of tyranids.

Thurliarissa and the Shrine of the Patient Blade killed and killed, and the tide of voidspawn did not abate. Four great creatures directed the horde of red and bone beasts, guarded by squat, dome-headed monstrosities. At their command, waves of shrieking monsters crashed into the Aspect Warriors. Raw terror emanated from these leader things, battering at the minds of the eldar, causing them to falter and sapping the strength from their blows. Even so, many of the eldar had managed to withdraw, broken free to go back to the transports and reinforce the eastern front. Wave Serpents rushed overhead, heading for the spore-hazed cliffs on the far side of the valley. That was good.

Thurliarissa was lost in her art, the five minds that made up her personality working as one, drawing on dozens of arcs of experience. Although the Great Dragon was a new foe in the galaxy, many savage beasts and psychic horrors had fallen to her blades over the aeons and she was not afraid.

She slashed and cut, severing weapon-limbs at the elbow, ripping open hardened thoraxes, blasting shuriken from the pistols built into her chainsabres into vulnerable eyes and mouths. Not all weak points could be engineered away.

She bent over backwards as a crackling sword of bone swept over her. The creature that wielded it did not hold the weapon; rather the hilt was melded to its hand, ribbed tubes going from the sword into the arm. Thurliarissa caught sight of dark eyes near the base of the blade, vestigial legs fused to the fingers of the warrior beast wielding it. It too was alive. A claw came after the sword, then another, weaving a cage of talons around her. She saw the sword coming again, and did an elegant cartwheel away. She spun on her heel, driving her chainsabre into the hilt of the living weapon and cracking its shell. The sword squealed piteously; the creature carrying it roared, sharing its weapon's pain, and she took her chance. Dodging under its other arms, she raised her fists and decapitated the creature with a hail of shuriken. It staggered forwards, arms waving, the body perhaps under control of its symbiote-sword, but its mind was evidently not strong enough, and it jerked spasmodically before crashing down.

The Shrine of the Patient Blade was down to five. Four of her warriors had been killed, including rash Dariathanar. He had lost the opportunity to learn his lesson of earlier in the day.

Her warriors fought well, working in pairs as the scorpion's claw works with its sting, pinning and then destroying alien after alien. Not far from her position, Dire Avengers of the Diligence of the Argent Fault Forgotten cleared a wide arc with the endless firing patterns of their catapults. The ground before them was littered with shattered flesh, the ground sodden with alien life fluids.

The Burning Rebuke fought again alongside the Patient Blade, Oskirithil of the Sorrows directing

his warriors to vaporise those creatures too mighty for the Striking Scorpions' weapons. And so, as each eldar was deadly in his or her own right and was made deadlier by fluid cooperation within the squads, the multipliers of force where several different elements worked together were astounding. This is art, Thurliarissa thought, the greatest art known to our kind. She revelled in her exarchhood; a fate terrible to most eldar was to her the finest of all things the galaxy had to offer.

Yet deadly as they were, still battle's tide turned against the aspect shrines.

Fully half of the taskforce's Aspect Warriors had been trapped in the valley, attacked by voidspawn drawn to the Swordwind's initial thrust. Such was the way of the Tempest of Blades, to strike and withdraw and strike elsewhere. The greatest danger to its warriors was to become bogged down and lose their formation's fluidity. This had happened in the valley. Slowed momentarily by the ambush, they had been caught by their pursuers. Two hundred Aspect Warriors of many shrines battled the horde, but deadly as they were, they were ill-equipped to fight such a war of attrition. The eldar slew the voidspawn by the score, but every rare death they suffered in return was calamitous.

Thurliarissa glanced to their flanks and saw the Aspect Warriors were being pressed back. They were surrounded. Some kind of munition like a large fruit blurred through the air, landing in the middle of Diligence of the Argent Fault Forgotten. The seed pod erupted in a frenzy of tentacles, whipping out and tearing the Dire Avengers from their feet. Its activity reached a crescendo, ripping limbs from fragile bodies, and the tentacles fell limp, their energy expended. The Diligence of the Argent Fault Forgotten was no more.

Jetbikes and Vypers streaked overhead, strafing the horde and bringing down the living tank that had fired the strange munition, but heavier weapons were not being utilised, probably for fear of hitting the vastly outnumbered eldar in the maelstrom. The remaining three great leader-beasts, a massive swarmlord at their head, suddenly pushed forwards. No readying themselves, no sign of preparation, no signals, no warning, they just *moved*. Three-score of the large warrior organisms came with them, heading for the weakened centre of the line.

They were going to lose.

Thurliarissa vowed to sell this body's life dearly.

A bellow from the north, from the trees. The voidspawn there turned their heads as the Avatar of Khaine strode into their midst. Its green and white plume whipped in the convection currents coming off its glowing body, its green cloak streaming behind it. It cast the Wailing Doom hard. The spear sped through the air, leaving fire in its wake, and plunged into the side of one of the leader-beasts. The voidspawn crashed down, eyes smoking, its internal organs burned out from within. Before the spear flew back to the Avatar's hand he had smashed several lesser creatures down with his fists, their touch setting the broken corpses ablaze. Behind him came the Autarch Sunspear, greatest of Biel-Tan's generals, and a portion of those eldar who had earlier withdrawn.

Suddenly, explosions rippled in the forest. Thurliarissa consulted her viewing orb; Dark Reapers had been brought down from the cliffs to the east. Guardians protecting them, they fired from the trees into the rear of the alien force.

The Avatar roared, hatred emanating from it so powerfully that the hive mind shrank back as dry grass shrinks back from fire. Smoke pillared in the distance, evidence of grav-tanks scouring the valley floor with high energy weapons.

The autarch's voice came through to her helm's ear-beads. 'We have them trapped. Destroy their leaders, let Khaine bathe in their blood, for Biel-Tan!'

'Biel-Tan! Biel-Tan! Ancient days reborn, our time comes again!' came the shout from the Swordwind, and Thurliarissa's heart sang. With laughter on her lips, she danced back into the fray.

Night came again to Dûriel. From the shelf on the mountainside the Inner Command watched the fires burn unchecked in the forests.

‘Every one must be slaughtered,’ said Sunspear.

‘They have gone to ground, autarch, it will take some time,’ Autarch Hethaeliar the Fourth-Blooded said.

‘It is to be expected. Their leaders slain, they will revert to animalistic impulses. At the least they will stay put and await their end. Seers?’

‘The mind of the Great Dragon is in disarray,’ said Kellian. ‘Its presence is upon the skein heavily, yet here it has little influence. We have rooted out the greater beasts of Far Ranging Hunger, rupturing its synaptic web. The integration between Far Ranging Hunger and Starving Dragon has yet to begin. The lesser creatures of Far Ranging Hunger will be easy prey to our warriors.’

‘Do not be so certain, Kellian, it ever was your weakness to see invincibility in Biel-Tan’s greatness,’ Forlissiar said. ‘As it is our autarch’s.’

Kellian bowed his head in acknowledgement of the older seer’s rebuke. ‘And yet you have thus far been wrong.’

‘Autarch Sunspear has fought a masterful engagement, it is true, and flawlessly exploited fate. The fact remains that we are pressed. As you yourself say, autarch, we do not have much time. We have kept the swarms apart, but to what end? Can we annihilate them all? I think not. The joining has yet to commence, but it will not be long before the fleet’s minds merge and then we will have a far more numerous foe to contend with.’

‘But how long will that take?’ said Kellian. ‘I see much confusion.’

‘It is a mistake to think of them as separate entities, they are one and the same,’ said Forlissiar. ‘I see a great chance that their bonding will go quickly. Once the two fleets are of one psychic accord, it does not matter how stealthy we are, the greater numbers of Starving Dragon will fall on us. And what of the creatures yet in orbit? There are several hundred of their hive ships, no doubt greatly equipped with more monstrosities to unleash upon us. One spore fall, and our work will be undone. We will have achieved a worthless victory at great cost in eldar lives.’

‘I have the night,’ said Sunspear.

‘You do, but it will not be enough. Daybreak will bring more death, and defeat,’ said Forlissiar. ‘This I foresee.’

Sunspear turned away from the flames in the valley and stared at the farseer. ‘That is as may be. We have bought Iyanden time.’

‘Ah, so you retreat from your initial aim of victory alone?’

Sunspear twitched with annoyance.

‘And this time. Time bought for what?’ said Forlissiar. ‘Altariéc saw this clearly also. They have no means of preventing this merging. Even together, the two craftworlds are outmatched.’

Sunspear shook his head. ‘You are wrong. Kellian does not agree with you, nor did Serriestalar.’

‘Serriestalar’s mind is greatly ravaged, a direct consequence of his taking part in this battle. His personal experience indicates that, just perhaps, his opinion was incorrect,’ said Forlissiar mildly.

The autarch looked out from the mountain again, across the fires, to where, in the distance, the bioluminescence of the feeding Starving Dragon glimmered in the night. ‘Time is all we need, and time I have secured. Between us, Iyanden and Biel-Tan have the night. We will not be denied victory. I can feel it.’

Forlissiar moved dismissively. ‘You are no seer, autarch. Vague feelings are no match for the skein.’

‘And the skein is nothing without will and the sword’s edge to make it,’ countered the autarch. ‘You are timid. We will scour this valley of Far Ranging Hunger’s creatures, and be away.’

In the valley, the slaughter continued.

CHAPTER SIX

Leviathan Awakens

The next morning came swift and sultry, the carefully engineered climate disrupted long ago by the carelessness of the human interlopers. The sun was a bloated orb, its light dispersed by the thickening of the atmosphere. Angry red clouds striated the atmosphere, and there was a sharp scent on the air that, although faint, induced a sensation of queasiness in the eldar if breathed too long without filtering. Far to the south, a thick black band of cloud cast shadows upon the dying planet, shafts of sunlight stabbing through to impale the scarred lands below – sunspears. The autarch thought this a good omen.

Sunspear stood on the lip of the rock shelf, staring out at the ravaged world. His helmet was off, his topknot blowing in the stiff, hot wind. He let his body relax, allowed its sensations to engage his mind; the feel of the airflow over the runes of dried blood painted on his face, the way his feet made tiny adjustments to keep him steady, the grit under the soles of his boots, the clasp of his armour, the drag of his cloak as it billowed. The light sparkling from the salt in the dried seas arrested him, his heart swelled with profoundly sweet melancholy, and he allowed himself to enjoy the ruination of a world.

‘It is beautiful, is it not?’ said Forlissiar, coming up behind him. Kellian was there too. Both were fully masked and robed.

Sunspear nodded. ‘Our ancestors saw the beauty in destruction, but it is unwise to appreciate it for too long.’ He turned his attention to the valley. Smoke, trapped by temperature inversion, formed a bluish pall over the trees. The sun had not yet cast the full force of its light upon the ground there, and through the haze bright points of smouldering forest twinkled like dying stars. The eldar’s weapons were generally too quiet to be heard at such a distance, but the occasional crack as a laser beam superheated and displaced the air and the thin roars of dying creatures came to their ears frequently.

‘How fares the hunt?’ asked Sunspear.

‘The psychic presence of the hive mind remains strong,’ Kellian said, gesturing upwards. ‘The fleet of Far Ranging Hunger remains in orbit, and moves towards that of Starving Dragon.’

‘We inhibit this fate in one theatre, another remains,’ said Forlissiar. ‘The beasts of the earth may be prevented from merging, but the Great Dragon sails the void unopposed. You have led well here, autarch, but it was ever a fool’s errand.’

Sunspear scowled. ‘And I say no again. Iyanden will be here soon. With our fleets combined, we shall scour the voidspawn from space as surely as we have from the ground.’

Forlissiar assumed the posture of extreme disagreement, shoulders back, one fist upon his hip. ‘That is a...’

A frantic communication interrupted their argument. A Vyper patrol. ‘Autarch! To the south!’

‘Manifest the image,’ said Sunspear, cutting through the pilot’s panicked voice. He placed his helmet on.

When his helm activated, the viewing globe came to life in front of him. The storm clouds to the south leapt into tight focus, a Vyper banking round in front of them.

‘They move against the wind,’ said Kellian.

‘Those are not clouds,’ said Sunspear.

The image zoomed in. What appeared to be storm clouds was a wall of winged tyrannids, thousands of paces across. Not red and bone, but purple and ghostly white.

‘Starving Dragon has awoken, as I predicted,’ whispered Forlissiar. ‘We are discovered.’

‘Why was I not warned?’ said Sunspear. Dread gripped him.

‘The skein is clouded, autarch...’ began Kellian, but Forlissiar interrupted, his voice hard.

‘You were warned, autarch. We told you, Altariac and I, that this venture was doomed. And behold, your doom approaches. If we survive, I pray our counsel will carry more weight next time you march to war.’

Sunspear dismissed the image.

Forlissiar dipped into the skein. ‘You will withdraw, and you will salvage your reputation.’

Sunspear looked into the valley. His warriors, unaware of what approached, continued the hunt. ‘No. The task is almost done.’

‘You will withdraw,’ repeated Forlissiar.

Sunspear’s pride overwhelmed him. He would not add defeat to his unblemished tally of victories.

‘No!’ he shouted. ‘We need only a little more time.’

For the second time in two days, Thurliarissa found herself retreating. She fought as if possessed by Khaine himself. Screaming hordes of winged aliens fell from the skies, swooping low to discharge their vile flesh weapons at the Aspect Warriors. The sky was black with them, numberless pairs of wings blotting out the sun. The aliens’ composite mind was a crushing presence. A cold intelligence regarded her through a million eyes, staring at her with an indifference that made her feel small and afraid, ancient and powerful though she was; prey for an infinitely superior being.

‘Starving Dragon!’ came the cry over the communications network. ‘Starving Dragon has awoken!’

First was a shadow on the sky, a swirling mass that could have been mistaken for smoke driven into frantic curls by some inferno. As the eldar paused in their hunt for Far Ranging Hunger’s creatures to look up at this new occurrence, the reddish sun went dim.

The swarm had fallen upon them, and the fight for survival had begun.

Leathery wings flapped at Thurliarissa as small beasts scrabbled hard claws against her. Guns and mouths ejaculated searing acids onto her armour that pitted its ancient surface. Under such pressure, her personalities coalesced into near-perfect unity, each one of the souls which made up Thurliarissa supporting the other.

She swiped her chainsabres through delicate membranes, sending creatures crashing down. She stepped and whirled, ending the lives of crippled voidspawn with controlled bursts of shuriken fire, or blasting away their faces with her scorpion’s sting. Metal splinters shot from her mandibles; atomised by high-intensity laser blasts in the air, they burned flesh from the creatures with ease.

The shouts from her squad were losing their joy, becoming those of alarm rather than exhilaration. She ducked as a warrior variant swooped low on broad wings, claws outstretched. It missed her, only to jink sideways and snatch away Raelian. He struggled in its grip, blasted at its underside with sting and pistol simultaneously, but it bore him away into the flapping maelstrom and she did not see him again.

Her shrine was down to three members besides herself. They worked their way together, fighting in perfect concert, each blow powered by desperation. The swarm whirled around them, crashing through the thin trees of the forest. They caught glimpses of aerial combats: Swooping Hawks mobbed by dozens of creatures, jetbikes moving at insane speeds, far faster than the winged beasts could fly, dodging artfully only to be dragged down by the sheer density of the beasts. A constant rain of

squirming bugs and weapon fluids splattered the ground, spent ammunition fired above them. A Crimson Hunter flight screamed overhead, spitting rapid death from its wingtips, but the skies were clogged, and one suddenly lurched to the side, flames spewing from its port engine, the result of an alien being sucked into its air intake. It plummeted, winged horrors bouncing from its fairing, going down somewhere to the south-west.

‘Exarch, I fear we are overmatched,’ said Ulieneathar, one of her last remaining warriors.

‘We shall fight on, we kill as many as we can, we die with pride,’ said the exarch, leaping high to eviscerate another large beast. It slammed into the ground. Creatures were falling from the sky, crashing through the trees. The noise of the swarm was tremendous, as overwhelming to the ears as the hive mind’s presence was to the mind, a hideous cacophony.

Falcon grav-tanks drove overhead, turrets swivelling. ‘Even the poorest marksman cannot hope to miss!’ said Ulieneathar, and laughed.

A scream to the left. Hadirel went down, clawing at his shattered faceplate. Blood spurted as writhing grubs pushed through the fingers clutching the wound and into the soft meat beneath. Three of them left in total.

The gems of Thurliarissa’s communications suite coloured red. A command pulse, broadwave broadcast. A voice spoke solemnly in her ear-beads.

‘Retreat, retreat. The day is lost. Retreat, retreat. We return home to mourn our dead.’

Maps sprang up in her lower visual field – fallback points.

‘We must fall back, she said coldly. ‘The fight is done untimely, home awaits us.’ What did she have to fear, who had lived lifetime after lifetime? Her last two warriors, Ulieneathar and Ralitheen, signalled their understanding. They turned and ran.

Foliage whipped across their faces. Creatures came at them from everywhere. Thurliarissa threw herself aside as a pair of Swooping Hawks crashed into the ground directly in her path, mauled flesh bloody through their broken armour. Something exploded in the sky, and burning debris pattered down. Slow-moving creatures, large as young void whales, had joined the swarm. Hundreds of the smaller beasts detached from these aerial brood mothers. Wings sharply folded, they swooped upon the fleeing eldar like eagles.

Other warriors joined the Patient Blade, other far-spread squads who had been engaged in the hunt for Far Ranging Hunger’s remnants converging on the evacuation point. Thurliarissa snapped off shots as creatures lunged for her. Their death screams, she fancied, were more of frustration than pain. Ulieneathar killed a couple of the lesser types with his shuriken pistol. Ralitheen chopped in a controlled frenzy about herself, every blow severing a wing and tumbling a screeching monster to the ground. Fist-sized beasts bounced from Thurliarissa’s armour, tiny mouths lined with rows of diamond-hard teeth snapping at her. She crushed them underfoot, where she could.

There were several dozen eldar Aspect Warriors streaming back. Their shrine markings were familiar to her from long association; Burning Rebuke, Hail of Tears, the Edge of Silence... They were all depleted, most under half strength, and they were still falling, plucked from the forest floor or smashed to the ground as multiple creatures mobbed them.

Calm instructions came to them over the communications web, directing them slightly to the west. They went up an incline. The noise of engines reached Thurliarissa’s ears, then heavy weapons fire.

A dozen grav-tanks were arrayed in a circle in a break in the trees, guns blazing at everything around them. Laser light and actinic bolts of plasma lit up the clearing, large-diameter shuriken scythed the sky of monsters. The sky rained burning tyrannids, and the assault on the group grew less ferocious.

Guardian squads aided by the Shrieking Havoc shrine swept the evacuation zone free of voidspawn. Thurliarissa was a warrior first and foremost; death held little fear for her, for she was unlikely ever to truly die. If she did, another would come, don her armour and add their soul to those who had gone before.

But even she felt relief.

Eldar were emerging from the trees, pursued by warrior beasts. The monsters, intent upon their pursuit, ran straight into the barrage of cannon fire streaking from the tanks, and the eldar broke free. By order from the Inner Command, some joined the firing lines of eldar, other ran up the boarding ramps of the tanks. When full, the tanks closed up their doors and shot off into the sky, using their greater speed and agility to evade the swarm. Thurliarissa saw the flare of webway gates on the mountaintop, another storm of weapons fire there clearing a way for the tanks to drop off their passengers. Other tanks landed, empty, their doors hissing open and turrets adding to the aerial barrage around the clearing.

The tanks were several hundred paces away. Thurliarissa shouted for her last warriors to run. They were nearly there.

A roar split the air. A giant creature landed directly in front of her, the ground shaking with the impact of its taloned feet. A hive tyrant, a general of Starving Dragon. It bellowed again, raising its high-horned head to the heavens, wings spread wide. Thurliarissa took this as a challenge.

The creature was three times her height, heavily built, and surrounded by an aura of utter malevolence. Below the wings, two enormous weapon arms were held up in front of it, similar to those of a praying mantis, but broad and flat, the deep purple carapace on the front full of tiny holes. The creature shook, and these arms twitched, shooting a shower of sharp-toothed organisms at Thurliarissa. She dodged, but some caught her. The impact was phenomenal, the velocity of the creatures equal to that of solid-shell bullets. One of the things found a chink in her armour, and pain flared as it burrowed manically into her flesh. She ripped the grub out, crushing it between armoured fingertips.

The creature charged, horned head down. The psychic horror it projected had little effect on Thurliarissa. She had in her time fought the daemonic servants of She Who Thirsts, and the perils of the flesh held no fear for her. But it was big, and fast, and her battle skills were sorely taxed by its prowess.

The club-like weapons limbs flicked forwards. The air they displaced buffeted Thurliarissa as she pivoted on her back foot, bending her lithe body around the arms. As they passed, she saw the rear sides were lined with hundreds of triangular plates like teeth, each serrated and deadly sharp. She responded with a volley of shuriken at the creature's eyes. The disks embedded themselves in its armour, only one finding its way through to the soft flesh beneath. The tyrant blew out air from its nostrils, and slammed its curved arms forwards again, whipping them back as fast in an attempt to snag her on their rear-facing blades.

Again she twisted, avoiding the blades by a hair's breadth. She dropped to the floor, and slashed with her chainblades. The diamond teeth of the weapons caught at the horny plates covering the creature's legs, jolting her arms, but did not cut through. She was forced to roll away as a foot descended, the sharp hoof and subsidiary claws upon its ankle biting deep into the ground.

Then Ulieneathar and Ralitheen were there, chainswords purring, raking the beast with shuriken fire from both sides. Through its pounding legs, she saw the flashes of colour as eldar sprinted past. Time slowed as her mind was filled with the memories of a hundred similar combats, each aspect of her composite soul appreciating the recollections in its own, subtly different way.

She pulled her knees under her. Pushing off from her feet, she leapt between the creature's legs as it slammed Ralitheen to the side with its clubbed forelimbs. Ulieneathar drove his chainsword into the back of the creature's knee joint. It stumbled forwards, wrenching the weapon from his hands.

'Run! Run! This foe is too great for us!' Thurliarissa called. Ralitheen was up and into a limping run, Ulieneathar sprinting ahead. The hive tyrant lumbered in pursuit. Building up speed, it spread its wings, gliding after them.

A crack of superheated air had Thurliarissa's ears ringing as a lance beam snapped out from a Guardian support platform. It caught the tyrant square in its wing joint. The spread limb furled awkwardly, and the tyrant came down. As it got to its feet, other weapons came to bear on the giant beast, hammering into it mercilessly. Its chitin cracked, luminous ichor spilling down its exoskeleton. It roared weakly, and sank forwards.

Thurliarissa and her remaining warriors made it into a waiting Falcon grav-tank. Three more eldar leapt in after them. Warriors jumped into three other transports alongside their own, and the doors began to close.

The voidspawn were not done with the Patient Blade. With the tanks concentrating fire on the hive tyrant, a sudden surge of beasts flew in over the evacuation zone. Shuriken whistled at them in an upward hail, felling dozens. Scores got through.

As one, they opened fire, sending a tide of living ammunition streaming into the holds of the grav-tanks. The door to Thurliarissa's transport hissed shut, sealing the warriors into the craft with thousands of squirming weapons grubs.

The creatures spasmed violently, expending what little life they had to destroy the eldar. First to fall was Ulieneathar, shrieking horribly as the beetle-like constructs burrowed through the weaknesses in his armour and through the hardened bodyglove beneath. Then Ralitheen. And finally Thurliarissa. They all swatted at their limbs, fingers digging frantically at flesh to pull the creatures out, but there were too many.

Pain of a kind Thurliarissa had never felt overwhelmed her as the creatures chewed through her soft tissues, their barbed bodies scraping against her bones. Acidic secretions burned her nerves. The strength left her legs. She collapsed to the floor, and was engulfed by the grubs.

The last thing Thurliarissa heard in this life was the screams of eldar in many transports being devoured alive.

All over the Valley of the Gods and the Godpeak, eldar were withdrawing. Craft fell from the sky as they were overwhelmed. Grav-tanks were chased by shimmering clouds of living ammunition. Webway portals burst wide as squads and vehicles fell back. Here and there, daring seers dropped webway beacons, and temporary doors opened into the network, allowing the evacuation of isolated units who otherwise seemed trapped.

It was as close to a rout as any withdrawal Sunspear had overseen. Screams filled the airwaves, adding to the insidious terror projected by the hive mind. Purple and white tyranids broke like a wild sea upon small islands of eldar resistance.

Sunspear remained to the end, directing the heavy weapons fire of his weapons batteries and tanks to aid the evacuation as best he could. To the west, on a crag below the command post, his Revenants fought with three gigantic hive crones, the bladed tips of the tyranids' limbs slicing curls of wraithbone from the Titans' armour. He clenched his teeth as he watched a giant winged creature knock a war walker from a cliff, snatch up a second in its claws and drop it onto the rocks below. In the valley, the Avatar of Khaine battled on, its giant form reduced to a glow surrounded by darting

shadows by distance. Sunspear watched as its fires were gradually eclipsed by the creatures attacking it.

He could not save it. Shame filled him.

‘The heavier elements of our force have withdrawn from the valley, Autarch Sunspear,’ said Hethaeliar the Fourth-Blooded, her sing-song voice as empty of emotion as ever.

‘What of Guardian group Whispering Aid?’

‘All dead, autarch. As with so many others, their waystones remain where they have fallen. It is something of good fortune that none, as yet, have been destroyed.’

‘How many dead?’ said Sunspear quietly. A Crimson Hunter exploded in the valley below. To his left, a range of support weapons intensified fire to the front of the rock shelf, battering a rearing harriidan out of the sky. Its cargo of gargoyle children shrieked as they burned.

‘Four hundred and eighty-seven,’ she said. She shrugged. ‘None damned. That is a thing.’

‘It is a thing,’ agreed Sunspear without conviction. ‘Sound the final retreat.’

‘What of the Avatar, autarch?’ said Hethaeliar.

Sunspear turned away from the battle below, refusing to look at the place he had last seen the god-fragment. His posture told Hethaeliar all she needed to know. Sunspear looked at the farseers by his Wave Serpent, entirely occupied with keeping the morale-sapping presence of the hive mind at bay. His heart was like lead, his tongue ashen. ‘I will inform the farseers myself.’

Hethaeliar the Fourth-Blooded dipped her head. ‘As you wish, Autarch Sunspear.’

Her words were bland. Hethaeliar seemed entirely emotionless outside of combat, but within the carefully phrased statement, Sunspear detected her censure.

The eldar left Dûriel. The last to leave were the great Revenants, the rearmost covering his sibling as the webway portal gaped wide to allow his entrance. Stalking backwards, pulsars blazing, the second Revenant left the plateau below the summit of the Godpeak.

Within, wayseers hastily performed the rites of closing, sealing shut that which had been shut for ten thousand passes, but they worked under great pressure, and the hive mind battered at them as they sought to lock the way. Thinking their task done, these eldar returned to their ships with heavy hearts, not knowing that the doors had not been closed.

Deep in the forests of Dûriel, a pile of corpses stirred. An eye opened underneath a tangle of limbs. With a snorting grunt, a leader-beast stood tall.

A four-armed creature, a great swarmlord possessed of deadly and sure purpose. The eldar had been thorough, but the creature’s cunning was depthless, with a sharp mind of its own, and able to draw upon millions of years of the hive mind’s experience. Red and bone was its armour, the colours of Far Ranging Hunger. It roamed the mountainside, gathering to it those of its kind that had survived, burrowed in the ground, hidden in cracks in the earth, or lurking under mounds of dead warrior beasts. As the hive mind, focused through this leader, made contact with the primitive cortices of the creatures they ceased their basic behaviours, sharpness returned to their eyes, and they moved with surer purpose. Those of Starving Dragon fell under its influence also, quickening in infinitesimal steps the merging of the two branches of the hive mind present on Dûriel.

All over Dûriel, Leviathan calmed, going back to its feeding. But Kraken did not. Scouring the site of the battle, the tyrant at last came to the peak of the mountain. There, through unearthly senses, it spied an emanation of energy suspended above the ground.

Driven by the limitless malice of the hive mind, it went to investigate.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Strange Ambassadors

There was no joyous welcome for Sunspear's force. The ships exited the webway and slid into the docks of the Towers of Bloodied Knives without fanfare. A semicircle of seers awaited him, heads bowed and expressions grim.

+They believe he has failed,+ mind-whispered Taec to Kelmon. The two of them were on a balcony overlooking the quayside. Crowds of silent eldar looked on with them, lining the walkways and viewing platforms that jutted over the quays. Many cast their eyes askance at the Iyandeni. Kelmon's presence elicited abhorrence in the Biel-Tanian civilians already, and Taec was uncomfortably aware that they were held accountable for Sunspear's defeat. Their staring annoyed him.

He was feeling wearier than usual today. That morning he had noticed crystal strands shining in his hair, fascinatingly supple, yet not of his earthly body. The tingling in his crystallising limbs was stronger. He had an urge to return to the Dome of Crystal Seers on Iyanden and sit, never to rise again. He put the call from his mind. There were more pressing matters to hand before he could take to his rest.

+His chances were never great,+ said Kelmon. +And yet I believe although he may have failed in his aims, he might yet have succeeded in ours.+

'Time has been bought,' said Taec aloud.

'Time has been bought,' agreed Kelmon. 'With eldar blood, but yes, time has been bought. We may yet be successful in preventing the joining, if we can persuade them to venture to Dûriel one last time.'

'Lose one battle to win the war. If only it could have been achieved in another way.'

'You of all people know well that sacrifice is demanded if we are to survive as a race,' intoned Kelmon, his deep, dead voice well-suited to the solemnity of the occasion.

Taec thought of the vision of his own demise, and he shuddered.

They watched as floating biers bearing eldar corpses were brought from the ships' sides. Those on the Path of Mourning wailed at their sides. A group of spiritseers fell in with the first of the biers, leading them to Biel-Tan's Catacombs of Repose, where their waystones would be ritually removed. Waystone caskets were interspersed in the funeral procession, carrying the gems of those whose bodies could not be retrieved.

Sunspear, his helm under his arm, went before the semicircle of seers. The three farseers with him joined at the horns of the group to face him. Sunspear was renowned as a haughty figure, self-assured, but the eldar Taec saw moved stiffly, keeping his eyes from the line of the dead and bodiless moving slowly past him. A gasp went up from the silent crowds as he knelt before them, an unusual mark of humility. He cast his arms wide, head bowed.

'An act of contrition, but for what?' asked Taec. 'What has befallen Biel-Tan?'

An iron throne was led out from the ship's wide doors: gravitic motors humming, surrounded by an honour guard of exarchs, empty of its god-fragment.

'He has lost Biel-Tan's Avatar,' said Kelmon. 'That is why he kneels. Troubling, most troubling.'

Taec glanced at his one-time rival. 'The skein grows ever more tangled,' he said.

‘We said that a conventional strike would avail us nothing!’ said Altariec angrily, his staff levelled at Sunspear’s chest. The autarch had changed from his armour, wearing robes coloured the white of mourning. ‘The skein was clear on this: that the swarm of Far Ranging Hunger would be too numerous to extirpate from Dûriel by the Swordwind’s efforts alone, it was said, and so it proved to be. What have you achieved, O vaunted son of Biel-Tan? Nothing!’ Altariec slammed his staff hard upon the floor. ‘Nothing I say, save death and the loss of eldar souls to our ever-thirsting enemy.’

‘The thirst of one enemy is tantalised so the hunger of another might be blunted,’ said Sunspear. He held his gaze level on the farseer. ‘We have traded life for time.’

‘And for what?’ said Altariec. ‘So that the mating of the Dragons might take place two cycles later than at first fate decreed? Oh, a fine bargain you have struck for the children of Biel-Tan. We thank you, great and mighty autarch.’ Altariec gave a deeply mocking bow, causing a flurry of shocked chatter to fly around the chamber.

‘Iyanden’s warriors are coming,’ said Sunspear, raising his hand in Taec Silvereye’s direction. ‘We are honoured by the presence of the current head of the seer council, as well as the presence of the former.’

They debated in the Chamber of Seers, an ornate spherical space ranked with many podiums that eldar stood upon, each encased in his own column of light. Many dozens of eldar psykers were there, not only those tasked with guiding the craftworld’s fate, but warlocks, senior bonesingers, wayseers, pathmasters and more; all had a say in the affairs of the seer council of Biel-Tan. The craftworld’s numerous autarchs were there in force, nearly twenty of them, stood in a block of seats of their own. Not all of them supported Sunspear’s efforts, and those minority that did not stood apart from their fellows, a line of empty podiums dividing them cleanly.

The debating floor was a mosaic composed of giant gemstones, paving slabs of diamond, emerald and star sapphire, interspersed with panels of red grasses, different species artfully planted and cut to form intricate patterns. Altariec and Sunspear faced each other over it.

‘And they are welcome here,’ said Altariec, in breathtaking opposition to his actual welcome of Taec and Kelmon, ‘but they are but two, while the children of Far Ranging Hunger and Starving Dragon are effectively numberless. The warriors of Iyanden are many cycles away. And how many, we do not know – they are in the webway, and our communications to them are delayed or dispersed by the mind of the Dragon. We have had no reply from them, as Iyanden did not receive our reply to their petition for aid.’

Taec was troubled by this, for he too had been unable to get through to the Phoenix Host. It was as if the Great Devourer had cast a shroud upon the eternity matrix; that, or darker forces had. It was a possibility that troubled him.

‘The council voted to approve the mission,’ said Sunspear coldly. ‘You, the elder of the council, may not have agreed with the decision, but the vote was a clear majority.’

‘We approved a limited strike! You exceeded your remit, autarch, and provoked a sleeping giant. Our children paid the cost for your arrogance,’ said Altariec.

‘I saw a chance to further the future of the empire.’ Sunspear threw his hands up, and turned slowly on the spot, addressing the entire chamber. ‘The skein is shrouded, the mind of the Dragon blinds you, you all say so. At times like this, we must look to other means of decision-making. Would you have me hold back, only for unseen opportunities to slip away to our detriment? Would you look back, and see in retrospect on a clear skein how things might have been, and weep? No! I did what had to be done.’

Forlissiar stood to speak. ‘It is true that Autarch Sunspear performed magnificently under the

circumstances.’

‘Thank you, Forlissiar,’ said Sunspear.

Altariéc sneered.

‘I did say under the circumstances, autarch. My blandishments are not without caveat. But blandishments they are. Even I admit this, Altariéc, and I am one of your chief supporters. You ever were the voice of caution, and we respect you for it. Indeed, in a craftworld such as ours, circumspection is to be valued, lest hotter heads drag us all down with them. But whether Sunspear was right or wrong in his attack, the problem remains. If the fleets combine, then doom will fall upon us all heavily, whether we spend the blood of our children with profligacy, or hide our warriors from harm. Our visions were quite clear on this also, were they not?’

Altariéc sighed, and leaned on his staff. ‘Yes, yes. It is an impossible position. I see fire and death should the Dragons merge, but the immediate future for Biel-Tan should their merging be prevented is grimmer still; seriously weakened, we will be easy prey in the arcs to come. And this is my objection, as well you know. Success is so slender a chance, no matter how we manipulate fate.’

‘Should they merge, the arcs to come will be the last arcs of our kind,’ said Sunspear. ‘Surely you must see this?’

‘You would give up?’ said Taec. ‘Might I speak?’ he added, looking imploringly from face to face. Haughty Biel-Tanians looked back, their approval or lack of it masked by courtesy. ‘I am a guest here, and will not unduly influence your deliberations.’

Altariéc waved his hand. ‘Very well. You are here. You are well respected. You may address us, Taec Silvereye of House Delgari of Iyanden.’

‘My thanks to you, father of seers,’ said Taec humbly to Altariéc. He addressed the rest of the council. ‘I understand your fears, the fate of my own people is not one I would wish upon yours. But you have seen the consequences of not acting. You all have.’

Muttered conversations sprang up in the ranks of seers and autarchs, some agreeing, others in angry dispute.

‘For many arcs we were allies,’ continued Taec. ‘We achieved much.’

‘And then you turned your backs on us,’ said Altariéc. ‘Iyanden’s aims are Biel-Tan’s when it suits Iyanden, and not when it suits the future of all our people, it appears.’

‘Now is not the time to argue on past disagreements,’ cut in Sunspear. ‘What is to be done now, that is the matter at hand.’

‘Scour the planet with fire,’ said Forlissiar. ‘Wipe them out.’

‘Crude, human almost, but feasible...’ said Geraintheneth, one of the autarchs of Sunspear’s camp.

‘I have seen such a future,’ said Taec. ‘Dûriel erupting, its inner fires worn upon its skin.’

‘Atmospheric ignition, that would be an effective manner of destruction,’ said Hethaeliar.

Taec shook his head. ‘The voidspawn will hide in the earth, and emerge after the fires abate. Not many, perhaps, but if only a few dozen of Far Ranging Hunger’s beasts are taken into the embrace of Starving Dragon, we will have failed. The bio-constructs of the Great Devourer are resilient, and the mind that rides them cunning. We would have to destroy the planet from the inside out to be sure.’

‘Such a thing would have been a simple matter in the elder days, but now?’ said Forlissiar. ‘We lack the capability. Even if we were to bring Biel-Tan itself into the system and attack with every weapon we possess we would not fracture the planet, and we will not put our home in harm’s way under any circumstances. Kelmon’s error is a grave lesson to us all.’

Kelmon bowed his long head in acknowledgement.

‘There are still such weapons...’ said Sunspear quietly, almost to himself.

Altariiec ignored him. ‘What then?’

‘Allies,’ said Forlissiar flatly. ‘The threads of the skein indicated allies and a joining of purpose. It is why the council voted approval in the first place. It appears that we must gather more.’

‘Allies are in short supply in this dark age,’ said Altariiec grimly.

‘We must meditate on it,’ said Taec. ‘And then decide upon our course of actions.’

More talk flared up around the sphere.

‘How?’ shouted one. ‘The skein is draped all in shadow! The future is hidden to us!’

‘The Mind Choir. As we did upon Iyanden to good effect, let us do here also,’ said Taec.

More talk, more arguing. Shouting erupted. The Athelin Bahail had not been attempted on Biel-Tan in some passes.

‘For seers they are a fiery breed,’ said Kelmon quietly as the debate raged.

‘We will be thankful of that, before the end,’ said Taec.

Whereas large parts of Iyanden’s Dome of Crystal Seers were fashioned of crystal, showing the veins of the infinity circuit to all, much of Biel-Tan’s was a series of beautifully tended gardens and lakes housed in twenty-three interconnected habitats, the infinity circuit emerging into the world but coyly, where it was not easily observed. The bodies of their crystal seers were not concentrated in one place, as was the way in Taec’s home, but dotted all over the dome’s parklands, so that one might walk through a peaceful copse of trees and come quite unexpectedly upon a crystal-bodied seer rooted to the ground. Warlike in life, the expression on the crystal seers’ faces suggested they reached a certain peace when they joined finally with their ancestors.

The seers made their way to the central dome in ones and twos from various places, emerging from forest edges or coming in from other domes, many having withdrawn for private meditation before the group scrying. Most of the senior seers were attending the Athelin Bahail, no matter their path.

Kelmon and Taec followed Dahtarioc over rolling hills of springy turf. They walked for some time, the exercise clearing Taec’s mind as much as his meditations had. At length they came to a stone amphitheatre cut into a hillside. A hundred semicircular rows of seats surrounded a glowing circle fifty paces across. There, the infinity circuit was exposed to the air. Many small groups of seers came, winding their ways over the hills. Taec felt a sudden grip of sadness at their numbers, reminded of what Iyanden had lost in its earlier battles with the Great Dragon. More than the living seers, his heart was moved by the sight of a dozen or so crystal seers sat on benches in the amphitheatre, as if they enjoyed a play after long, troubled cycles. The crystallised bodies of Iyanden’s own heroes were smashed, her living seers much reduced in number.

Close to a hundred psykers of all kinds gathered in the amphitheatre. Virtually all wore robes in the green and white of Biel-Tan. There were patterns of thorns in various contrasting colours, and a number of different designs executed in differing materials, but as Taec had noted before, in Biel-Tan there was a great deal of uniformity as to how the citizens dressed. An expression of their militaristic nature, Taec supposed. Despite the gravity of the occasion, and their supposed belligerence, their spirits were light, and many laughed easily with one another as they took their places.

Taec was to take part in the scrying, and was given a place by Altariiec, whose froideur towards the Iyandeni had warmed somewhat. Taec thought Altariiec had acted the way he did through fear, and the prospect of being able to see clearly again removed much of this anxiety. His initial hostility towards Taec had dissipated, now that he had presented the Biel-Tanian eldar with a solution.

After Taec had been sitting for a few moments, Altariiec turned to the Iyandeni. ‘The path is set now,’ he said. ‘There is little honour or profit in opposing you, whose thread is so similar to mine. I

will not apologise for my welcome, because I believe that my course is the right one still, but I have no reason to go against the rest of the council when their success would be better assured by my aid rather than opposition. I extend the palm of friendship, see it is free of weapons and ill intent.’ He recited an ancient greeting, not often employed.

‘I see and reciprocate, see also my hand is empty,’ said Taec, somewhat taken aback by Altariéc’s change in mood. His friendliness made Taec like him less rather than more, as it betrayed a certain cowardice and fickleness of character that doubtless accounted for his invidiousness. Taec resolved to watch him carefully.

Altariéc looked to the glowing centre of the amphitheatre. ‘No doubt you think me mercurial.’

‘You are of lusty temperament for a seer, it is true,’ said Taec tactfully.

Altariéc laughed. ‘I am the son of my father, although our final paths are different. All we of Biel-Tan are warriors, but he is mighty.’

‘He lives still?’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ said Altariéc sadly. ‘It seems strange, does it not? I am almost as old as you. My father fell to Khaine,’ he explained. ‘His body inhabits the armour of the Exarch Suilin-Kraitharath, and Suilin-Kraitharath’s spirit inhabits him. In all probability not for much longer, for his body is ancient now.’

Taec nodded. ‘Now I see.’

‘Why I shy away from combat?’ Altariéc became short again.

Taec stifled an irritated sigh. ‘I mean no offence. I mean only that you are less set upon it than your fellows. Did not the Asurya through the path seek to instruct us that balance is paramount in all things?’

Altariéc was mollified by this, making the gesture of offence-swept-aside. ‘That is why I am council head, for the little good it does me...’ He trailed away and looked around. ‘I see we are all gathered. We should begin.’

Kelmon was kept away from the Mind Choir. The Biel-Tanians were not forced into such close acquaintance with their dead often. The majority of their departed farseers were within the infinity core, not caught in living tombs of wraithbone armour. Kelmon was a distasteful oddity to them, no matter how much respect they bore him.

Altariéc stood and addressed the seers. His introduction was to the point, and the seers slipped quickly into their trances. In the uppermost tiers of the amphitheatre, the lesser seers worked hard to push back the hateful presence of the hive mind.

For Taec, the experience was a telling one. Rarely did he join with seers of another craftworld, and he found the techniques of Biel-Tan subtly different to those of Iyanden. War and supremacy dictated the choices they made upon the skein more than any other, and their choice of rune patterns held surprising lessons for him. Taec wondered, as he had wondered before in his long life, if the temperament and character of each craftworld unduly influenced the scryings of its elders. The seers, for example, were supposed to exemplify the wisdom that the path could bring, in the same way exarchy exemplified aggression and prowess in combat, and yet he watched as they discarded threads rapidly for not according with their own view of what should be. Taec would also have discarded the majority, for the choices open to the eldar regarding Dûriel were a slender group, but he would have done so after more deliberation, and some he would have more thoroughly investigated. Perhaps, in less straitened times, he would be well instructed by scrying alongside seers of other worldships.

He tried his hardest to forget that there would not be a later for him, should all he wished for come to pass.

The skein was as before, turbulent and beset by the hive mind, although here at least he was untroubled by restless dead, Biel-Tan's being properly quiescent. Worryingly, he saw that the twin cables of the hive minds' multiple threaded destinies were already joining as the seer's minds sped over the present, and would become one not far into the future. To this outcome there was no exception. Taec wondered if all of them had fallen into the age-old seers' trap, panicked into rash decisions that would bring about precisely the outcome they desired to avoid. Sunspear's attack might yet prove to be the catalyst for driving the two minds together, and that mental joining would in turn guarantee the physical joining he so feared.

Somewhere, Taec swore he could hear laughter. +There is a fell hand at work in all this,+ he thought out. +Beware.+

One by one, the farseers broke away from the conclave, each employing their favoured rune patterns to focus on particular threads of the skein. The world-runes of all the major craftworlds and many minor ones were produced, in some cases many times over. Others gathered up the lesser runes of maiden worlds, renegade settlements, corsair fleets and others who did not follow the teachings of the Asurya, or who had abandoned them.

The Biel-Tanians' minds were glowing sprites leaping from thread to thread in arcs of bright thought-energy. Runes glowed over various destinies. He followed the track of Iyanden many times over, until he was satisfied that his countrymen would arrive upon Dûriel in time. He skirted his own fate. Where he glimpsed his death, he was at least surrounded by the yellow and blue colours of his kinfolk.

Taec withdrew a little from the skein. Runes orbited in multitudes around the entranced seers, somehow avoiding collision. Daytime in the dome was pleasant, warm light from a tame sun shining upon the parklands of the Dome of Crystal Seers. He took the opportunity to think on his initial visions, recalling the runes the dead had showered around him in Iyanden's Dome of Crystal Seers.

He slipped back into the skein. He thought up the Llith'amtû Khlavh. Allies they looked for, perhaps their allies would be of a darker kind. One of the lesser associations of the Knife That Stays The Blade was with the Dark Kin of Commorragh; perhaps that was where they should look for aid. As a balance to its darkness, Taec brought out the Dawn rune, sign of hope and warm satisfactions. He set the two in the position of the second opposition, not quite diametric, but subtly supportive of one another. With this as his focus, he fixed his mind upon the future.

New possibilities opened up, a new possible future rushed towards him. Many kindreds of eldar fought on the blasted surface of Dûriel. Bladed attack craft flew in close formation with the elegant ships of the craftworlds.

+The craftworlds will not stand alone,+ he thought out, then, +I have it.+

Khaine's rune blazed bright over the skein, the Blade That Stays The Knife beside it.

+This is the path to victory.+

Biel-Tan's seers abandoned their own readings and flocked to his side, to see what Taec Silvereye of Iyanden would see.

The farseers delivered their verdict to the war council in the Chamber of Seers.

'Commorragh,' stated Sunspear in bald disbelief. A susurrus of whispers set up from the autarchs around him.

'It is certain,' said Altariec. 'Farseer Taec led the way. Only as a united host can we vanquish this threat.'

'The Dark Kin are our only aid,' said Forlissiar. 'The portents are quite clear. I trust this time you

will listen to us?’

+I do not like this,+ thought out Kelmon to Taec.

+It is fate, and as good as done,+ he replied. They returned to the conversation of the Biel-Tanians.

‘But how to contact them? Any message we send will doubtless go unheard, consumed by the Shadow in the Warp cast by the Great Dragon,’ said Kellian.

‘What then?’ said Altariec.

‘An embassy will be required,’ said another seer, old and with milky white eyes.

‘We are aware that you, Autarch Sunspear, have trodden the streets of the dark city and survived,’ said Forlissiar. ‘Perhaps you could go again?’

‘It was a long time ago,’ said Sunspear gravely. ‘I recall the pathway there, but I do not wish to repeat the journey.’

Altariec gestured irritably. ‘Doubtlessly they sealed it long ago. They are jealous of their privacy.’

‘Murderously so,’ said Forlissiar. He raised an eyebrow to indicate that it would be permissible to laugh, despite the gravity of the situation, and the others duly did.

‘I find them tediously bloodthirsty, and without finesse,’ said Hethaeliar. She was bored by the talk, her mind wandering. ‘Can we not concoct some other plan?’

Sunspear twitched with annoyance. ‘You were there on Dûriel, there is no other plan. It is numbers we lack. The voidspawn are too many.’

‘The Dark Kin are our only hope, nevertheless. Taec has seen it,’ said Forlissiar.

‘I do not like it. But the Dark Kin hold devices we have forgotten. Such a thing as might burn a world. With the Dark Kin at our sides, Biel-Tan and Iyanden will stand at least a chance of preventing the merging,’ said Sunspear.

‘That thread ends in fire and the death of the world,’ said Altariec.

‘Our preferred result,’ said Kellian. ‘You see it now, don’t you, Altariec? Your mode of speech suggests you do. Why trade in ambiguities? Be of one mind with us.’

Altariec leaned his staff out at an angle from his body. ‘This thread has only one favourable conclusion, the one that Taec has seen. I have no choice but to put my support to your proposals, the time to avert disaster to Biel-Tan is past. We must follow the path of fate we have chosen. Or that has been chosen for us.’ He stared at the others with hard eyes as he spoke.

‘I am entitled to change my mind. This path offers the faint possibility of averting the crisis Taec Silvereye has seen. You will recall that my objection was to Autarch Sunspear’s plan, and I was proven correct in that instance. His attempt to purge Dûriel of Far Ranging Hunger’s beasts was a disastrous failure, as I predicted.’

‘Taec Silvereye has made a convincing prediction,’ said Kellian.

‘As did I, if you will recall, Farseer Kellian. You did not pay me much attention.’

Hethaeliar’s focus returned sharply. ‘Taec is not of this world, with all respect, farseer,’ she said, tilting her head in his direction. Taec acknowledged the potential insult, and indicated his intention not to be insulted by a delicate flaring of his nostrils.

‘He is second only in ability to Farseer Eldrad Ulthran of Ulthwé,’ said Kellian. ‘We all acknowledge that.’ He too bowed at Taec. Altariec snorted derisively. ‘If he says it is so, then to the Dark Kin we must go.’

‘It is not so easy, my friend,’ said Sunspear. ‘If we were able to retrace my steps, we would most likely be hunted down and killed. Even if this did not come to pass, and I somehow managed to communicate this portent to them without having the tongue ripped from my mouth, and they then agreed to aid us, that aid would be too late in the coming. Fearful of revealing the path to their

domain, the Dark Kin would take a torturous route. As they delay, Dûriel will beget its abominations, and the galaxy will fall.'

'Quicker rather than sooner,' Forlissiar reminded them. 'The second fall comes what may.'

Sunspear flicked his hand out at the farseer. 'No, I do not agree. We shall rise again.' He made a complex salute. 'The rebirth of the light of ancient days.'

The war council and seer council murmured the same words in response.

Altariéc sighed. He seemed frail all of an instant. 'They will aid us. Taec Silvereye of Iyanden has indicated to us that She Who Thirsts makes a play against us all. The ejection of Far Ranging Hunger's remnant from the Othersea hard by Dûriel was no accident. The taint of the Dark Prince is on this thread.'

'And how shall we?' said Kellian. 'If, as you say, the way to Commorrhagh is barred to us, the more evil fate we have all now witnessed will come to be. There is nothing to be done!'

Sunspear stood stock-still, his hands clenched. He turned abruptly on his heels, and walked from the dome. 'I said the way is barred to us, but not to all,' he said as he left, his head held high. 'There are others we may call on, those who know the webway like none other. Although their aid and that of the Dark Kin may cost us dear, there is another way.'

The seer council looked to one another. Urgent whispers mingled with the rustle of robes as the farseers argued by voice, gesture, and telepathy. The autarchs argued more vociferously.

Kelmon held out his mighty wraith's hand. Silence returned. 'The Biel-Tanians did not allow us to speak at their council, but they said nothing of following their autarch. I suggest we go after him, Taec.'

The Iyanden farseer nodded sharply. The Iyandeni departed, and the seer council of Biel-Tan looked to each other. Several, and then all, hurried after Taec and Kelmon, the autarchs falling in behind.

Sunspear proceeded slowly and with great dignity, stepping out from the Chamber of Seers into the parklands of the Dome of Crystal Seers. Thence he went into the greater body of Biel-Tan, taking a short, wide corridor onto the Avenue of Lost Glories Remembered to be Recaptured, the giant arcaded space that ran just over half of Biel-Tan's length. Five hundred paces across it was and three thousand high, with many galleries and open walkways rising up its either side. Giant statues of historic Biel-Tanian heroes graced its length. Immense archways shimmering with energy fields separated the arcade from the discrete environments of various bio-domes housing ecosystems from across the galaxy. Vast wraithbone pillars, sung to resemble trees, interlinked spreading branches to make of the roof a tracery of breathtaking artifice. Between sky-runners, grav-skiffs and transport discs, aerial creatures flew on the avenue's artificial thermals, nesting in the thousands of living trees and plants that grew in ornate pots between the statuary and all up and down the galleries to create a cascading, vertical garden.

Taec snagged the arm of Kellian, who, being several arcs younger than most of the other farseers, had caught up easily with the Iyanden seer. 'Where is he going?' asked Taec.

'We shall have to wait and see,' said Kellian. 'Your guess will be as good as mine, and I see nothing on the skein but confusion. He spoke of the Harlequins.'

'Doubtlessly,' said Taec. 'They treat with the Dark Kin equally as with us. But I fear his sudden action.'

'I also,' said Kelmon gravely. 'This is no time to be rash.'

Kellian laughed, an unpleasant edge of offence to it. 'Then you have spent precious little time on Biel-Tan.'

Autarch Hethaeliar also joined them, as in time did others. A knot of high-ranking Biel-Tanians

formed around Taec, keeping a respectable distance from Sunspear.

‘I am interested in finding out, are you not?’ said Hethaeliar. She had a detached manner that disturbed Taec. A permanent expression of snide amusement played around her lips, and her eyes were cruel and calculating. Taec could not tell if she were being genuine in her statement or not, for she used her words playfully in a manner that suggested she thought it all a joke, while her dreamy body language said something else entirely.

Taec glanced at her, watching her full lips quirk further with unpleasant amusement, and she drifted away.

+Be wary of her,+ Kellian thought over to him. +She sees all as a game, its sole aim to allow her to exercise her power and lust for conquest. War is all to we of Biel-Tan, if it restores us to our rightful place. To her, enjoyment of the means outweighs the sanctity of the end by far.+

+Such you have on the Path of Command here,+ Taec thought back.

‘Heroism is the pleasant distillation of many noxious ingredients,’ Kellian said aloud.

‘Indeed so,’ said Kelmon.

Eldar thronged the avenue, engaged in the toils of their path or walking with friends, all of them wearing variations on the craftworld’s green and white heraldry. Once again, Taec noted it, thinking on how their militaristic sensibilities bred in the eldar here a certain narrowness of being, tighter even than that decreed by the Asuryan path. He did not think it healthy.

The eldar in the Avenue of Lost Glories Remembered to be Recaptured were subdued, for the news of the failed expedition to Dûriel had by now been passed throughout the entire craftworld. What conversation went on was hushed, and fell away to silence when the eldar spied their greatest living hero striding down the centre of the avenue. The crowds parted to let Sunspear pass, and turned to watch his unhurried progress. They shied away from Kelmon when they saw him, but when the seers of the seer council came hurrying in the wake of the autarch, many eldar fell in behind them out of curiosity. Soon Sunspear was trailing a crowd of eldar many hundreds strong, dragged after him as surely as iron filings are dragged by a magnet.

Sunspear eschewed transport, walking to wherever he was going with a measured stride that, though processional in manner, conveyed him swiftly along the arcade. Seven thousand paces from the Dome of Crystal Seers, the avenue was crossed by a second, similar way that went from one side of Biel-Tan to the other. Where they intersected, the avenue opened out into a true dome. The pillars reared up, doubling their height, and many habitation towers and other buildings were contained under the glass vault, forming a small town. At the centre of the town, where the narrowed avenues crossed, was a lesser dome, roofed over with solid wraithbone.

‘Ah!’ said Kellian with an arch smile. ‘The great amphitheatre. What does he want there?’

The skirts of the amphitheatre were pierced by many arched doorways allowing ingress to its audiences. One, aligned precisely with the centre of the arcade, was bigger than the others, the height of five eldar rather than two. A thick border surrounded it, bearing an inscription that glowed faintly with the light of the infinity circuit. At the apex was a delicate mask, set into a depression: the mask of masques, an exaggerated eldar face divided into two, one half a weeping face coloured the deep red of misfortune, the other a laughing face the bright white of death. Sunspear stopped in front of this amphitheatre’s main archway, and regarded this mask purposefully.

Without warning he sprang from the ground and, using the theatre’s inscriptions as handholds, he swung himself easily the ten paces up to the top of the arch, snatched the mask from its recess in one hand, somersaulted and landed nimbly upon his feet.

‘He would not dare...’ said Kellian.

‘What?’ said Taec.

Kellian only stared at him, his face shocked.

A murmur went up from the crowd. Eldar within their apartments had come out onto their balconies and watched from above. A flotilla of sky craft hovered over the amphitheatre. All were silent. Biel-Tan held its breath.

Sunspear turned to the war council.

‘Come,’ he said, and strode through the archway. The seers and autarchs followed after him. By unspoken agreement, the common citizenry of Biel-Tan remained outside.

The interior of the theatre was dark and cool. Within the arches, a walkway ran around a deep bowl set into the floor of the craftworld. This was filled with descending rows of seats broken up by sinuous stairways. A round area at the centre of the bowl held a crescent stage large enough to present a small battle on. Wraithbone ribs held the soaring dome up high over it. The stage was bathed in light. Superficially white, subtle spectrum shifting made it glow with captured rainbows to the eldar’s eyes, and the soft blue uplighting to the rest of the dome seemed an uncanny shade by contrast. The group followed Sunspear as he made his way down one set of steps. Every tiny noise made by the eldar was amplified a thousandfold, and in the susurrations of moving cloth and breathing thus magnified Taec fancied he could hear teasing voices.

Sunspear stepped onto the stage. The war council and seers halted at its edge.

The mask tumbled from Sunspear’s fingers, not as if he had deliberately dropped it, but as if his nerves had ceased working. Such clumsiness was highly unusual to the eldar, and a gasp went up from the assembled seers. Hands flew to mouths. Some turned away in grief.

The mask seemed to tumble in the air for longer than it should. It met the hard firestone of the stage and shattered, sending splinters out in a broad fan before Sunspear’s feet. They skittered everywhere, and the breaking of the mask and the sound of the splinters skidding hither and thither made a harsh music that took an age to die away, transmuted by the acoustics of the dome to distant laughter tinged with madness.

As the last rasping note faded, Sunspear stepped back.

The light over the stage went out. More sounds of surprise from the farseers among the watchers. Several of them slipped in and out of the skein in an attempt to see what would occur. Their muttered ritual forms and frustrated exclamations evoked more mocking laughter, and this time it was louder and free of ambiguity.

New lights flickered on the stage, one emanating from each shard of the mask. The lights unfolded, each one becoming the graceful figure of a Harlequin: a hundred of them, a Great Troupe, a sight not often seen. Of all kinds they were, Death Jesters, Mimes, Shadowseers; only a Solitaire, who travelled alone and whose presence was rarely revealed, was missing from their number. At their head stood a Harlequin King, the greatest of the Great Harlequins. By his side was a Shadowseer, her faced masked with a blank silver bowl, her cowl yellow and patterned with purple diamonds. At the sight of this Shadowseer, Taec’s eyes narrowed. The skein was blank to him, the presence of these strange images of the wanderers destroying his ability to see it. But there was a psychic echo to this seer, something familiar. Like a scent one does not notice at the time of first experience, but which triggers maddeningly elusive recollections when next encountered.

Sunspear knelt, one knee on the floor, the other raised, his fingers splayed, their tips pressed to the stage surface. He bowed his head, and spoke.

‘Wanderers in the webway, hear my plea and my call for help. A great danger awaits us, a terrible changing of the ways that will bring disaster upon the eldar race and all the galaxy besides.’

He spoke in an archaic form of Eldar not heard upon Biel-Tan since the years after the Fall. Old Eldar was indulgently phrased and sensuous, attributes that had been shorn from the common eldar tongue when the path had been adopted to save the speakers from the temptations inherent in its form. Taec, oldest among them bar dead Kelmon, found the words hard to follow, and yet their meaning was clear.

Sunspear detailed Iyanden's dilemma. The Harlequins were totally stationary, but as Sunspear described Taec's visions, he felt their attention on him – from somewhere far away, but penetrating nonetheless. Sunspear wept as he described his own defeat on Dûriel, gripped by a shame so intense the seers shared it.

‘Already the Phoenix Host of Iyanden makes its way to Dûriel. It is to you we turn in desperation, walkers of the void. Aid is required. The runes of the Dark Kin loom large in the scryings of our seers. Without their alliance, delivered swiftly, a great and terrible threat will rise to engulf us all, the Dragon's hunger will exceed Draoch-var's worst ravages, and the galaxy will be stripped of life. Aid us, we beg of you.’

There was no reply. The regal Harlequin at the throng's front cocked his head in exaggerated mime of consideration, then executed a complicated bow.

The figures exploded into showers of multi-coloured diamonds, the lights collapsed into bright points, then winked out one by one.

Sunspear stood and turned to face the astonished war council. His voice trembled at first, but regained its commanding strength.

‘We must prepare,’ he said. ‘Call the fleet, muster the host again. We return to Dûriel with not one, but two new allies at our side. If the mating of the Dragons cannot be prevented with their aid, then it cannot be done at all.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lord Sarnak

The *Flame of Asuryan* arrowed out of Biel-Tan's main webway portal with a flare of rainbow light. Its pilots manoeuvred deftly between the multitude of ships gathering alongside the craftworld, the nimbleness of the ship belying its size. Further bursts of light painted Biel-Tan as the remainder of Yriel's warfleet exited the webway and came in fast to fly alongside the craftworld.

The voidway was crowded with eldar attack craft at high anchorage, there being insufficient room for them all at the docking towers. The craft were mainly of Biel-Tan, but there were many ranger craft, corsair vessels, and the occasional warship bearing the colours of other craftworlds. Most surprising to Yriel, however, were the bladed vessels of Commorragh sailing in great profusion around the others.

'What transpires here?' he called from his command pod. 'Why is the void crowded with the blade-ships of the fallen ones?' He gripped at his throne arms to stop his arms from shaking. The ague of the spear was hard on him, his fingers stiff within their gloves, his teeth clenched so tight his jaw hurt.

'No word, my prince,' answered his master of communications. 'All are emitting the signals of peace, Dark Kin and Biel-Tanian both.'

'An alliance?' said Yleanor. 'They have come to our aid the second time.'

'I do not trust this,' said Yriel darkly. 'That the Commorrites came to our aid at the time of the Third Woe and now do so again...' He trailed off. A hand went to his mouth. He worried the soft leather of his glove with his teeth for a second and suddenly snatched it away.

'Biel-Tan will speak with us,' said the master of communications. Yriel thought out his approval. A viewing orb came on above the forward portion of the bridge.

'Prince Yriel, your arrival is welcome. I am Autarch Aloec Sunspear of Biel-Tan, commander of this effort to thwart an ill fate. We invite you in the spirit of brotherhood to join us in a council of war.'

Commander. Is that so? thought Yriel to himself. Anger twisted in him at Sunspear's presumption. 'I am Prince Yriel, Admiral, Last Scion of the House of Ulthanash, Autarch and High Lord of Iyanden, late of the Eldritch Raiders. I thank you for your welcome, and return it. Tell me, Autarch Sunspear. What is the business of the Dark Kin here?'

'They aid us, Prince Yriel,' said Sunspear. He was unsmiling. Yriel sensed unbending arrogance almost to match his own. A slight smile tugged at the corner of his lip, and the autarch noticed. His brow creased in response.

Yriel stood, and walked towards the display. 'The Dark Kin aided us not so long ago, in our struggle against the foul orks. They did so for the opportunity to mock our pain. What is their price today? Be on your guard, autarch, this is a situation I am wary of.'

'You lecture the cognoscenti. I have been to Commorragh itself. I have supped with Vect. I know their untrustworthiness, prince of pirates.'

Yriel smiled. 'Then you are better informed than I. Forgive my impertinence, far-travelled one.'

'Follow our impulses to your berth, Prince Yriel. We shall meet soon enough.' The display went out.

Yriel fidgeted with his topknot, pulled off his glove, and slapped it in his palm. A number of

emotions played over his face. ‘Be on your guard, my brave warriors. There is more here than meets the eye.’

‘Docking impulse received,’ announced his master of communications.

‘Allow the *Flame of Asuryan* to respond,’ he said, some of his old energy returning to him, his mind and body invigorated at the prospect of intrigue. ‘Let us be drawn in.’ He set off to his throne, then spun on his heel, pointing at the viewing orb. ‘But let us not be caught.’

‘Yes, my prince,’ said the bridge crew as one.

Yriel stared intently at the Spear of Twilight, hanging in the air by his command pod. He trembled with resurgent weakness and went to stand close by it, then settled back into his chair to be closer to it still.

His crew pretended not to notice.

The *Flame of Asuryan* pierced rippling energy fields to slide into dock, its weapon-studded sides coming to a rest against a four-levelled quay. Walkways on all levels reached out for doors in the side, but only the chief entrance, tall and imposing and framed within the world-rune of Iyanden, opened. Yriel stepped out alone, the Spear of Twilight in his hand. The crescent of farseers there to greet him took a step backwards as its fell energies touched their minds. Seeing their discomfort, Yriel whispered to it, and the sensation retreated.

One of their number came forward again. ‘Your highness, Prince Yriel, I am Farseer Kellian,’ he said, employing the full range of formal greeting postures. ‘On behalf of the council of seers I welcome you to Iyanden.’

‘I thank you for your welcome, but I will not be staying long,’ he said. ‘The fleet needs resupply, and I would speak with Taec Silvereye.’

‘You shall, and our autarchs as Autarch Sunspear requested. Our council of war is in session now, Farseer Silvereye with them.’

‘Then I must join them immediately.’

Kellian bowed his head in agreement.

‘What of the Dark Kin?’ he said. Sunspear had already told him of their alliance to Biel-Tan, but Yriel was curious to see what the farseers thought. ‘It is ill-starred to see so many of their slaveships in close proximity to a craftworld.’

Kellian’s tone was deliberately measured, and that in itself told Yriel how the farseer felt about their presence. ‘They are allies, summoned by Autarch Aloec Sunspear.’

‘The combined hosts of Iyanden and Biel-Tan are not enough?’ he said, feigning surprise.

‘Desperate times, prince, call for desperate measures. Autarch Sunspear’s initial foray to Dûriel was... unsuccessful,’ he said, declining the word to show his regret and slight embarrassment.

Yriel’s eyebrow arched over the Eye of Wrath, the powerful relic that covered his ruined left eye. ‘There was an attack? We heard nothing.’ Which naturally, he had as soon as he had come alongside Biel-Tan, but he saw no reason to reveal the full extent of his intelligences.

‘Biel-Tan draws closer to the wave front of the Great Dragon’s mind. Our messages to Iyanden vanished into the Shadow in the Warp. We struggled alone.’

‘Alone no longer,’ said Yriel. Kellian bowed.

The Biel-Tanians took Yriel to the Chamber of Autarchs. Yriel was weary to his bones, and the spear dragged on his soul like a hooked, weighted net. He paid scant attention to Kellian’s conversation as

they progressed by transport disc from the docks of the Tower of Bloodied Knives, and Yriel had the vague impression Kellian became offended by lack of Yriel's response. Biel-Tan passed by in a blur. Yriel sank into the fugue of the spear. His mind was filled with the comforting wrath of the weapon, and he drifted in his mind to the beach of bone where red waves pounded in relentless procession.

Many times aboard the ship, in the breakneck flight through the webway to Biel-Tan, he had felt a febrile energy, and had been at times voluble as if intoxicated. His crew were used to his moods, the way he would swing from intense chatter to brooding, but for Yriel these more engaged phases, although he still felt ill while enjoying them, loaned him time. At Biel-Tan, at rest – or rather, he thought to himself, at a point of fulcrum in time, where the next dipping of the scales had yet to begin – he was tired, almost bewildered, and said little. Biel-Tan struck him as remarkably uniform, its people regimented, and its architecture, although as billowing and sinuous as that of any craftworld, suffocated by conformity. He saw many eldar under arms, and many training fields, and far fewer places of contemplation and art than he had when aboard the worldships of other kin branchings.

Within the Chamber of Autarchs, his wits sharpened again. The sense of militarism was strongest there; the council met, the exarchs had blooded their warriors. Surrounded by such a concentration of controlled rage, the malign soul of the spear became interested in the world of the fleshly senses once more. Yriel followed its interest, and the scene about him came back into focus. The aspect shrines had gathered about on their stands, the armoured warriors beneath runes woven of light that rotated slowly in the air. Yriel noted how few they seemed in number; their ranks were thin. Sunspear's defeat had been costly.

The Chamber of Autarchs of Biel-Tan was larger than that of Iyanden. Whereas Iyanden's was dimly lit and soberly appointed, in acknowledgement of the bleak realities of warfare and the toll it took upon the eldar mind, that of Biel-Tan was celebratory. The walls, where not pierced with fretwork or curved with decorative embrasures, were richly decorated with coloured bas-reliefs of victory. In alcoves all round the room's circumference, trophies of barbaric lesser races were displayed under bright lights. The dome over the chamber was made of a billion coloured crystal panels, set into a wraithbone tracery of hair-like delicacy. By great art alone, they made an image of Kaela Mensha Khaine's roaring face that glared down at the assembly. The flames wreathing his eyes and mouth seemed to flicker as Yriel passed under the face, and its burning gaze followed him across the room. This was a craftworld that pursued war with enthusiasm.

He could grow to like it here, he thought, if only he liked green and white more, but the combination did little to please him.

The autarchs and farseers were gathered in a golden bowl at the centre of the room, projected viewing orbs cluttering the air showing various tactical plans. Yriel was gratified to see both Taec and the towering form of Kelmon in deep discussion with those of Biel-Tan. If they were included directly in the war council, the alliance was closer than he could have hoped, and some of the worry he had experienced on the voyage at Biel-Tan's lack of reply disappeared.

Sunspear was at the centre of the gathering, stood in a floating pulpit that turned as he conversed, directing his face to those who addressed him. Household badges upon his cloak proclaimed a rich ancestry. He was a hawkish eldar, with a dour demeanour. On first impressions, he was even more unsmiling than Yriel himself had become – Yriel fought down a bitter laugh at that. The prince had been told some passes ago that the autarch bore him a grudge for his activities as a void-reaver, for in his wildness he had not been beyond attacking the merchant ships of fellow eldar, and he resolved to be on his guard.

The assembled eldar debated in calm, formal style various forms of attack and defence, exarchs

around the golden bowl asking questions or seeking clarification in their role. Now the thread had been seized, it was time to scry for detail, seeking out those junctures in causality where victory might be assured or defeat delayed. Layers of plans within plans were proposed, checked upon the skein and set into order patterns, a counter for every eventuality. Yriel was impressed by their methodology, until he realised that their calm air came not from certainty, but rather from forced composure in the face of a lack of sure path through the battle.

Yriel dug deep into himself for strength, drawing upon the dark energies of the spear. In return, he felt the edge of his soul fritter away a little more. Sometimes, he felt there was not much of him left to be devoured, but he was needed and so he took freely from the spear's dark gift. To appear weak in front of an eldar such as Sunspear would be a mistake.

Kellian strode into the throng of debating eldar and proclaimed, in mind and voice, 'The Prince Yriel of Iyanden.'

Yriel came forward, the Spear of Twilight held lightly in his hand.

'Greetings, kinsfolk. I have been informed of your efforts on our behalf, and I give you the gratitude of all Iyanden in return.'

Sunspear's platform hovered closer to the prince. The autarch looked down on him imperiously. He stared long at the cursed weapon of Ulthanash, so long that other eldar unconsciously shifted into postures of disquiet. The spear thrummed in his hand at Sunspear's appreciation. Through the weapon, Yriel heard the autarch's mind, felt his covetousness. With such a weapon... he was thinking. What might be... He saw fantasies of victory, and felt the autarch weighing up the risks of damnation against those of glory, felt too the burning disapproval of what Yriel had done with his talents. Yriel had to exert all of what remained of his will not to pull the spear in towards his body protectively.

The moment passed, and Sunspear locked eyes with Yriel.

'Well met,' said Sunspear. There was little warmth in his greeting, and the form was of the lesser third degree of politesse. 'It gladdens my heart that such a leader has rejoined his folk, and makes petty war no longer. The likes of the last heir of Ulthanash should not be harrying the spaceways, but acting as a leader to his people.'

Yriel dismissed the jibe with a smile, and bowed. 'I returned when occasion demanded, and serve now as I should. All else is in the past. I fight only for the preservation of Iyanden, and the resurgence of our kind.'

'Is that the case?' said Sunspear. He placed his hands, richly decorated with rings of rank, upon the fluted railing around his platform. It sank lower, nigh to the floor, but his native height alone was greater than Yriel's, and the disc ensured he still towered over him.

'I came swiftly,' said Yriel. 'From here, I will debouch into real space and make the void-voyage to Dûriel. The fleet of Far Ranging Hunger needs destroying, and that is a task in which I have some expertise. I remain here but briefly. I have with me also the Titans of our craftworld, for they were too large for the swift passages to Dûriel. Once they are landed, I will engage the hive fleet.'

Sunspear held his eye, then nodded. 'As it should be. We will be present on Dûriel for longer than I had hoped. If we do not destroy the space swarm, then no matter how many we kill on the surface, it will not matter.' Sunspear turned from him, and spoke with one of his own autarchs. Yriel felt the strength leave him, and he had to clutch the spear for support.

'You are well? enquired Kellian, solicitous again. 'The spear is a heavy burden. You feel Sunspear's disapproval keenly.' Kellian regarded the spear carefully. 'They say it enhances the gifts of the mind.'

Yriel leaned upon his curse and his crutch, the Spear of Twilight. He pinched the bridge of his nose between armoured fingertips. 'It does so, potently. I feel the emotions of those whose attention is

directed upon me clearly, and I often hear their very thoughts.’

‘Ah, as our people of old all did, before the Fall necessitated their powers’ suppression. An equally onerous gift, for those not attuned or trained. To have the fullness of psychic power thrust upon you is no small thing, safe only for seers and twinned siblings, or to be mediated by machine. You must languish under the gaze of She Who Thirsts. I feel for you.’ The farseer motioned the gestures of sympathy genuinely meant.

The spear vibrated in Yriel’s grip. He nodded, gritting his teeth together. All he wanted to do was scream in Kellian’s face, spurning his pity. Unbidden images of the spear driven through the farseer’s body came to his mind. He swayed on his feet. He wished to flee the room, to get away from its incipient bloodlust, imbued into the fabric of the chamber by long millennia of war councils and the very nature of the Biel-Tanians. The spear twisted, eager to be free. Yriel held it tightly. He thought of the beach of bone and the sea of red, the hot sun merciless on his face. It was an unkind place, the beach, but there the malice of the spear was ever behind him and not within him, and he knew something of equilibrium on its bloody shore.

Thus centred, he thanked Kellian, attempting to convey with the posture of his body and the movements of his shaking limbs that he was sincere, and sorry for his earlier distraction. ‘I am free of the Dark Prince at least – the spear is death to her creatures, and her whim does not affect me. Tell me, Kellian, might it be possible to obtain a drink?’

Kellian nodded with understanding. ‘Of course,’ he said. Kellian had a chair brought also, lifted on gravity cushions so that Yriel would remain on eye level with his peers, but Yriel sent it away, once again with his thanks.

As Sunspear spoke with his generals, Taec and Kelmon made their way over to the prince.

‘It is good to see you, prince, how do you fare?’ said Taec. His smile, rich with concern, turned to a frown. ‘You appear ill.’

‘It is nothing. I am tired, a long voyage under testing circumstances.’

Taec was unconvinced.

Yriel assayed a smile. It was brittle on his face. ‘Why has the war council proper not begun?’

‘The Dark Kin,’ said Kelmon. ‘They arrived not long before you, but have not spoken with us other than to confirm that they are to offer aid, as brokered by the followers of Cegorach.’

‘What goes on here, that Biel-Tan allies with the Commorrites?’

Taec shrugged slightly. ‘One should not examine a gift too closely. Without them we will fail.’

At that moment, as if they were listening in, the Dark Kin chose to engage with the craftworlders.

A face appeared enormous over the Chamber of Autarchs’ floor, the transmission overriding the Biel-Tanians’ technology and swelling the viewing globe to ludicrous size. The eldar within was of singularly awful appearance. His bone structure was perfectly sculpted – it probably *had* been sculpted, for the Dark Kin of Commorragh were both vain and adept at manipulating the flesh. But his skin was taut and drawn over it as that of a desiccated corpse, of greyish pallor, hinting at a sickness of more than the body. His eyes were large, the whites very white, the pupil and iris the same coal-black; alluring, seductive eyes, but set in that ruin of a face they accentuated the cadaverousness of it. The eyes were not the worst his visage had to offer. By far the most unpleasant feature was his smile: a broad grin fixed by some form of rictus, it displayed overly long teeth and had nothing to it of humour. Contempt, disregard, callousness, cruelty, and an unholy joy were combined in its unmoving architectures. Laughter, especially of a wholesome kind, there was none.

‘Greetings, cousins of the craftworlds,’ he began, his voice booming at unnecessary volume across the speaking-stage, causing the craftworlders to wince. ‘I trust you are well... Oh!’ he said, as if he

had misspoken. ‘Oh, I forget myself. You are not well, not well at all. And I thought that the tedium of the path was affliction enough for you, now you find yourselves embroiled with this ravaging monster from beyond the black gulf. How terribly awful.’ His smile, although it did not change, contrived to become a sneer. ‘Of course, that is why we are here, that is why you shattered one of our historic baubles to summon the laughing ones to come on your behalf. I would tell you to be more careful with what little shared heritage we have remaining to us.’

He leaned in closer. ‘But a wise choice. Had you come begging to Commorragh, you would have left this life begging also, for a quick end. No aid would have been forthcoming.’ He inspected long, manicured fingernails. ‘Ah well, who are we to deny our kinsmen aid in times of need? Lord Vect, Ruler of the Eternal City and rightful inheritor of all the eldar’s legacy greets you, staid Biel-Tan, weeping Iyanden. One-fifth of the fleet of the Kabal of the Black Heart stands here to fight beside you, and a full half of the Wych Cult of Strife, including Mistress Hesperax herself.’ He paused for dramatic effect. His body language was hard and offensive to the craftworlders, worse than his verbal tone. No one moved or spoke.

‘Don’t all thank me at once!’ he said with undisguised glee.

‘With whom do we speak? Announce yourself!’ said Sunspear.

The dark eldar looked taken aback. ‘You do not know me? Truly? How terribly provincial of you. Worse than the mud-pilers of the maiden worlds mighty Biel-Tan has become!’

‘I know you,’ said Sunspear. ‘But courtesy demands you announce yourself.’

‘Oh, very well. I am Lord Sarnak, one of the five prime archons of the Kabal of the Black Heart. The prime of the primes, if you would.’ He peered about expectantly. ‘Anyone? Know me now? Dear me. I will accept your gratitude and amazement later, if you will. Now, in return, let me see who would treat with the Black Heart. Who do we have here? Taec! Is that Taec Silvereye? Doleful seer! And your dead friend. How nice of you to keep up contact through the veil. Sunspear? It is on your behalf the court of the motley king came and dragged us into the Great Wheel for this fight, no need to look so dour, and... Wait! Wait!’ His hand shot up, palm flat outwards, and he peered into his imaging device, his eye becoming magnified to monstrous proportions and his wizened face distorted. ‘Now, now! Prince Yriel himself.’ The eldar bowed with great insincerity. ‘My lord! A pirate no more, they say. A shame, you were so amusing as a buccaneer, so very... earnest.’ Sarnak tittered, and held a intricately embroidered handkerchief to his lips. He took it away with a flourish. ‘A beautiful eyepiece you have. It matches your spear.’

‘The Eye of Wrath,’ said Yriel sternly. ‘I took it from the Shrine of Ulthanash, of whose descendant Karathain Starstrider it is a relic. As last prince of the Ulthamar, I am entitled to carry both eye and spear.’

‘I am sorry, where are my manners?’ said Sarnak. ‘We are kin after all. You have my apologies.’

Yriel’s eyes narrowed. ‘That is not true. There is no kinship between us.’

‘Oh, I’d say there is. On your father’s side, wasn’t—’

Yriel snapped, ‘A rumour! Nothing more.’

‘Is that so? I rather thought not. If you truly are as sure of your parentage as you insist, then might I suggest that your royal house be a little more careful with its princesses? Although between you and I, it would be a shame if you were to be so. Your mother’s ways demonstrate that there are some on the craftworlds who yet have a modicum of spirit, and it would be a sorrowful thing to cage them.’

Yriel snarled. The Spear of Twilight whooshed around, its blade pointing at the image. ‘Hold your tongue.’

‘Is this the welcome you give your allies? Tsk tsk.’ Sarnak yawned theatrically. ‘Perhaps I will start

to feel unamused by you. Maybe I shall take my ships and warriors home and report to Lord Vect that you did not wish for our aid, after all.'

The atmosphere in the Chamber of Autarchs thickened.

'No?' said Sarnak provocatively. 'Good. Because now I can give you your present. Isn't that nice?' He leaned back from the viewing orb's capturing mechanisms on his ship, and assumed the pose of a poet about to declaim verse. 'I have in my possession a weapon of immense power. We of Commorrhagh make of it a gift to you, our benighted cousins who cling so bravely to life here in the Great Wheel on their tedious, joyless path. I would say that we derive no entertainment from your plight, but that would be a lie, and to lie in good company is simply unforgivable.'

His impossibly wide grin grew wider. 'Well, unless circumstances necessitate. Anyway, the nature of the problem was presented to us by the dancing fools, that you lacked a weapon of sufficient potency to incinerate the planet properly. My Lord Vect, in his infinite wisdom, proceeded directly to his grand armoury and produced this.' Sarnak's awful face disappeared, and a monolithic device, tall as a Revenant, took its place. Gems studded its sides at regular intervals, one of great size mounted on its summit. 'Behold!' he said pompously. 'The Fireheart. A device of the elder days, when our kind strode the Great Wheel as masters over all, and didn't live such dreary, funless little lives on boring worldlets. It's in the hold of my ship, waiting just for you. Aren't we *nice*?' He giggled.

'I have seen such as this before,' murmured Taec.

'I also,' said Kelmon. 'It is a relic, powerful. Used by the planetshapers of distant arcs in the sculpting of star systems. It can collapse a dust field into a world in the course of passes, or the resonance it can create in an existing planet's core will tear it apart in mere tenths of a cycle. I believe many were used in war.'

'Imaginative, those of the empire, wouldn't you say?' Sarnak's grinning visage reappeared. He affected an air of sorrow. 'Unfortunately, it is, like so much of our people's inheritance, psychically activated, and the ban on the use of the abilities of the mind precludes we of the Eternal City ever using it. Of course, you, our most excellent cousins, have no such ban, and as I see, there are many of you here skilled in the arts of such sorceries. A foolish taunt to She Who Thirsts, but what would life be if we were all the same? Boring, I say. So bravo. You goad the Dark Prince. Well done you.'

Sarnak was grinning wider and wider now, as if he were reaching the punchline of an enormous joke.

'The Shadow,' said Taec bluntly. His vision flickered through his mind's eye, he on the surface of a world tearing itself apart by a monumental device, and falling to be burned, his soul consumed. 'It will prevent remote activation.'

'He has it! Oh, he has it!' Sarnak pointed his finger at Taec, deformed by foreshortening. 'You will require a powerful conclave of seers to activate the Fireheart, and because of this "Great Dragon" and its "Shadow",' he said scornfully, 'they will have to be on hand to do so.' He put on an outrageous caricature of sympathy around his rictus smile. 'I am so terribly, terribly sorry about that.' He laughed sadistically.

The Chamber of Autarchs erupted in shouts. 'Treachery!' said someone. 'The Dark Kin trick us!' said another.

'It is no trick,' Sarnak said gloatingly. As he drew in the dismay of the assembled eldar, his skin smoothed, his hair darkened and he drew in a sibilant breath of pleasure. The effect lasted but a moment, his features returning to their repellent state of decrepitude as the Biel-Tanians watched. 'You are pleased with our gift!' he said sarcastically. 'How delightful. I cannot wait to inform Lord Vect.'

Sunspear motioned for silence. Those who knew him well saw a storm of emotion flicker across the stony angles of his face. The desire to shut off the holo-field and blast Sarnak's fleet from the heavens was strong in him.

'It is indeed unfortunate. Perhaps you will mourn our losses alongside us?' said Sunspear, his head cocked expectantly. 'No? Very well, as you wish. We thank our Commorrite cousins for their gift, and invite you to our council of war.'

Sarnak hesitated. The Dark Kin were suspicious to a fault, and to walk into the lair of an enemy in Commorragh was foolhardy. All listening were almost sure he would not come onto Biel-Tan itself. 'I shall send my best dracon,' he said eventually, 'along with several of my senior captains.'

'And Hesperax?'

Sarnak frowned. 'Oh no, no, no. She is away on her own business. But do not worry, you will not need to lecture her on your tedious battle-plans. She will be present when her blades are needed, she always is. In fact, there's no need to lecture me further, for that matter. Askar-vaq will speak with my full authority and tell me the interesting parts.'

The holographic projection winked out, leaving the chamber feelingly momentarily empty.

'I am sure he will be watching through this Askar-vaq's eyes,' said Altariec. 'Why must we treat with these monsters?'

'You well know why,' said Sunspear.

Altariec nodded glumly.

'What must be done will be done,' said Taec. 'Fate decrees it.'

As they awaited the eldar of Commorragh, refreshments were served to the assembled warriors and seers. Within a quarter-cycle, a group of pale-skinned officers dressed in ostentatiously ornamented armour were escorted into the chamber. They looked upon everything they saw with snide amusement.

A lesser dark eldar strode arrogantly into the midst of the hall. 'I am Borhu'Q, captain of the Glowing Pain. I present to you Askar-vaq of the Black Heart.' He gave a curt salute, and bowed.

Vaq swaggered forwards, razor-sharp hooks rattling on his armour plating. His face was luminous and beautiful, coloured with a purplish hue to match his bone-threaded hair, his eyes darkened with protective lenses against Biel-Tan's light. 'I demand to know why we were brought here under armed escort,' he said, jerking a razored gauntlet behind him at the Aspect Warriors surrounding him.

'Your honour guard?' said Sunspear innocently.

Askar-vaq laughed, and though the sound was beautiful, his expression was ugly. 'I have followed your campaigns, Sunspear. You are bold and decisive in battle, but I had not expected the slightest modicum of wit from one raised among the po-faced miserablists of Biel-Tan.' He clapped his hands softly. 'Why, another like that and I may mistake you for a trueborn.'

'An insult disguised as a compliment that feels like an insult.' Sunspear raised his arm. 'You do not disappoint. Join our deliberations. Despite your nature, you are welcome here. For now.'

Askar-vaq looked over the food and drink presented him with distaste. 'Why do we wait? Let us get on to the business of the day. My patience is thinning. The sterility of this environment is unpleasant to me. How do you live like this? Our ancestors would be most discomposed.'

Altariec spoke up. 'Some of the Iyandeni are to deploy on the planet Dûriel with we Biel-Tanians and the warriors of your kabal, among them Iyanden's Titans. These ships are slower than the Prince Yriel's vanguard, but will be here soon. The rest of the Phoenix Host will join us via the webway on the surface.'

'Ah, yes! The bold admiral. Yriel! There's an eldar almost worthy of the name.' Vaq snatched a glass of darkvine wine from the tray of a server and held it aloft, and shouted out a toast to the prince.

‘To you, daring pirate! Your exploits generated much mirth in the Eternal City. A shame you did not come to us, you would have received a royal homecoming.’

‘I am home,’ said Yriel. ‘I am prince of Iyanden, last of Ulthanash’s line. It is my shame that I left it.’

A slow smile split Askar-vaq’s perfect face. ‘As you wish, but mother’s home is a haunt for milksops who will not reach for father’s sword.’ He pointed one finger at Yriel, swirling his wine around in his hand. ‘Remember that, O prince.’

Fortunately for the peace of Biel-Tan, one half-tenth of a cycle after Askar-vaq arrived, the Naiad-class cruiser *Vaul’s Caress*, bearing the Titans *Sound of Sunlight*, *Silent Scream* and *The Curse of Yriel*, arrived in the orbit of the craftworld. A number of lesser troop transports came with it. The autarchs, Titan steersmen, exarchs and ship captains borne by them were called in, and the Chamber of Autarchs became crowded with eldar of all kinds. Only the servants of the Laughing God were absent, but Sunspear gave assurances that the deal they had struck included the Great Troupe’s involvement in the fight, and that they would be present when battle was joined.

Finally the business at hand was discussed in earnest, and in depth. Dark Kin in bladed armour rubbed shoulders with the green-and-white-clad Biel-Tanians and the warriors of Iyanden. Rangers and corsair captains spoke amicably with those bound to the path. Petty rivalry was put aside as talk moved on to discussions of strategy, excitement grew from talk of battle, and for a precious cycle it was as if the empire of old had been born again.

Yriel was to take the entirety of the Iyanden fleet, along with large elements of Biel-Tan’s and the Black Heart’s ships, and strike for Dûriel. ‘We will destroy Far Ranging Hunger in space, denying its ground swarms reinforcement, and preventing a later merging,’ he explained. ‘We shall deliver the Fireheart and Iyanden’s Titans while Lord Sarnak holds the main body of Far Ranging Hunger’s swarm, then we shall attack and crush them between our armadas.’

‘What is to prevent a merging elsewhere?’ asked Hethaeliar the Fourth-Blooded.

‘Indeed,’ said Gurieal, her autarch-companion, a male almost as reserved as she. Unusual to see pair-bonded autarchs, and Gurieal’s expression told Yriel he did not much like the manner in which Hethaeliar looked at the prince; her interest was poorly disguised. ‘Far Ranging Hunger attacked the galaxy across a broad front, how do we know it will not arise again?’

‘How entertaining!’ said Askar-vaq, who evidently shared many of his master’s irritating traits. The craftworlders ignored him.

‘We cannot know,’ said Taec. ‘The skein is as blocked there as it is elsewhere by the Dragon’s shadow. We can but trust, and if the occasion arises again, we simply must react again.’

Yriel waved Taec’s concerns aside. ‘There are few elements of Far Ranging Hunger remaining in the galaxy. Most were destroyed by the mon-keigh, others we have hunted down ourselves. Those that remain are easily dealt with, as the Great Dragon requires a certain density of numbers within its swarms. Should this critical mass not be reached, the swarm functions poorly. I feel it in my very core that this will be the last threat we will face from Far Ranging Hunger.’

‘That just leaves the other swarms,’ said one of the Dark Kin. ‘They are only few. You should not need our aid to destroy those!’ The Commorrite eldar laughed unpleasantly.

‘Then we shall all have to become dragon slayers,’ said Aloec.

As soon as the meeting was over, Taec, Kelmon and Yriel rode a sky-platform through Biel-Tan to the Tower of Bloodied Knives. There the *Flame of Asuryan* and the fleets of the eldar were readying

themselves for battle. It was not to Yriel's ship they went, but to *Imbriel's Embrace*, for Taec Silvereye was leaving Biel-Tan.

'Must you go, farseer?' said Yriel. 'The Red Eye needs the Silvereye. Once I was happy to follow my own guidance, but I realise a firmer hand is needed to tame my wildness. Come with me and grant me your rede.'

'Is age bringing wisdom to you, Lord Yriel?' said Taec.

Yriel moved his head a fraction. 'It has been said. It is not mine, however,' he said, his mood turning grim, 'but the spear's wisdom.'

Taec's own smile disappeared. 'It has been determined as best as we could discern upon the skein, I must depart. I must rejoin the Phoenix Host. Our communications are not reaching them, thwarted by the complexity of the webway and the shadow of the Great Dragon's mind upon the Othersea. If they progress as expected, they will be upon Dûriel soon. If they attack without us, they will fall alone and unsupported, not knowing that a greater host comes to their aid mere tenths of a cycle behind.'

Yriel, who had been watching the architecture and crowds of the worldship pass by, looked to the farseer.

'There is more. I sense you are keeping it from me.'

Taec raised his eyebrows.

'The spear.' He bared his teeth. 'I am become a seer also, it seems.'

Taec nodded. 'That makes a breed of sense, prince. Little is known of the Spear of Twilight's true nature, for it consumes those who probe at it with their minds, and its bearers have been few. The spear was crafted at the birth of our race, when our minds were unfettered and we did not live in fear of She Who Thirsts. It is natural, I suppose, that your mind, a blood echo of Ulthanash's own, should respond to its spirit so powerfully.'

'It is burdensome,' said Yriel. 'And it is a burden I cannot set down.' He looked at the shaft clasped in his hand with a mixture of love and hate.

'We all must make sacrifices if we are to survive as a species,' Taec said, remembering Kelmon's words to him.

Yriel looked away. 'For what, sometimes I wonder. For Iyanna's god to stir? Or so that successive generations can suffer even more greatly than we have already? Perhaps our time is over.'

'Do not discount Iyanna's prophecies,' said Taec kindly. 'They might seem the stuff of myth, but these are great times in their way – times of myth – when the fate of everything could well be decided. Despair will avail you nothing.'

'You think this will avail me where despair will not?' said Yriel, hefting his spear. 'Do not trust. It is despair wrought in steel.'

Taec put a hand on the prince's shoulder. 'You bear it well.'

'Look at us,' said Yriel weakly. 'A dying prince, a repentant revenant and a vitreous seer. Are we the great champions of our days? If so these are no mythic times, and you are wrong. Our kind has come to a sorry pass. Our light flickers dimly.'

The platform passed over a sparkling pink ocean, its expanse punctuated by islands fringed by grey sand, and grown over with exuberantly coloured vegetation.

'You do yourself a disservice. The heroes of old were just as flawed as you, and far less flawed than that which came after. You have borne the spear longer than any other save Ulthanash himself. You are of purer heart than you think, Prince Yriel, and mightier than you believe.'

They went into a transit tube bored into wraithbone cliffs rising high over the pink water. The sunlight became an oval behind them, their way ahead lit by coloured running lights, other discs

moving ahead of them, joining or leaving the tunnel at its many junctions.

‘My heart? Before I took up the spear, I set aside the cares of the heart, and became as careless with violence as a Commorrite. In my dreams I look upon an ocean of blood that pounds upon a beach of bone. The foam of this sea is purest white, but each bubble therein contains a death’s head: one for each of the thinking creatures I have slain, I am sure. The sun never sets, nor moves in the slightest. Behind me, a dark presence waits, I feel its eyes upon the nape of my neck, and I dare not turn to face it. There is a peace to this place nevertheless, the peace of endless victory. My heart is not pure, seer, it beats to the pounding of the thick surf. I am lost, lost to Khaine. I am an eldar that should never have been. If I know one thing, it is this: Dûriel will be my final battle. The portion of my soul dwindles, imbibed by the spear. If this must be so, it must be so, but I still do not know who I am.’ Yriel looked Taec dead in the face. The Eye of Wrath glittered dangerously. ‘Who was my father, Taec?’

Taec refused to answer. He squeezed the prince’s shoulder, and let his hand drop. They ceased speaking, and became lost to their own thoughts: Yriel to his bloody sea, Taec to his terrible doom, Kelmon to whatever occupies the dead.

The disc passed over a plaza, picking up speed. It entered another tube, and emerged in the grand lounges at the feet of the Tower of Bloodied Knives. Through crystal panes and energy walls they could see the bulk of the tower cantilevered out into space, cluttered with a thousand warships. The lesser docks and quays were crammed with eldar and machines supplying the vessels. It was surprisingly quiet, the Biel-Tanians intent on their tasks.

The disc floated downwards, heading for a final tube only broad enough for one disc. It ran out along the foot of the tower, and the starward side of the wall was of clear resins, affording them a better view of the fleet.

The disc came to rest at a small quay. The sleek hull of *Imbriel’s Embrace* occupied the dock. Rangers sprang to their feet from where they had been waiting when Kelmon and Taec approached.

Taec stepped down stiffly from the disc, Kelmon by his side. The seers turned to face Yriel. Kelmon made the passes of sorrowful partings in front of his chest, the gestures given great force by the size of his hands. Taec looked up at the prince, his face still sullen at Taec’s refusal to tell him what he wished to know.

‘Farewell, prince.’

‘Farewell, seers.’

‘Prince,’ said Taec. ‘Do not fear the red sea. The thread of your destiny is still being woven by Morai-Heg, and she will not cut it yet.’

The disc rose into the air, and Yriel shouted over its rising hum. ‘Have you not heard, Taec Silvereye of House Delgari? The gods are dead!’

Taec watched the prince depart. His shoulders sank a little. The tingling in his crystallising limbs redoubled.

‘Aye,’ he said softly. ‘We are all the authors of our own dooms.’

CHAPTER NINE

The Great Troupe

‘Ariadien, I am cold.’ Neidaria shivered. Ariadien pulled her closer and moved her to the side of the pathway, out of the way of yet another squad of fully-armoured Guardians jogging past. He held her in his arms. As they were identical in so many ways, they were of the same height, yet she huddled into him and became so small he could rest his chin on the crown of her head.

‘It is this place,’ he said. ‘The Biel-Tanians have a cold world to match their cold hearts.’

‘I was practically shaking the whole way through the gathering in the Chamber of Autarchs. Is there nowhere we can go to warm ourselves? I do not wish to spend the last night frozen to my bones.’

‘I saw a pleasant enough drinking...’ began Ariadien.

‘Must we?’ She snapped. ‘Must we spend the last night with you in your cups, so I may watch you become bitter and sharp-tongued? I would rather freeze.’

Ariadien was taken aback by his sister’s outburst. She rarely exhibited any aggression, even in war practice, where she was instead dispassionately efficient. But here she was, face twisted and teeth bared. Ariadien was taken aback, and took a step away from her, his hands upheld. ‘Sister,’ he said, attempting a joke, ‘pray do not bite me!’

‘You are impossible!’

She turned away, her thoughts bright with her annoyance at him, with sorrow at the deaths that would come tomorrow, at being far from home. Her emotion flooded him. He reached out to her, mind and body. She recoiled for a moment, then accepted his touch upon her back.

‘I am sure there are habitats, warm ones, like at home. Perhaps a sea, or a desert we might explore to while away the night. We have nearly a full cycle before the fleet will be ready to depart.’

‘Prince Yriel is already aboard his flagship,’ said Neidaria.

‘He has his own battle to plan for, we ours, and we are not needed as yet,’ Ariadien said gently. ‘So, a desert dome? We can guarantee the heat there...’

She shook her head. ‘I wish to see the ocean,’ she said.

Ariadien bowed with courtly extravagance. ‘As my lady wishes.’

She laughed through her tears. ‘You are a fool, Ariadien. You always make me laugh, always. How can I stay angry at you for long?’

He grinned. ‘I suspect that if I were to suggest a session of good wines you would be angry with me again.’

She blew a strand of hair from her eyes with a puff of breath. ‘Don’t taunt me.’

He became serious. ‘When was the last time I made you laugh? You have been sorrowful of late.’ He took her upper arms in his hands.

‘Too long,’ she said. ‘There has been little amusement in life.’

‘Then I promise, when this is done, I shall endeavour to make you laugh again – every day! – until you find a bondmate, and then, I solemnly swear, I will spend my days teasing him for your entertainment.’

‘You mean yours.’

He waggled his head and smirked. ‘Well, yes. But it’s almost the same thing, is it not? You and I are

the same.'

'One and one is one,' she said, the words they had spoken to each other every day since they had been children, when their minds had gradually divided from each other's as they had grown and they had become as individual as they ever would be.

'One and one is one,' he repeated, resting his forehead on hers. 'What is to be done with us?'

Neidaria smiled sadly, a mirror image of his own face cast in female form. 'Survive, until these wars are past memories and our service to Iyanden deemed complete.'

'I will be by your side until that is so.'

'I know you will. I love you, my brother.'

'And I love you too, my beautiful sister,' he said. Their combined affections overwhelmed them, and they stood in silence, one soul in two bodies, as the warrior-folk of Biel-Tan rushed gladly by them to their next war.

Ariadien found a suitable dome through the infinity circuit of the world. He melded with it at a public terminal. If he were truthful, it was not an entirely pleasant experience, being at once familiar and alien. The infinity circuit of Biel-Tan did not rage with angry spirits as did Iyanden's, but that was not to say it was the same as Iyanden had been before the Triple Woe had filled the circuit with the early dead. Biel-Tan had a cold soul. There was little of kindness to it, it had an iron certainty tempered with nervous frustration, as if it had bided its time through long night and was impatient to see the dawn. War seemed its main preoccupation, and as Ariadien interfaced with it his soul inadvertently touched upon the multiple domes, shrines, and groups dedicated to the prosecution of Khaine's bloody arts. The infinity circuit's gestalt mind regarded Ariadien as the Biel-Tanians regarded him. It was obvious he was a foreigner to both. There was a mild indifference and superiority in the infinity circuit's regard that bordered upon hostility.

He found what he was looking for within the circuit and withdrew, then led his sister to a transport hub where they took a disc and soared away over Biel-Tan's spires.

Half a tenth-cycle later, they were walking barefoot along the shores of a vast sea of cerise water, warm sun upon them. He sighed in happy sorrow, his heart carried to sad, comforting places by the pounding of the waves on the grey beach. Large aquatic animals of a shocking pink played out in the bay, double tails slapping at the water as they breached and came splashing down. Seabirds of types Ariadien had never seen wheeled in a simulated sky, and strange shells littered the sparkling graphite of the sand.

Other eldar paced the strand, but they were infrequent adornments to the beach. Ariadien could not see the end of it, and the sea seemed to stretch on forever.

They walked in companionable silence for a time, until music interrupted their shared reverie. Neidaria grabbed at Ariadien's arm, and pointed away from the sea to where a line of dunes fronted a red-leaved forest. An eldar sat upon a tree trunk bleached a light red by the salt and sun, beyond the line of tidewrack.

'A musician! Let us go to him!' said Neidaria, her face lighting up. She ran from him before Ariadien could grab her, and flew some way before him, sprinting lightly. He could not muster the enthusiasm to go and converse with a stranger and so did not run, but despite his reluctance, he tramped wearily through the hot sand after her.

By the time Ariadien had caught up his sister was in conversation with the eldar, laughing at something the other had said while he was out of earshot. Her happiness at this distraction infiltrated his mind, and he could not remain angry with her any more than she had remained angry with him.

The eldar was shading his face from the sun as he looked up at Neidaria. He was dressed in rich clothing of simple cut, and his face bore the signs of great age: fine lines around his eyes, a certain parchment thinness to the skin, and an attenuation of the cartilage in his nostrils and the tips of his ears.

‘Ah! The brother,’ said the musician. ‘Well met.’

‘Well met,’ said Ariadien cautiously. ‘You are no Biel-Tanian.’

The eldar followed Ariadien’s eyes up and down his clothing. There was not a patch of white or green anywhere upon it. ‘No, it appears that I am not.’

‘And you are old!’ blurted out Neidaria. Ariadien cringed inwardly at his sister’s gaucheness, but the old eldar was unruffled.

He dipped his head. ‘I am.’

‘How old are you?’ asked Neidaria hesitantly, picking up on Ariadien’s embarrassment.

The stranger laughed. ‘Older than most you have ever met or will ever know, but does it matter?’ He gave a cheerful toot upon his pipe, a summer-flute as long as his arm. ‘I am here, and you are here. Location and position in time, and yes, I include age in that – these things are unimportant. Strangers meet in a moment, strangers part in a moment. Let us enjoy the moment together.’ He gestured to the bleached log. ‘Please, sit with me a while. I would be glad of the company.’

Neidaria looked to her brother. +Shall we?+ she thought to him. They were close enough to speak mind to mind without mediating equipment.

+I don’t know,+ Ariadien thought back, caution underlined his words. +There is something a little... off, about this one.+

Neidaria burst out laughing. ‘Oh truly, Ariadien!’ she said aloud and clapped her hands together. She sat herself down with an abandon that was almost inelegant. ‘I am Neidaria, this is my brother Ariadien.’

‘Twins,’ stated the eldar. He fixed Ariadien with eyes filled to brimming with the weight of many arcs, and Ariadien’s spirit buckled under their examination. ‘A sad rarity now. You are luckier than some in some ways, unluckier than some in others.’ He played a brief tune on his flute.

‘What do you mean?’ said Ariadien, who would not sit.

‘What do I mean? I mean this: you are close enough to communicate mind to mind without fear. Such a bond is so tight even She Who Thirsts cannot slip a blade between you to sever Morai-Heg’s cord. You experience something few others in these times can, and naturally so, as it was meant to be. Machine shielding, or the path of the seers... these are poor manners by which souls should commune. You are lucky in this, as much as you are in your deep love for one another.’ He played again, a mournful sound, then stopped. His musical interjections were unselfconsciously done; he tooted a few notes or bars, a musician looking for a song to play. ‘Look to the sea, how it appears infinite here. Purposefully so.’

‘How so?’ asked Neidaria. She still wore an expression of gaiety, but she shuddered despite the heat of the bottled sun.

‘It was designed by its architect to be that way, in recognition of a past so distant it is no longer even myth. The emotions of our kind are as the sea. Did you know that many of the first of those born from Asuryan’s grace chose to live by the oceans of their home world, regarding them as the finest of Isha’s gifts? Oceans and seas were beloved of our kind long before we first stepped into the void, for we share affinity with them. As our emotions, they appear infinite, they are of plumbless depths. They can transform in an instant from calm to fury, they are possessed of boundless beauties.’ He pursed his lips, and there was contemplative sadness in his expression. ‘Only those of the old empire discovered

that nothing is infinite, and that no depth is too deep to be plumbed. All oceans are only smears of water lost in the night, and the vastnesses of the true oceans – the void and the Othersea – are not to be lightly sailed.’ Another burst of music.

‘You said unlucky also,’ said Ariadien.

‘Did I?’ he said, seeming genuinely surprised. ‘So I did. Unlucky, young Ariadien, in the same depth of that selfsame bond. For if one suffers, so does the other. If one dies...’ He shrugged. A smile wiped his grave expression away. ‘Serious matters. I am sorry. Enjoy what you have. It is in the moment that we truly live, and this is a pleasant moment and should be lived as such.’

‘Serious matters for serious times,’ said Ariadien. ‘Death may greet us soon, we go to war tomorrow.’ He squatted down beside the log, picked up a fistful of sand and let the grains run through his hands.

‘Steersmen?’

They nodded simultaneously.

‘Ah.’ He looked at them both. ‘And if I am not mistaken, a path not freely chosen. I am sorry.’ He lifted his flute, then lowered it as a thought crossed his mind. ‘You seek distraction?’

‘Yes. Ariadien brought me here to take my mind off the war.’

‘Then be advised, young eldar, that tonight a Great Troupe of the wandering folk has gathered in such numbers that none can remember the like. They come to aid the Autarch Sunspear, and will fight alongside you tomorrow.’

‘That is good news,’ said Ariadien.

The eldar smiled widely, his eyes twinkling with mischief. ‘But it is not the best! Tomorrow they fight, tonight they dance.’ He leaned forwards, his voice dropping, and he looked from one sibling to the other in conspiracy. ‘There are rumours that a Solitaire is aboard Biel-Tan, and so they shall perform the Dance Without End! A rare occasion, one that must be grasped with both hands, Neidaria, Ariadien! Such an opportunity may never come around in your lifetimes again.’

Ariadien grew excited, and he felt his sister’s interest building too. ‘Truly?’

The eldar nodded seriously. ‘Truly.’

‘I have always wanted to witness the Dance!’ said Neidaria.

‘Every eldar should.’ He held up a long finger. ‘And tonight you shall.’

‘Thank you, stranger, for your words and your advice.’ Neidaria bowed her head in respect. ‘But what is your name?’

‘They call me Lechthennian,’ he said, dipping his head, his ancient face alive with a glee that the twins found infectious. ‘I will play awhile now, before attending the performance. We have plenty of time. You are welcome to remain with me and listen, if you would. Speak no more of war, let the sound of the sea and this simple flute soothe your fears away.’

‘We would very much like to,’ said Neidaria before Ariadien could speak.

Lechthennian looked to her brother. ‘Very well,’ Ariadien said.

Lechthennian winked and held the summer-flute up to his lips. ‘Then listen,’ he said. ‘And know gladness.’

What Lechthennian played was far from simple, a long and haunting melody of such power that Ariadien found himself weeping and laughing at once. He could not look at Lechthennian as he played, afraid that the sight of his ancient eyes and the music combined would overwhelm him. He and his sister stared out over the sea, the music stirring in them images of times a million years ago and more, when simpler folk than they dwelled by the sea and looked out onto it with joy in their hearts and minds.

They fell asleep to the music, and dreamed of peace.

When they awoke, Lechthennian had gone, and the bottled sun was sinking slowly below the ocean's horizon. Mindful of Lechthennian's words, they gathered themselves quickly, and set out to Biel-Tan's great amphitheatre.

Tonight they would witness the Dance Without End.

News had spread of the performance and many thousands of eldar were converging on the amphitheatre. Despite the crowds, Ariadien and Neidaria found seats quickly. The excitement of the throng filled the space. Swept up in anticipation, the distance the Biel-Tanians had regarded the twins with had gone, and they found themselves surrounded by eager, welcoming faces. They were two eldar among many, distinctions of kindred gone.

The amphitheatre took a tenth-cycle to fill, so huge it was. The conversation of the eldar, reflected back upon them by the dome's peerless acoustics, became the rushing of the sea, and the twins clasped hands, the memory of Lechthennian's powerful music still fresh in their minds. They searched the crowds for him in vain; there were so many eldar in there and such were the angles when looking up or down the stepped rows of seats that it was impossible to pick out a single face.

The noise of the crowd eventually abated, their chatter giving way to anticipation. The air became pregnant with it, and Ariadien experienced a larger version of the sense of unity he shared with his sister. The crowd thought with one mind, breathed with one breath. Within this joining, the twins wondered to each other, if this was the way it had once been, when the eldar were mighty and not afraid to enjoy their senses to the full.

When the last whisperer had ceased his whispering, the lights dimmed to a level just above blackness. Faces and hands were visible as luminous blobs, blue as deep sea fishes, the eyes in the faces moist jewels, all fixed upon the stage.

A sweet smell wafted over the twins, and they felt their minds sharpen.

A spear of white light snapped on, illuminating a figure dressed in the motley of the Harlequins. He was a hundred paces away from the twins, but every lozenge upon his multi-hued cloak was visible to them. His mask was alabaster white, fixed with a caricature of a smile that could have been a sneer, a single sapphire tear on the left cheek. He wore a tall brush of hair of constantly shifting colour, curving almost over to touch his nose to the front, running to long tails at the back.

He said nothing, but bowed artfully. The light went off.

'Tomorrow we fight,' said a female eldar's voice; a breathy whisper alive with joyful humour, it filled the auditorium wall to wall. 'But tonight we dance. Tonight we dance the Dance Without End, tonight we dance it as many, and in full.'

The lights came up. Forty-nine dancers were on the stage, frozen in poses suggestive of might and wisdom – these were the eldar of old. Music struck up, a skirling of pipes, underpinned with deep and sombre bass. A dozen eldar of noble bearing strode among the others as they slowly came alive. Their masks marked them out as the gods – Asuryan, Vaul, Khaine, Isha, Morai-Heg, Kurnous, Lileath, and more, each baiting, gifting or dancing with the eldar as to their own imperative. For the most part, these interactions went unseen by the dancers playing the eldar, for the dance showed the race of Eldanesh at their height of power, when the gods had been set apart from them by the will of Asuryan and their influence on the eldar was subtle.

The Harlequins playing the eldar danced nobly and with strength, various movements within the dance alluding to legendary happenings, some well known, but many leaving the twins feeling ignorant. Over time, a note of discord crept into the music. The gods' movements became halting,

concerned. The eldar moved ever more twistedly, and one by one their dances became darker and darker, until they were acting out depravities in groups all around the stage. The music grew unpleasant. Stealthily at first, then with brazen openness, others came and joined the dance. They wore black body-suits, their masks projecting snarling faces that whisked into the audience and peered into their eyes, causing them to shrink back and cry out. The servants of Chaos.

The sweet scent grew stronger, and the dancers grew in stature, becoming giants. The black-suited creatures moved among the eldar, dancing obscenely. They drew them into grotesque pairings, and when they touched, the dancers representing the eldar took on the dances of the servants of Chaos, their bodysuits losing their colour, their stances losing the cast of nobility they had previously displayed. The gods recoiled as more and more of the Harlequins dancing the dance of the eldar were corrupted, and then they too were assailed. Prancing Death Jesters came swarming on stage, somersaulting over the writhing dancers. They attacked the gods, fighting mime battles with them, until one by one they were felled, their corpses thrown through the air to land in a pile. Only Khaine remained, battling skilfully with numberless opponents.

There were three eldar left untouched by the lusts of Chaos. One turned his back upon the depravity early, and left the stage. Another waited longer before he, too, turned and left. A third remained. As the frenzied dancing reached a crescendo, the last unaffected hid himself in a cloak of black, and disappeared with a vicious laugh. The rest collapsed as one, dead.

The tune ceased. A fresh began.

A new dancer entered: the Solitaire, his suit projecting beauteous images of pleasure interspersed with those of horror. The figure at their core was inconstant, seemingly male one moment, female the next. This was the Dark Prince, She Who Thirsts – Slaanesh. He danced around Khaine, enticing him, while off the stage the audience felt a great wrath build. The unseen source of this fury pulled at the god, and he was dragged to and from the edge of the stage, almost into the arms of Slaanesh, then back to the edge again. Finally the war god fell, the dancer playing him somehow becoming many dancers, and they rolled away. Slaanesh pranced in victory over the corpses of the slain, seeking when he could for those who had eluded him. A terrible scream built, drowning out the song. It grew beyond bearing, projected into minds of the eldar audience, it tortured ears and souls alike. Laughter resounded within the scream, mad, despairing and exultant.

Another figure came onto the stage as the audience reeled. New laughter, laughter that parodied the first and took on an ironic edge, pure and cynical. The Great Harlequin. He wore the same garb as before. No costume for the one who represented Cegorach, for the clothes of the Harlequins were reflections of their god, those of the Harlequin King most of all.

Cegorach strolled around the stage, laughing at the fallen and provoking the daemons of Slaanesh before darting away from their clutches. The Dark Prince grew angry, and sent his minions to catch him. They danced around the Laughing God until they brought him low, but he burst forth unharmed, his bright clothes shining brighter. On and on this went. As it did so, the three eldar who had escaped the Fall crept back onto the stage and took up the dance of their forebears in muted form, hiding away whenever Slaanesh glanced in their direction. This attention came seldom, for the Laughing God held She Who Thirsts' eye, sending her into furies with his antics. Once or twice, the Dark Prince snatched at the eldar, but they escaped again and again, and Slaanesh grew furious. He threw himself at the Laughing God, and they fought, the two Harlequins performing a breathtaking dance duel of high leaps and somersaults.

It was at this point that the Dance Without End traditionally ceased, the Solitaire and the Great

Harlequin leaping around each other without conclusion. Every eldar knew this, for the Harlequins were much discussed and the ritual of the Dance Without End was well-known.

That night, the great dance did not stop.

A new movement began.

As the Laughing God and the Dark Prince danced, one of the fallen stirred. Their costume flickered, the blackened images of perverse lusts and violence giving way to skulls and bones of pure white, studded with jewels clearly intended to resemble waystones.

The figure rubbed at her head, as if waking from a long sleep. She stood, the waystones upon her exposed bones flaring brightly.

She looked at her hands, and they clenched. She became huge, her size magnified in the audience's minds by the arts of the troupe's Shadowseers. She swayed from side to side with the music, arms of shadow sweeping over the audience and back with dire whooshing noises. The Laughing God laughed at this apparition, but leapt away from it, the movements of the Great Harlequin depicting him conveying defiance, humour, hope and fear.

The Solitaire, playing the Great Enemy, stumbled in the act of snatching at one of the three remaining eldar. The dancer representing his victim fell away shrieking, but was not dead. It crawled away, a broken thing of half a soul, to lurk in the darkness. He dived again at the Great Harlequin, and the dance became more and more frantic. The audience were spellbound, unable to move, the breath stopped in their mouths. The Laughing God leapt back and forth, keeping Slaanesh's attention from the being growing to power behind it.

At the last, Slaanesh tripped the Laughing God. Standing triumphantly over her prey, she reached for him, but Cegorach laughed triumphantly, staring over the Dark Prince's shoulder.

Slaanesh looked around. The new god reached for She Who Thirsts, limbs burning with the light of borrowed souls. Slaanesh's face cycled rapidly through numberless visages of terrible beauty. Inconceivably, each displayed fear, and the Prince of Chaos shrank back.

The lights went out before the new god could grasp the daughter of the eldar, leaving the conclusion unresolved.

The lights came back on. The stage was empty. The crowd members looked to their neighbours, disbelief on their faces.

'Ynnead?' they said.

'Kysaduras's fable!'

'The god of death awakens.'

'It is a myth, a parable, that is what we have seen. It is all a parable. Isn't it a parable?'

'This is an ill omen.'

'What do the seers say?'

Ariadien blew out a long breath. He was emotionally overcome. He looked at his sister. She fixed him with a serious eye, and gripped his hand more tightly in hers.

+The Dance Without End has a new ending, it seems,+ she said.

CHAPTER TEN

The March of the Phoenix Host

Iyanna watched the boneseers at work. They wore their strange armour, rarely brought out for a bonesinger did not lightly go to war. All were helmed and masked, with tall antlers either side of their helmets and a stubby projection on the chin in the manner of an alien's bound beard. They danced while they sang, in a slow, languorous manner, bringing their hands around in wide passes, their arms at full length.

Several of them played instruments – pipes, cymbals, tiny gongs, flutes and harps. It was an otherworldly melody, not meant for entertainment, but possessing a profound loveliness despite its discordance. The melody of instrument and voice intersected in the centre of the ship's hold where light glowed brightly, wisps of it revolving around a bright core to make a galaxy-like tissue.

The song changed, the light coalesced, forming matter. Wraithbone.

Iyanna was spellbound by the creation of matter from nothing.

'Look at them, Althenian,' she said. 'I love to watch the bonesingers.'

'It is dull. I am unmoved by it, war is art,' said her hulking companion. 'Mine is death, not the act of creation, war is all. I will fight, battle's music is my music, not this din.' His voice was that of Jeleniar Death-bringer, the fourth Althenian. Only Iyanna could tell them apart. Guessing which aspect of Althenian spoke had been a game she played with herself, one of her last pleasures, until the psychic signature of each soul and the minor quirks their temporary dominance brought to the exarch's personality had become totally familiar to her and the game had lost its fun.

She rested her hand on his huge thigh, spindly in proportion with his mighty frame, but three times thicker than her arm nonetheless. The psychoplastic was warm to the touch. 'And without it? How would you make your war music, Althenian?'

'I would not, this is the full truth of it, you are right. Even so, I will remain unmoved, Iyanna.'

She tapped at his limb with her nail. 'It moves me. It demonstrates how superior a way of being the path is. The bonesingers are not so different to me, we both follow paths of the mind. They use their gifts for the manipulation of the physical, I for communication with the immaterial. Without the path, how would one reach such a height of mastery? We would wander from one vocation to the next, tasting each and never drinking deeply of their wisdom. Our way is the best way.'

'Perhaps so, what do I know of other paths? I am trapped,' said Althenian. 'More than that, I am twice trapped on mine, so I hold.'

'Watch and learn, dear Althenian.'

The wraithlord growled, an affectation that made Iyanna smile to herself. 'War is all. War is my only pursuit, that is just.'

'And you will have war soon enough!' she scolded.

The light at the centre of the chamber was dimming as more wraithbone solidified from intangible plasms. The product of the song was luminous, but no more than that. It had crossed the threshold from the *might-be* to the *is*.

Having judged there to be sufficient raw material for their purposes, the bonesingers changed their tune, picking up speed. Under their influence, the wraithbone moved, melting and reforming into

recognisable shapes – an arm, a foot, a high-crested helm. For nigh on a full tenth-cycle they worked, until as if by some sleight of hand the wraith-stuff was gone and a tall, sculpted figure was at the centre of their circle: a freshly made wraithguard, its long helmet open and revealing the setting for a spirit stone. The song abruptly ceased, and the bonesingers stepped back. Eldar on the weaponsmith and pseudo-life branches of Vaul's Path moved in, fitting the construct with the parts that were not of wraithbone. They too worked quickly, a team of them chanting in the smith cant. They moved easily, always on the verge of colliding with each other, always avoiding their comrades' limbs.

They stepped back, another half tenth-cycle gone. Now it was Iyanna's turn. She turned to the two lesser spiritseers by her side, who presented her with a spirit stone. Small enough to fit in her gloved fist, it glowed with striated light of a soft yellow and was hot to hold. With reverence she walked to the newly minted ghost warrior, bearing the stone in cupped hands in front of her.

'Return to your children, honoured ancestor,' she said. 'We call you from your slumber and we are sorry for what we ask; our hour of need is upon us, and you must wake awhile.'

She placed the stone into the setting and stepped back. It shone brilliantly in the shadow of the closing helm. The long face of the wraithguard snapped shut. The warrior sagged, lumbering three steps to the left as the spirit within tentatively inhabited its shell.

Iyanna shut her eyes and reached out with her mind, calming the spirit within. The spirit was in confusion, as they nearly always were. The final mortal thoughts of the spirit shook its being, memories of the warmth of the infinity circuit at odds with who it remembered being in life.

This one, like so many recently resurrected, had died during the voidspawn invasion. A potter, caught in his workshop and hunted through his art by a pair of hissing creatures. As he died, his dismay had been greater for his broken pottery than for his lost life.

Iyanna focused on this horror, bringing it into sharp relief. Shards of ceramic sharp in his mind, red with his own blood. She turned these thoughts of his into sword blades.

'Never a warrior in life, Hetherion of Divinesh, that time is upon you in death. Take up your arms, drive forward your armour and avenge your art and your life against those who took them from you.' She insinuated images of the voidspawn into his mind, a mental picture of ravaged Dûriel, sorrow at the fallen eldar race falling further. Hetherion of Divinesh's terror at reawakening turned to resolve.

'I...' he said haltingly, his wraithbone voice a monotone. 'I will live again to fight for Iyanden.'

She led him gently to more artificers, who presented a wraithcannon to the ghost warrior. With hesitant hands, Hetherion reached out and grasped the gun. He became steady. Iyanna was satisfied. She led the wraithguard to join several ranks of them already standing in the hold. She closed her eyes again. Under her mental influence, the pale bone colour of the psychoplastic blushed, turning yellow and night-blue. She caressed the potter's soul again, turning over his memories like seashells. From them she selected a rune, and this manifested itself on the cowl of his helmet. A simple rune – artful vengeance.

'Rest now, Hetherion,' she said. 'Grow accustomed to your new body. We will need you soon enough.'

She rejoined Althenian.

'A potter,' she said.

'A potter? He will find no clay to throw, in this war,' said Althenian.

'Do not scoff. He is one who will fight without much prompting. If only that could be said of more of our honoured ancestors.'

'You say so, there are many more to come, volunteers.'

'Yes, but not all,' said Iyanna. Her eyes lingered on the rows of caskets regretfully. Elsewhere in the

fleet her brothers and sisters on the branch of the spiritseer performed the same rituals, placing spirit stones into new-grown wraith bodies for war. ‘Were it not so,’ she said. ‘A necessary task, but after all this time, still distasteful to me.’

Althenian did not reply. He knew when to hold his tongue and when to tease her.

She oversaw the resurrection of seven more spirits and was about to retire to rest, when news of Taec Silvereye’s arrival at the fleet reached her.

Taec was frailer than when Iyanna had last seen him. He leaned on his staff during their conversation, and was distracted when she spoke. They stood in the *Pride of Haladesh*’s observation lounge, watching the infinite involutions of the webway wall scroll past the port side.

‘You have made good time,’ said Taec. ‘It augurs well. It is imperative that the Phoenix Host arrives simultaneously with Prince Yriel’s grand fleet and the Swordwind of Biel-Tan.’

‘We go the shortest way,’ said Iyanna. ‘To travel the larger passages to Biel-Tan would have taken too long, and to risk planetfall from orbit would have been foolhardy in such ships. We will leave the art of void war to its pre-eminent artist, Prince Yriel. We head to a nexus where we may disembark and make our way with haste to the main gate-point of Dûriel. Such is the nature of this route that even on foot we will arrive before Sunspear’s second invasion can emerge.’

‘Good,’ said Taec. ‘We must hold back until we are sure they are on the surface. If we leave the labyrinth too early and engage the voidspawn piecemeal we will be overwhelmed.’

‘As the Autarch Sunspear nearly was,’ said Iyanna. She frowned. ‘Sunspear was brave.’

‘There are few who would disagree, but it was not his bravery that led him along that thread. He is proud, he wished for outright victory, and although fortunate for our plans, that was nearly his undoing. His arrogance approaches that of Prince Yriel’s, but even so, he was close to successful on his own terms.’ Taec sighed. ‘Victory eluded him. Still, a success for us, if a near disaster for them. For his failure he has had a hard time of it on Biel-Tan,’ added Taec. ‘We are not the only seers to treat our autarchs harshly, it appears.’

‘And the council of seers is behind the Biel-Tanian war council now?’

‘Fully,’ said Taec. ‘There is one seer among them, Altariéc, who was against the invasion initially. However, your message swayed all but he and his followers. Now his hand is forced, he complains loudly that Sunspear’s actions precipitate a doom for Biel-Tan that could have been avoided, but he is beginning to admit that a greater peril awaits Biel-Tan should the first be avoided.’

‘That is good.’

‘It was not a point of view that was easy to foster,’ said Taec. ‘We were greeted at gunpoint.’

Iyanna raised her eyebrows.

‘Indeed,’ said Taec.

‘I am most relieved, farseer, that the Biel-Tanians march at our side. We feared the worst when we heard naught from you,’ she said.

Taec began a slow walk down the lounge, the high windows to his left. Iyanna followed. ‘Biel-Tan is closing on Dûriel, albeit to a safe enough distance to avoid attracting the voidspawn’s direct attention. The presence of the hive mind there is very strong. Biel-Tan have received no message from any quarter for several cycles, and if our experience is the norm, then none they have sent have reached their intended recipients either.’ He paused, and looked at her earnestly, leaning on his staff again. ‘You have not felt the like, not even when Far Ranging Hunger nearly destroyed us. The strength of the mind... It is...’ He trailed off. ‘It is impossible to describe. You must arm your mind against it. I will spread the word to the seers in the fleet that they must take special care of their runes of warding.

Psychic communication, even projected by devices, is impossible in the face of it. Sunspear was forced to rely on electromagnetic means to direct his army.'

'How primitive,' said Iyanna.

'There is more: the eye of She Who Thirsts is fixed upon the place. I grow ever more certain it was her caprice that cast the splinter out of the warp into the Dûriel system.'

'Crystal father...' began Iyanna.

'How many times have I said that you need not refer to me as such, Iyanna? Your days as a warlock are long behind you, your might is equal to mine, though different.'

'I speak respectfully because I must say a thing of some dreadfulness.'

'Then say it.'

'This war... It is a trap, designed by the Dark Prince solely to snare you. I feel this.'

'And I know it,' said Taec darkly. 'I am thoroughly caught. My doom awaits me there on Dûriel's dead surface, there is nothing to be done for it.' His eyes were tired and sad, and he spoke frankly to her. 'I will die and my soul will be forfeit, but what other choice do we have? She Who Thirsts will take me, but I go willingly. It is the only way.'

'You could flee, you needn't go. Let others work in your stead.'

'What, child? Such as yourself? And then your soul will be lost, and not mine. Whichever way the die is cast, the numbers are not in our favour. I have cried again and again and there is only one future that leads to total victory, and that is one where I perish.'

He sighed again. There was a tremulousness to it that Iyanna could not miss. He was afraid. 'There is nothing for it. Think of the sacrifices you have made, Iyanna Last-of-Your-House, that we all make. I will not be alone in falling into the Dark Prince's clutches. Many will feel the true death and the torment that follows. But if not, what? We all die, we all suffer for now and evermore? If I die, Iyanna, at least you,' he gestured at her elaborately with his hand, a mark of deepest respect, 'will live. And you are the most important of us all. I was never convinced by the words of Ulthran, his relaying of the visions of Kysaduras, but I am now. It is you who have convinced me. I would die a thousand deaths to see you succeed, and I will. Do not think you have the easier path, for upon you the hope of all our salvations rests. You must triumph, Iyanna. Bring forth the goddess of death and restore equilibrium to the souls of our people. Dying is the easy part, and it is not for you to travel that road.'

A half-cycle passed. The webway yawned wide, becoming a glowing funnel half a million paces across. The ships flew down it, coming into a junction of staggering proportions. Many conduits came together here, giving it the appearance of a great, golden heart viewed from the inside.

If a heart, it was dead, the walls of it plaqued with broken wraithbone structures, the ash of the sun fragment that once lit it hanging dark in the centre. The ruins of a port city, cast down perhaps at the Fall, perhaps later – for in the uncertain light of the webway, one could see that the spires were blackened by flame, and walls scored with the tell-tale marks of lance fire. Whatever its name was had long been forgotten.

The ships – a fleet of twenty-three in all – went for the centre of the chamber, shoaling by the dead sun as lighter vehicles sped from apertures in their sides and swooped down to the distant city.

The scouts were gone a long time, for the nexus was broad as a world's orbit around its sun, and the ruins were vast. Eventually they reported in, each vessel's captain declaring his assigned quadrant clear of danger, and the ships of Iyanden sank in streams to an area of crumbling docks where seven major webway tunnels pierced the city floor.

Aspect Warriors deployed first, taking up position in cracked towers around the piers extending

towards the centre of the nexus. Flights of Falcon tanks swept overhead, turrets tracking back and forth.

The word was given, and the sides of the Iyanden ships opened. Out strode the Phoenix Host, hundreds of tall wraithbone shapes disembarking onto the ancient quaysides. Iyanna was at their head, Althenian as ever by her side. She and all the other eldar wore their helmets, for the atmosphere of the dead city was not safe to breathe.

‘Fitting place,’ he said. ‘The dead walk in the dead lands. Homecoming.’

Iyanna, distracted by the sinister ruins all about them, replied, ‘This is as close as we can come with our ships to Dûriel. We go from here on foot.’

‘I will march,’ said Althenian. ‘I do not tire and will not, nor can I.’

Rank after rank of wraithkind tramped down the ramps into the dead city. A flight of Vypers sped overhead, looped and flew straight at the ground – an illusion, as they were scouting webway tunnels. The whole inner surface of the webway held gravity, making the chamber a giant world turned inside out, the broken towers of its bottom reaching out for their kind, lost to distance’s caprice, on the opposing side. The world-city was so large that on the ground the curve of the chamber was imperceptible, and webway portals opened directly into the plazas of the place, appearing as glowing, smooth-sided pits.

All was lit by the lambency of the webway, a shifting light that made every shadow a trickster. In this dimness, the yellow and blue of Iyanden were sinister brown ochre and midnight black.

‘In this place, the ghost warriors are as ghosts,’ said Taec, walking to join Iyanna and her companion. He glanced up at Althenian with idle curiosity, but the giant exarch’s attention was elsewhere.

‘They are not the only ones,’ said Iyanna. ‘I sense dark shades, the spirits of those who dwelled here. Not many, but dangerous. We should not tarry. There is a hunger on the skein that I do not like.’

‘We are done. The Phoenix Host is all ashore. All await,’ said Althenian. ‘Do not fear, with such might at your command, no danger.’

Iyanna shivered, as if touched by cold, and her face, a pale grey shape in the perpetual dusk, took on a seriousness mirrored by her gestures and the sense of her soul. ‘Ghosts will fight ghosts, a waste of time. We must be away.’

As if to deliberately accentuate her concerns, the sound of laser fire cut through the sepulchral silence of the city: the whining of powercells, the crack of stale air heated explosively, the thump of impact explosions.

‘From afar,’ said Althenian. ‘The sound of war in dead lands. Bad omen.’

The captain of the frigate *Lileath* spoke to the High Council through their helmet crystals. +We have movement in an area twenty thousand paces to the left,+ she said.

+There are worse things than ghosts in these places,+ said Taec via the same psychic link to the force’s commanders. +Iyanna is right. We should not stay overlong here. We have the numbers and the might to overcome most threats, even that of fell spectres, but in doing so we will waste valuable time.+

Signals of assent came to them over the communications web. Columns were forming up alongside each of the five major transport ships, phalanxes of wraithguard at the front, their guiding spiritseers protected in their midst. Wraithlords went with them, three or four to each group of one hundred, those who were once seers aiding the spiritseers in directing the march of their lesser fellows. Wraithknights walked up and down the lines, weapons ready in delicate fists. Falcon grav-tanks rode by. A blast of air pushed at Iyanna’s and Taec’s robes as a Cobra floated onward to the front of their

group.

Behind them came the Guardians of Iyanden, pitifully few of the living to fight alongside the dead. War walkers were gathering in number in the open spaces by the piers, waiting to go ahead as vanguard.

‘You should take a transport, Silvereye,’ said Iyanna kindly. ‘The crystal grows apace within you, and you are venerable. I must walk with the wraithkind, to ensure their minds remain clear.’

Taec bowed stiffly. He was glad Iyanna had given him the excuse to withdraw. As head of the seer council, he was senior to her in both the seer council and the High Council, but to have withdrawn to a vessel without prompting while the rest marched would have been unbecoming.

A Wave Serpent flew down to the broken square they waited in, and with a touch of his hand to his forehead, Taec took his leave of the spiritseer.

Only one warrior remained to join the column.

The army fell silent as the last door opened, a wash of fury coming with it. With steps like the ringing of a dolorous bell, the Avatar of Kaela Mensha Khaine strode down the gangway to the quayside. Aggression rose within every eldar present, living and dead. The thrill of it rose within Iyanna, starting deep in the pit of her belly and rising up her body to flush her breasts and face with heat. The power of it took her breath away. Her eyes slid closed, and when they opened again, she looked upon the world very differently. Fury; she felt it coming from all the others. Her sadness at war retreated, and became anticipation.

The Avatar halted, breathing fire, fire wreathing it from iron joints, fire streaming from its eye sockets, blood hissing from its perpetually dripping hand to the floor. Whatever spirits watched them shrank back into the dark. They feared the god-fragment greatly. It swung its head back and forth over the host, inspecting its followers. The roar of its furnace body was mirrored in the heartbeat of every eldar.

Abruptly, it walked ahead, eldar parting to let it through. Its heavy treads receded, taking with it some of its boundless anger, but not all.

The disembarkation was complete. Iyanna signalled the group of rangers who were to guide the force the remaining way to Dûriel.

+We are ready,+ she said. +You follow no path but your own, now show it to us.+

+This way,+ their leader said. Small groups of them joined the head of each column.

Iyanna held up her hands. With complex gestures denoting hope for victory, she signalled the army to move out, simultaneously emitting a psychic command pulse that galvanised all to motion.

The effect was, in its own way, shocking. The wraithguard of the first column suddenly lumbered into life from total stillness. The wraithkind did not move at all when not in motion, unlike living creatures, and their sudden transition from immobility made even Iyanna start. They marched in perfect unison, each one placing its feet exactly where the one before it had trodden; left then right then left again. The first column cleared the dockside, war walkers falling in to stride in front, and the second column joined it, then the third, until all five columns had merged into one to snake through the nameless port city towards the glowing way to Dûriel.

Iyanna and Althenian fell in behind the first group to draw off. The dead marched tirelessly, but slowly, and Iyanna thought she would have little difficulty in keeping pace with them.

+How far to Dûriel?+ she asked of the rangers’ leader.

+Four cycles’ march, my lady,+ he said. +An unusually long way to walk, but this part of the webway is seldom traversed, and has fallen into disrepair.+

She nodded. She knew this anyway, but asking again reassured her in some way she found hard to

define. Perhaps it was simply the touch of a living mind upon her own when she was in constant communion with the dead.

The city shook to the stamp of the ghost warriors' feet. They were agile for such large machines, but still heavy, and the sheer number of them generated a certain noise. Their march was unlike the marching of other creatures: they planted their feet firmly but quietly, and the resultant tramping was loud but stealthy seeming, if not stealthy in actuality. The city was so silent that the slightest noise sounded like a crack of thunder. No living creatures had come this way for a long time, and why would they? A nexus point for the southern True Stars, all the inhabitants of those planets had been swept away by the calamity of the Fall, and there had been no eldar to come here for many generations.

Something stirred at the back of Iyanna's mind, the sensation of being watched again. Shielded by the webway from the fall of the empire, other port cities and worldlets had survived. Some had even been built since. Many had become satellites of Commorragh, but not all. What had happened here? she wondered. Where was the sun that should light it? Where were the people? Shielded from the warp, those in the webway had famously avoided being consumed by Slaanesh.

She looked up, at elegant windows piercing the sides of soaring towers. Most still held their glazing. The damage here was superficial, many parts of Iyanden were in far worse state, but Iyanden yet lived, while the dead nature of the place was unmistakable. Sure she was being watched, she looked around her. Some of the spires were tens of thousands of paces tall, impossible architecture in an impossible realm.

She saw nothing, felt nothing more than the unease she had felt since debarking. The glass reflected only the shifting light of the webway, empty windows like the eyes of the dead, but the feeling persisted until the Avatar walked past the building, when it abruptly ceased.

Iyanna pressed her lips together, and refused to look up again. Even for one such as her, for whom necromancy was life, this place carried too great a burden of death.

Iyanna breathed more easily as the roadway opened out. The remains of a park girt the trumpet-mouth of a webway tunnel. Air- and grav-craft peeled away from the column on the ground, soaring vertically, then coming down at a steep dive and passing down the funnel into the webway. The Phoenix Host marched directly for the lip of the tunnel, through ancient trees that crumbled at their touch and grass, held together by nothing more than the memory of its shape, that puffed into dust.

They went on without pausing over the edge of the tunnel. As Iyanna came to it she experienced a brief surge of vertigo. The mouth of the tunnel was like a slope that turned into a sheer drop and the tunnel a pit that went on forever. But as she passed its edge, the wall of the tunnel became the floor so that she was perpendicular to the horizontal planes of the city. When she glanced behind, she saw the spires were now on their sides. Framed by the tunnel mouth, the ships were withdrawing to take up station at the centre of the chamber to await their return.

If they returned.

Grav-craft humming overhead, the Phoenix Host marched on in silence. Iyanna strained her mind to keep the huge number of wraithkind focused on their purpose. So much vengeance was hard to bear, but she summoned up her own pain, remembering the terrible psychic burst that had killed all her house but her, and drew her own determination from it.

She drew power too from Althenian. He marched alongside her, long limbs swinging easily. He had been there for her for so long, Althenian the Thrice-Dead, but not dead yet.

And soon he would be gone.

She drew strength from this sorrow too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

War in the Webway

Gateways of light irised open over a low mountain once known as Kurnous's Seat, ancient webway gates that had remained hidden, unseen beneath the skin of reality for ten millennia. Reaver jetbikes came through at supersonic speed, the wind screaming through the holes punched into their bodywork. They performed a wide sweep, then set themselves into a protective pattern. One of their number re-entered the webway. Within moments, it re-emerged, two dozen Venom transport craft streaking behind it. Behind the graceful fairings of the Venoms, each emblazoned with the emblems of the Cult of Strife, were fighting platforms crammed with wyches. Seven Raiders likewise full of warriors, and five more carrying collapsed hex cages, came behind. Scourges leapt from Raider fighting decks, wings spread, as keen-eyed wyches swept the muzzles of dark lances and splinter cannons across the angry sky. All were visible only to the other eldar, sophisticated field devices hiding the presence of the Commorrites from eye and mind alike.

A final flaring. Alone on a jet-black Venom came Lelith Hesperax, framed by pennants streaming from a dozen trophy poles arranged in a fan; the greatest of all Commorragh's wyches, mistress of the Cult of Strife.

Like her followers, Hesperax wore a half-armour, presenting more skin to the world than was covered. She was astonishingly beautiful, her long red hair tied up in a tall ponytail, her limbs long and well-proportioned, her body curvaceous even by the exacting standards of Commorrite convention. Hers was a deadly beauty; a great many males had paid with their lives for lingering upon it for too long.

The wyches of her cult were armed with all manner of exotic weaponry, most fit for the melee they preferred – agonisers, splinter pistols, razorflails, shardnets and impalers. All Hesperax carried was two long knives. They were forged from the finest metals to the very highest standard, but aside from that they were entirely unexceptional. No poison coated them, no disruption field generators lent their edges might. Lelith Hesperax would use no other weapons, her pride would not allow it, and her skill was such that anything more than a keen edge was entirely unnecessary.

The clouds were an angry red; the sun, when it appeared, tainted similarly by the density of spores in the atmosphere. There was a pungent stench to the air, acid, bile and rot, worse than that in the slave pens of the Eternal City. When the clouds broke to reveal the poisoned sky, the fiery descent trails of landing craft – or pods, or whatever the voidspawn used to further their endless interplanetary buffet – slashed across it in regular diagonal lines.

Hesperax glanced at the display floating over the Venom's rail. Dark purple blotches pulsed, indicating concentrations of the creatures. 'That way, and swiftly,' she shouted over the wind, pointing to the Godpeak.

Her Venom was piloted by her current favourite, Khulo Khale. He turned in his seat to look up at her, his pale face artfully marked from their last encounter.

'Mistress!' Khulo Khale had a deep voice, sensual. She liked that about him, and he had not yet bored or offended her. It was only a matter of time until he did. She smiled at the thought of that day, a pleasant thrill shivering her belly. She had the habit of deciding how to dispose of her lovers the

moment they came into her arms; it made their couplings all the more erotic. The best had much time and attention lavished on their love-deaths. Each one, she was sure, came to her certain that they would be the one to survive her attentions, that somehow they would tame her. They were resurrected as wiser beings, if she allowed them to live again.

Khale was an exceptional pilot, a one-time Reaver champion, and he flew the Venom with consummate skill. Their craft banked to the north, following the Reavers. Terse reports came in from her followers, reassuring her that they had not attracted attention. The aliens were busy demolishing this world, eating it up like the mindless beasts they were. Hesperax stared through breaks in the streamers of red cloud. Already the industrious aliens had scoured much of the surface clean. Biological towers, weirder even than those created by the haemonculi, were growing from the cracked earth, many clustered around lakes of acid.

The creatures too were not dissimilar to those made by master haemonculi, she supposed, although they lacked any imagination, being brutishly utilitarian. She shouted a series of clipped commands, wyches' battle cant, the pick-ups in her armour conveying her orders to her followers. Twelve Reavers peeled away from the front of the formation, and dropped down to the remnants of forest in the valley before the Godpeak.

'Be sightful, my swift hunters. We seek the biggest warrior creatures alone, these eater beasts are of no use,' she said.

'Yes, mistress,' they said.

The consumption of the planet was well under way. Hesperax knew little about the tyranids, other than that which she needed to know: that they were formidable fighters. Hidden in the webway, the true eldar had little to fear from the threat the Great Dragon posed to the Great Wheel. The havoc they brought down upon others was mildly amusing, but it was as creatures for the arena that the aliens appealed to her. Novelty was the key to the games, and she owed her position to her inventiveness as much as her skill at arms. The voidspawn were devoid of fear and the capacity to suffer, but the terror they evoked in other species was particularly piquant. 'And here there are two colours to be harvested. How marvellous,' she said to herself.

The wyches sped on, invisible to the tyranids. Hesperax felt the hive mind as a dull pressure, for the true eldar were still psychic creatures, even if they repressed that side of their being. It was giving her a headache, and that made her irritable. Someone was going to regret upsetting her today.

'Mistress! We have sighted the prize!'

Hesperax manipulated the viewing orb with a swift motion of her hand. There was a large gathering of warrior-beasts on the flank of the Godpeak. The red and bone coloured ones.

'A delightful find! Fifteen fresh slaves to the one who gets the largest!' she shouted. Whoops and laughter greeted her over the comm-net. On the backs of the Venoms, shardnets were readied. Wyches leapt to their feet, bringing large splinter cannons around. The weapons had been loaded with ammunition intended to incapacitate rather than kill. Ordinarily this was done by the infliction of excruciating pain, but the voidspawn felt little pain either, so she had had all her venom weapons charged with potent sleeping drugs painstakingly designed to affect the aliens' extra-galactic physiology. It was a dull way to reap one's harvest, and they would get no sustenance from the suffering of such animals, but the Ebon Sting haemonculi had assured her it was the most efficacious way of delivering the prizes intact. She yawned. The fight would be technically engaging, but there would be no feast of dark energy. Boring.

They worked their way up the valley, picking choice specimens, bringing them to bay and felling them with their tranquilisers. Soon, three of the five Raiders' cages were crammed with slumbering

specimens. The day was going well, if tediously.

Her prefect brow creased as they approached the mountain. The air was clearer around its bulk, and she saw the majority of the craft were coming down to the north where her scanners indicated the greater part of the red and bone aliens to be congregating. There was a steady stream of them ascending the mountain. They formed a line that initially appeared chaotic, but on second inspection had the manic order one sees in social insects.

‘Vespah told me that this would not be happening, that the war phase is over. What goes on here?’ she said. No one answered, because none of them knew.

‘Mistress...’ said Uriqa, a pilot and succubus, with a servile mixture of caution and deference.

‘Speak, Uriqa!’ Hesperax said.

‘The webway is open,’ she said, and sent a visual of her proof.

For the first time in long arcs, Hesperax’s stony heart twitched with fear. It was swiftly overcome by outrage.

‘The webway! Those fools! The mewling craftworld flagellant fools have left the door ajar!’

The flotilla of wych craft dropped low, spiralling down over the horde of creatures. Sure enough, between high fluted backs and chitinous limbs, the glimmer of webway energy could be seen.

‘We shall have to abandon the hunt!’ she snarled. ‘We cannot allow this, the sacred grounds invaded so.’ Thoughts of the hive fleet flooding into Commorragh filled her mind with dread. ‘Soltarun!’ She called for her lieutenant.

His face appeared in the viewing orb, maskless, face painted with blood-runes, eyes calculating. ‘This one is ready.’

‘We have the coding for this gateway?’

‘This one has,’ he said.

‘Then open it fully. We will have to fly in, shut the gate behind us, and annihilate those beasts that have infiltrated. The fools!’ she shouted, slamming her fist into the railing. ‘They are children, puritanical fools!’

The dark eldar flotilla banked around. Soltarun had his transport broadcast the webway code into the ancient network, the machine mimicking the thought processes of the eldar to engage with its psychic matrices. The gate split wide, tall enough to allow a light Titan out. The aliens immediately surged forwards.

‘Now!’ screamed Hesperax.

The flotilla sped on, the wyches crouching low as windrush battered its way through their craft’s streamlining energy fields. They whipped over the stampeding voidspawn. Hundreds were thundering through, kicking up clouds of dust as they disappeared into the bright light.

The wyches emerged on the other side. Hesperax cursed loudly. This was a main webway conduit, designed to take transports, even small void craft, and it was full of aliens.

She grabbed at the splinter rifle mounted on the Venom’s rail. ‘Drop the captives,’ she said. ‘I will need everyone to fight.’

‘Mistress...’

‘Do it! And shut the gate, Soltarun!’

Hex cages detached from the undersides of the transports, spinning as they fell. They hit the glowing bottom of the webway, squashing dozens of tyrannids apiece as they bounced along. She examined one as they sped over it. The hex cage was intact, but the specimens inside were so much smashed meat.

‘Ruined!’ she spat.

‘We may gather more, mistress,’ said Khulo Khale. He instantly regretted trying to placate her when

the muzzle of the venom rifle swivelled down to point straight at his head.

‘If you were not flying this transport, I would hollow out your head with pain crystals. Be silent!’

Behind them, the gateway closed. No change came over the ancient wraithbone archway, all that was visible beyond it was a continuation of the conduit, but all of a sudden, there were no more aliens pouring through, as if someone had swept a brush across a line of ants.

A change came with it. As the webway portal closed, Hesperax was relieved of a part of the hive mind’s pressure. The line of the creatures lost some of its organisation, and started to bunch up around the leader-beasts.

‘How many came through?’ said Soltarun. The horde of monsters stretched away to the next curve of the webway.

‘Who knows? Hundreds, thousands maybe,’ said Uriqa.

‘Does it matter?’ said Hesperax. ‘A thousand or ten thousand, they all must die. I suggest starting at the rear.’

She indicated to Khulo Khale that he should drop low. In the confined space of the tunnel, the others followed.

Weapons blazing, the Cult of Strife smashed into the rearward portion of Hive Fleet Kraken.

The next four cycles went by in a blur for Iyanna. The light of the webway was unchanging. She walked the space between two worlds. She ceased to be aware of her body, and instead became aware of many bodies, all the same and marching in unison. The minds that glowed dully in their armoured heads all thought the same thoughts, their memories of themselves indistinct. She was a dreamer living the dreams of the dead. Her eyes unfocused, and she no longer saw those who walked in front of her. Her senses became innumerable impressions, half-formed, seen by a thousand eyeless dead. Althenian was her single fixed reference point, always there, ready to steady her should she stumble, ready to help her on when she faltered.

They did not sleep. Command of the living was taken up by the force’s three autarchs. They paused twice a day to eat and drink, and in those times Althenian gently stayed Iyanna with his giant hand. She came back from the death-trance long enough to take nourishment, but the thoughts of the dead were never far from her. And when eating was done, on they walked again.

The webway tunnel narrowed as they left the nameless port city behind, becoming far too small for anything larger than the super-heavy tanks accompanying the army, and in places the column had to make space for the flying machines to come closer to the floor or they would not fit. The wraithknights went through these constrictions bent double, the wraithlords’ helmet crests brushed the stuff of the webway.

A confusion of tunnels and branchings met them, and twice the Phoenix Host came to nexuses that were similar in form to the dead city but far lesser in scope. These were dangerous realms. Although they had been well-used, those days were long gone. As the rangers said, areas of the labyrinth had collapsed, and many tunnels led off to nowhere, or worse. The True Stars formed a ring around the Eye of Terror many light years across in real space, and so a number of the tunnels here would go directly to the crone worlds.

Parts of the network were shored up with wraithbone pylons, where the energies shackled aeons past by the Old Ones had given out or been deliberately sabotaged. In other places armoured gates sealed off tunnels, but not all dangers were thus captive. Disaster awaited them at every wrong turn. The rangers led them on unerringly, directing the scouting Vypers and war walkers down the correct conduits. Only the followers of the Laughing God knew the webway better than the outcasts.

A sense of urgency was over the living part of the host, and this helped drive the dead forward through their foggy perceptions.

At the close of the third cycle, Iyanna felt Althenian's massive hand once more close gently around her chest.

‘We stop here, now time to sleep spiritseer, time to rest.’

She looked up at him bleary-eyed, felt the other spiritseers withdraw from communion with her and the dead. The wraithguard stopped. Life left them again.

Iyanna blinked. Althenian was speaking to her.

‘You must sleep, unceasing your labours are. Rest great seer.’

She nodded. There was a roaring in her mind, distant, like far-off thunder or the rumble of the waterfalls of House Haladesh's Hidden Gorge heard from afar.

Althenian, sensitive to her thoughts as always, told her what it was. ‘The hive mind. The call of the Devourer, even here.’

‘We are close.’

Iyanna mumbled, weak and incoherent as a child. She half-fell against the wraithlord's arm. She was asleep before he caught her. When she awoke a few hours later, she was in the wraithlord's spindly arms, cradled like an infant.

The living members of the Phoenix Host ate and refreshed themselves before the army moved out again. In the face of the hive mind's roar, psychic communications were problematic, and the army switched to electromagnetic means of discourse.

‘We near Dûriel,’ said the rangers' leader. ‘We will pass through a large hall wherein many conduits join. We will lead you through there into the tunnel to the surface. There are many exits; Dûriel was a jewel among the True Stars and the webway adjoining it is correspondingly complex. The safety of most ways we can vouch for, some few we cannot. Be wary, and do not chance a path unless we or your wayseers permit it.’

Once more Iyanna reached out to the dead, waking them gently from their dreams of life. She felt stale and sticky, her saliva thick in her mouth. Whether this was an effect of four cycles without washing or the proximity of the gigantic mind of the tyranids, she could not say for sure. She hoped to lose the feeling in joining with the dead, but the hive mind was as audible to the dead as the living, if not more so. There was a change in the ghost warriors, a quickening of their mood. They sensed that their vengeance was at hand and their minds became more focused on the here and now as a result.

Iyanna marched on. At some point Taec had joined her. When she noticed him walking by her side, she raised a hand in greeting, but the gesture drifted off halfway through. She was invested mind and soul in the world of the dead. Bound into individual spirit stones, through her the honoured ancestors found a rapport of a sort not dissimilar to that offered by the infinity circuit. The sense of it was intensely comforting to her. They felt no fear. The dead were aware that battle brought the risk of She Who Thirsts, but they did not care. What drives they had came from the past, not from fears for the future, for they had no future. There was solace in their company, and Iyanna had to fight to prevent herself from sinking too far into their embrace. Were she to go too deep, she might never find herself again, and be like the others of her house; minds separated from their forms without the interposition of bodily death. Form, mind and being – she had to remain alert to the qualities of each, or risk losing them all. It was exhausting work.

They came to the nexus the rangers had described, an elegant cavern carved from the boundary between real space and the Othersea. The cavern was far broader than it was tall, and roughly kidney-

shaped. They emerged onto a sculpted platform ten paces high that filled a third of the cavern. Ramps descended to a lower level, and from there three major arterial routes exited, one opposite the tunnel the army came out from, the others to either side. Three-score smaller tunnels of lesser diameters went out at various other points. There was a pleasing asymmetry to the cavern, a place of smooth curves and ramps sculpted from glowing energy. There was evidence of vanished structures underfoot: wraithbone spars and time-worn psychoplastics.

Iyanna, her eyes attuned to the sight of the dead, saw the place as it once was. No settlement this, but a place of shrines, a small park. A rest stop for journeying eldar. There were half a dozen or so quays for small void-runners, but big ships could not come this way for whatever reason the beings that had built the webway had decreed. She had the sense that it had been a place of peace. How its modest structures came to be so eroded in the changeless labyrinth was a mystery, but then so much was within the infinite halls of the webway.

The rangers led them down one of the winding ramps and over the broad floor of the cavern, twelve thousand paces across, to the rightmost tunnel.

It was wide, and in her dream trance, she supposed it was once the main way to Dûriel from this particular nexus.

They went into it.

An uncertain period of time passed. Iyanna trudged on, her grace gone, as leaden in her movements as were the dead. The final corner was rounded, and they came to the top of a long, sweeping slope.

‘Dûriel is beyond,’ said the rangers. ‘In one tenth-cycle we will come to the place where the wayseers might open their temporary paths to the surface. The main gate is just beyond. You will see a large tunnel to the left and behind you there; this is the road to Biel-Tan. My band will look for their coming.’

Taec said something to her, but she did not hear.

The army picked up speed.

Iyanna came into herself, her sense of being rushing to alertness.

The minds of the dead were waking. A sharpening of perception swept through the army, as ripples from a stone cast into water.

‘Wait!’ said Iyanna into her comm-bead. ‘There is something wrong. The dead are stirring. Wait! We must stop.’ No one responded, and Iyanna could not be sure whether she had spoken aloud or not. Her mind was weak. The strain of directing so many of the dead for such a long march had taken its toll. She forced herself to greater wakefulness.

‘Wait!’ she shouted.

‘Halt!’ shouted Taec by her side, and the army halted. ‘What is it?’ he said to her.

‘Something is wrong.’

Taec shut his eyes, delving into the skein. They flew open, and he gasped at what he saw.

A terrible sound echoed up the corridor. Scout Vypers came speeding back from the front of the column, guns spitting. One impacted on the wall of the tunnel and spun out of control, crashing into a group of wraithkind.

The noise drew closer, a rattling sound, hollow stalks knocked together.

‘No,’ said Iyanna. ‘It cannot be.’

‘Voidspawn! Voidspawn in the webway!’ The cry went up, alarm sweeping through the Phoenix Host. That the most sacred of grounds should be so invaded was abhorrent to them. Iyanna and Taec struggled with the eldar’s dismay. The army’s ranks fell into disarray, the dead and living alike

paralysed by shock.

The noise burst upon them, the clacking noise of hard alien limbs, underpinned by hissed vocalisations. A wall of psychic pressure came next, a division of the hive mind, exhilarated at its discovery of the Phoenix Host.

The alien horde rounded the corner, filling it from side to side with hideous bio-constructs.

War walker pilots, momentarily stunned by the unexpected sight of Far Ranging Hunger within the webway, found their purpose and opened fire. Heavy weapons blazed as they stalked backwards from the threat. Aspect Warriors pushed their way to the front, forming firing lines.

Taec recovered his wits. 'We'll never prevail against them trapped like this,' he said. 'Fall back!' he called by voice and telepathy, his powerful psyche pushing back against the hive mind.

Quick response pulses clicked in his ears as the autarchs and exarchs responded to his command. He looked down the tunnel, the slight rise allowing him to see down onto the fight at the front of the column. Living tanks came to the front of the horde. Working in packs, the beasts trapped war walkers, preventing them from fleeing, then butted the fragile machines with their massive heads, smashing them to pieces. Laser and shuriken fire streaked across the dwindling gap between the armies.

'I must go,' said Althenian. 'Forward I am needed now, remain here.'

Iyanna raised her hand, then faltered. The giant construct stalked off, forcing its way roughly through the throng. Other wraithlords went with him to join the rest of their kind at the front.

'Fall back now!' shouted Taec, empowering his words with a psychic pulse strong enough to be felt over the hive mind's racket. This woke the army from its collective shock. Grav-vehicles lifted into the air to fire over the host, Guardians streamed backwards. Taec dipped again into the skein, hunting over possibilities. 'Why did I not see this? Why?' he muttered to himself over and over. In his mind, and upon the skein, he found no answer.

He called up the images of the autarchs in his helm's viewing orb. 'The skein is clear, many futures end badly, the best threads bring delay. Hope comes from unexpected quarters.'

'We should go to the nexus, hold them there at the tunnel mouth, and await the armies of Biel-Tan,' said Autarch Culthain.

'I concur,' said Autarch Jethlesar.

'And I,' finished Autarch Herinim.

'No,' said Taec. 'We cannot fight into them, we will lose all advantage of our ranged weaponry. We must fall back and bring them to battle across a wider front.'

A pause, and then Jethlesar spoke. 'We shall see to it, crystal father.'

Taec turned off his images of the others, but listened in to their chatter as they set their plans, checking them over in the skein and offering advice where needed.

'Come, Iyanna, we must go back.' He pulled at her robe. Now was not the time for social nicety; Iyanna was as one drugged, half in the world of the dead.

'I... The dead...' she said.

'They cannot operate here,' said Taec urgently. 'Imagine the calamity that would occur should their wraithcannons breach the webway. In this confined environment, they would slay us all. We would all be lost, and the labyrinth dimension damaged. No, this must be done with blade and fire, but with care! We must go.' He looked back towards the nexus. 'Perhaps there it will be safe enough to make use of our phoenixes, but not here!'

He tried to call for a transport, but the way was choked with floating battle tanks shooting down the slope of the tunnel. The armies had met, and ferocious fighting marked the thin seam between blue

and yellow, and red and bone.

A flight of jetbikes rushed overhead, dodging through the cramped airspace, Jethlesar at their head. 'Fighting withdrawal. Fall back by unit on my command,' the autarch said, his laser lance already blazing.

'Now, Iyanna! Now!' said Taec.

A group of Guardians formed up around them. Taec scanned the surrounding area for threats. As yet, the voidspawn were distant.

'Spiritseers! Bring the dead with you, bring them back into the nexus!' he called.

They went as fast as they could. Reports from the battle line were not encouraging to Taec's ears. How many eldar were dying he did not like to think. Despair lapped at the edges of his consciousness. To not foresee this... How much else had he not seen?

Within the tenth-cycle they had made it in good order back to the nexus. Culthain was dead, he heard, cleft in twain by a blow from a monster's claw. Jethlesar fought in the air still. Herinim greeted Taec in the nexus. Together they deployed their forces as best they could, ranging heavy weapons upon the platform, barrels pointing at the webway tunnels.

'Wraithblades upon the wings,' said Herinim. 'Place the wraithguard in the centre. They will be the breakwater that lessens the ocean's power. From above we will rain death upon them.'

Taec rode the skein, testing what threads he could see through the Dragon's shadow, seeing those that depicted the collapse of the line and the destruction of the host, others where they were victorious. All were ephemeral and uncertain.

'I cannot see,' he said. 'Either I am blinded by the tumult of the alien mind, or...' He was unwilling to voice his thoughts.

'Farseer? You have grave concerns.' Herinim's helm plate was impassive, white framed by dark red, his flight pack wings folded behind his head.

'Or I am being actively blocked, and that is why I did not see this incursion into the webway,' Taec said. 'We cannot rule anything out. This is a far more cunning foe than any of us could ever have guessed. Our arrogance once again trips us. That, or...' He let his fears of Slaanesh's involvement go unsaid.

'But now, what do you see?'

'Hold the wraithknights in reserve. Should the voidspawn break through the wraithguard, only they will hold them back.'

'We cannot hold for long, perhaps we should consider withdrawing from the webway?'

'And let Dûriel fall, and all I have seen come to pass, the voidspawn nesting in the webway into the bargain?' said Taec. 'No. Our undertaking is to prevent the merging and we must attempt to with all our will and might.' He looked off into the tunnels. The sounds of fighting were coming closer. 'Besides, we do not have to prevail, merely slow the tide. Help comes from unexpected quarters. From where is hidden to me, but it comes.'

'Farseer...'

'You echo my own reluctance, Herinim. Tell me, what troubles you?'

'If this foe is so mighty and so wise, strong enough perhaps to interfere with your vision, then is it not conceivable that your hopes are false? All we can do is trust in fate, as we have for a thousand arcs, but if we no longer can, what does the future hold for us?'

Taec frowned within his helm. He had had the same fear himself. 'Then we will have to wait and see, as all mortals ultimately must. Bladecraft and gunfire will see us through, or they will not. We have no choice but to try.'

They waited, as orders were sent out to the troops at the front to fall back in earnest. They trickled back in small groups. Transports, freer to operate in the nexus, swept down upon the shattered units and whisked as many as they could to safety. Others ran for their lives.

Wraithlords erupted from the tunnel, sprinting hard for the lines of silent wraithguard. Behind them were the wraithknights, moving easily backwards, ceaselessly scanning the tunnel mouths.

The horde flooded from the main tunnel to Dûriel, the last eldar firing desperately into them before they were overwhelmed.

‘Do not commence firing! Wait until our warriors are clear!’ shouted Herinim.

Iyanna and the other spiritseers, stationed back on the platform, drew themselves closer to the world of the living, dragging the minds of the dead with them.

The wraithguard raised their weapons in a single movement.

‘You will wait,’ said Taec, his eyes half-lidded, his mind half in the world of now, half upon the skein. ‘You will wait, you will wait. You will not hit the fabric of the webway.’

The voidspawn were coming closer fast. Taec could feel Herinim’s anxiety growing.

His eyes snapped open. ‘You will fire now!’

A dreadful drone set up as the reactors of the wraithcannon activated. With a sickening psychic backwash, they opened fire.

Five hundred glittering points of light opened among the voidspawn’s front line. The monsters carried on regardless as the lights grew into glowing spheres, then collapsed in on themselves to leave balls of glowing blackness crackling with purple lightning. Taec drew his breath sharply. Through the gaps in reality, malicious eyes burned, and they coveted his soul.

Alien monstrosities imploded and exploded, their shapes warped out of true by the pull of the warp. By the hundred they were drawn into the howling maelstrom as miniature portals pierced the veil between the worlds. Wind blew over the host as the atmosphere of the labyrinth realm was sucked away.

The wraithcannon shut off. The warp breaches snapped shut with peals of thunder. Great bites had been taken from the alien army, but such were their numbers that the gaps were filled in an eyeblink, and the wall of bone and red surged onwards.

One more volley from the wraithcannon, one more volley where Taec felt his soul shrivel a little more, and the aliens were on them, a spearpoint of twelve towering assault beasts breaking into the line of wraithguard, bowling them aside like game pins. The psychic shockwave came with it, the ravening hunger of the hive mind, and Taec staggered under its onslaught.

‘Destroy the leaders!’ shouted Herinim. ‘Bring down those that lead, and the rest will fall!’

The line of Guardians opened fire. Laser light, shuriken, plasma packets, clouds of monofilament wire – all the terrible arts of killing the eldar had perfected over the aeons – poured into the horde, picking out the larger creatures, those that, even to the non-seers, glowed with psychic power. Where they fell, Taec felt the densely woven synaptic network of the swarm ping apart like the strands of a spiderweb cut. But there were so many of them, thousands, and the directing will remained strong.

The voidspawn pushed deep into the ranks of wraithguard at the front of the army. The ghost warriors were tough, sung from the hardest wraithbone, and did not perish easily. Few of the great beasts fell, but so did few of the wraithguard, and all the while a great tally of lesser aliens was accounted for by the guns of the living and their armoured vehicles.

Taec saw opportunity. ‘Now, Herinim, it must be now. We have them trapped, crush them!’

Herinim relayed a complex series of orders. Wraithblades swung in from the wings, attempting to isolate the initial assault.

At the same moment, the wraithguard parted. The wraithknights of Iyanden came forward, the Avatar at their head. Towering over even the great warrior beasts of Far Ranging Hunger, they smote all about them with crackling blades, their shields glimmering as they deflected return attacks. The Avatar howled with uncanny fury, the rage of the god-fragment invigorating all the eldar, making the sluggish dead quick and the living eager to spill blood. Its burning sword howled and whooped as it sliced through the ranks of the aliens.

Slowly but surely, they were pushing the horde back.

‘Plug the tunnels! Keep them contained!’ shouted Taec.

More tyranids were joining the fight, spilling from subsidiary tunnels that must link with the main way. Either that, or more than one gate on the planet had been compromised and that Taec could not countenance.

Battle raged on. By the middle of the cycle, as the eldar reckoned it in the timeless webway, the aliens’ advance had been blunted. Wraithknights stooped to enter tunnels heaving with the beasts. Still the voidspawn appeared endless, and slowly the numbers of the Phoenix Host were being whittled away.

And then, a slow smile spread across Taec’s weary face.

‘Aid,’ he said. ‘Aid comes at last.’

‘I see nothing,’ said Herinim.

‘Wait. Now. Look.’ Taec pointed to a tunnel where several thousand smaller tyranids were throwing themselves madly against an implacable wall of wraithguard. For every wraithguard that died, a hundred or more of the leaping creatures were slain, but they had the numbers, and the time.

Herinim zoomed in with his helm lenses. ‘I see nothing still, farseer,’ he said doubtfully.

‘Watch.’

A disturbance. Flashing light came from behind the tyranids. A glimpse of blue, a tall helm. Aliens fell dead, and then, suddenly, there were none. The voidspawn had been annihilated. Eldar warriors took their place.

The wraithguard parted. Asurmen himself stepped into the cavern, surrounded by his fabled Crystal Sons. The eldar spread out, the wraithguard following his lead with no aid from the spiritseers. The living and the dead formed lines, and opened fire.

‘And there,’ said Taec. ‘And there.’

He pointed to other tunnels. From one, a dead serpentine creature fell. A tall warrior in black armour decorated by bones stepped onto its lip, levelled the scythed cannon in his hands at the milling creatures below and began to methodically cut them down. From another tunnel Jain Zar leapt, flipping through the air to land between a pair of hive tyrants. Baharroth soared into the air. Fuegan strode forwards from a dark tunnel, fusion lance blazing.

‘The Phoenix Lords... Five of them...’ said Herinim with awe in his voice.

‘Six, I believe,’ said Taec.

‘Aid from an unexpected quarter,’ said Herinim.

‘Fate is with us,’ said Taec.

Joined by their legendary heroes, the eldar fought harder. More and more of the tyranids’ node creatures died, and the swarm lost cohesion. The Phoenix Lords leapt from tunnel edge to broken wraithbone to the backs of the enemy, always where they were needed most, destroying the largest and most ferocious creatures with contemptuous ease. The psychic shocks of shattered waystones diminished in frequency, and a fervency gripped the army. The eldar scented victory. But the battle was not done.

‘There! Look!’ A panicked voice – Taec never knew whose.

A boiling mass of tyrannids came from the tunnel to the front of the cavern, piling into a weak point of the eldar line.

‘An inconvenient happenstance,’ said Herinim.

Before Taec could access the skein and attempt to find a counter-move, a flight of dark-finned attack craft came speeding from the tunnel, barbarically attired eldar riding them. Black light stabbed from ostentatiously decorated weapons.

A female voice spoke over their communications network, a derisory note to it. ‘Cousins! We come to your aid in the nick of time, it seems. You are late for your battle.’

Explosions ripped through the cavern. The entire nexus was shaking. The webway here would not go unharmed by this melee.

‘Let us finish this,’ said Taec.

At Taec’s command, Herinim ordered the Phoenix Host to fall upon the voidspawn.

They were utterly destroyed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Fate of Dûriel

Silent shapes slid across an ocean of stars, a mirror to the ocean of blood within Yriel's mind. The bridge of the *Flame of Asuryan* was alive with activity, but the Admiral-Autarch of Iyanden saw none of it.

Yriel gripped the Spear of Twilight hard in his right hand. His left elbow rested upon the arm of his command pod's chair. He chewed at the first knuckle of his forefinger, his eyes staring off into vistas no other could see.

The waves of blood beat harder. Iron spray filled the air. The unmoving sun had moved, sinking low to the horizon and raising sparks as bright as lance fire from the swell. All was blood red, the sky striated with clouds crimson as wounds. The fell presence of the spear was behind him, closer now than ever before, so close Yriel thought he might reach and touch it, if he were but fast enough.

The sun was hot on his face. The bubbles popped and churned in the foam on the sea, each one a short-lived screaming face.

The presence grew closer.

He turned.

'Admiral! My admiral!'

Yriel awoke from his vision with a start. Yaleanar stood by him, his face troubled.

'Are you well, my lord?' asked Yaleanar quietly.

Yriel nodded dumbly. He was staring at his lieutenant with wide eyes, his face slack. He noticed his hand, knuckles raw and slick with spittle, and hid it behind himself.

'Yes, yes.'

'The spear...' said Yaleanar.

Yriel nodded. Yaleanar understood. He composed himself. 'Do we approach Dûriel, my shadow?'

'Yes, my prince, only...' Yaleanar's face was worried.

'What?'

'See for yourself, Yriel.' He pointed at a viewing globe. It showed Dûriel, icons and runes denoting the position of the hive fleets. Far Ranging Hunger's was dark on the anti-solar side, Starving Dragon's ships an albedo twinkle.

It was not to the fleets that Yaleanar pointed, but the single moon of Dûriel, Ulaniel. The satellite was small, distant from Dûriel; enwrapped itself by tendrils of Starving Dragon, feasting no doubt on the Imperial stations there. It shone with a ruddy light as red as the seas of Yriel's nightmares.

'A red moon, my prince,' said Yaleanar. 'The omen of the doom of Eldanesh.'

A rush of feverish energy gripped Yriel. This rush of unholy vitality had come before every battle where he had borne the spear. He despised it and welcomed it in equal measure. He rose, and came down from the command pod.

'Aye! And the sign of the first of the Triple Woe! We should fear, yes?' he said angrily. 'You believe this?'

Yaleanar shrugged. 'It makes no matter to me, my prince, I would follow you were you to cast open the gates to the crone worlds and make for them at full sail. But the others? They might fear.'

‘Then let the others hear!’ shouted Yriel. ‘You look at a red moon, I hear, then hear this. An omen, ill-starred perhaps, but that is all it is.’ Yriel walked around the bridge. ‘Many of you are veterans of the Eldritch Raiders. Many of you have fought by my side against Far Ranging Hunger when two-thirds of the fleet died. We triumphed then, did we not?’

His bridge crew looked to each other.

‘We triumphed, prince,’ said one.

‘Aye, we did. And against Rekkfist, and against the humans who sought our home. Some few of you have been by my side since I defeated Kallorax, also in the shadow of a red moon, and the fateful day I broke the sceptre of command, cast it to the floor of the Chamber of Autarchs and took my leave of Iyanden.’

Yaleanar bowed.

‘And do I bear a sceptre now?’ No response. ‘I asked, do I bear a sceptre now!?’ he shouted. He looked about the bridge, his staring eyes stabbing into the viewing orbs of every one of the ships’ captains, his words conveyed to all the fleet.

‘No,’ came the replies.

‘No, I do not.’ He held the spear above his head. ‘I bear the Spear of Twilight, the weapon of Ulthanash himself! It too is an ill-starred omen, but I yet stand, and I do not intend to fall today. Who will stand with me?’

Shouts rang out over the ships’ network, boosted by the spirit circuits of each ship and pushed past the psychic roar of the hive mind.

‘Let it be known that I put no faith in omens, or the dead gods, but only in my skill, in your skill, in the right of the eldar race to tread the stars unopposed, not as refugees or skulking wretches, but as the masters of the galaxy!’

‘Yriel! Yriel! Yriel!’ came the chant.

‘A most rousing little speech.’ Lord Sarnak’s silky voice cut over the shouts, his perpetually grinning face appearing in the principal of the *Flame of Asuryan*’s viewing orbs. ‘You are absolutely wasted with these path-bound dullards. Come home with me to Commorragh. You’d be the season’s darling in the corespur, I absolutely guarantee it. I am very moved, yes, positively overcome with positive feelings for our coming victory.’

‘You care nothing for omens either then, Lord Sarnak?’

‘Quite the contrary, Prince Yriel. I have lived far too long to foolishly dismiss superstition.’ His grin moved closer in. ‘But red is my most beloved colour.’

Yriel laughed. Pain throbbed up his arm, needles jabbing his flesh from the spear. ‘Mine also, of late.’ The laugh died on his lips, and he turned his sallow face from Sarnak. ‘You are ready?’

‘As we agreed, O princeling.’

‘Then send out your signals to all the fleet! Make all speed! We will deliver the Fireheart to the surface of Dûriel, then rip the heart out of this splinter of Far Ranging Hunger as we ripped the heart from the one that came before it. This I swear upon the Spear of Twilight. To Dûriel! To Dûriel and glory!’

Sunspear’s Wave Serpent exited the webway into extreme turbulence. Immediately the minds of all aboard were gripped by the ravaging horror of the hive mind. Several of them gasped. Strong-willed as the eldar were, the insurmountable size and vile, alien nature of it was hard to bear. The clouds were thick and red, the atmosphere choked with spores. Tiny alien creatures blatted upon the hull by the thousands.

‘Take us to the surface,’ said Sunspear.

The craft dipped down low, Durantai-Bec’s instruments blinking light-patterns of warning as he strayed close to the rock of the mountain.

‘Shall I set us down, autarch?’ asked the pilot. There was an edge to his voice, one of concentration rather than fear.

‘Yes.’

The Wave Serpent swept low to the mountainside, bare stone visible through curling streamers of wind-driven spores. It set down near where Aloec had directed the earlier battle. The Inner Command disembarked swiftly.

They looked upon the world in horror.

The Valley of the Gods was unrecognisable. The forest had been stripped away to the bedrock. Massive creatures, little more than gaping maws on stout legs, bulldozed the land with shovel-like mandibles, scooping up the little remaining plant material, topsoil and voidspawn without discrimination. A vast digestion pool occupied the centre of the valley, steaming with noxious vapours, one of many that dotted the ravaged landscape. Young capillary towers composed of multiple stalks pushed upwards, the base of each stalk hundreds of paces across. The stalks writhed as they grew before the eldar’s eyes, vying with each other in the race up to space. Hive ships, invisible through the murk, showed up on the eldar’s helmet lenses as they descended from low orbit, their mouthparts waiting for the towers’ tops to reach them.

There was shocked silence as images of wider Dûriel, relayed by scout craft, played for the Inner Command. The state of Dûriel before had been cause for woe enough, but now it bore as much resemblance to its former beauty as the flensed skull of a maiden does to her full flush of youth.

Warrior beasts roamed the land. Their purpose done and without foes to battle, they fought one another, creatures from both swarms intermingling and fighting freely. Ripper swarms clotted the exposed bedrock, scavenging for every last piece of biological matter. Where they encountered one of the warrior beasts, they swarmed over it, pulling it down by sheer weight of numbers and stripping it down to the exoskeleton in short order. The rippers swept away from these downed fighters when done, leaving their gleaming bones to be broken up by slower-moving variants equipped with massive, crushing jaws. Similar beasts chewed upon rock, extracting mineral and microbial wealth.

Spore chimneys and bloated, barely mobile creatures belched endless clouds of micro-organisms into the sky. These drifted until they bonded with the desired chemical elements or free-floating native life, to be picked up by flying, insectoid creatures. These in their turn flew back to the pools once glutted, gathering in dense swarms like twisting smoke over the bubbling bile. A constant downward motion was visible in these shifting double-helix formations as the creatures flew into the acid pools, but there were always more to gather at the top.

That was not the worst of it. Tyranid corpses had been seen in some number in the atrium nexus of the webway opening out onto Dûriel. Sunspear, disquieted, had ordered an investigation. He did not have to wait long.

‘Autarch,’ a senior Guardian signalled Sunspear. ‘We have had contact from one of the Dark Kin’s gladiators. The wych...’

‘I will speak myself!’ said a second voice, heavily accented. A tattooed face appeared in the viewing orb. ‘You did not shut the door when you fled,’ the eldar said contemptuously. ‘My mistress Hesperax has been forced to pursue the voidspawn into the labyrinth. She is most displeased.’

‘This is a bad turn of events, Sunspear,’ said Altariet quietly.

Sunspear’s face burned with shame under his helmet. He could rail against the wayseers, but the

responsibility was ultimately his. ‘How many?’

‘Many thousands,’ said the wych. ‘I was bidden to wait by the gate to inform you of your mistake. They breached the right-hand tunnel.’

‘Iyanden comes that way,’ said Kellian.

‘Then Far Ranging Hunger will be destroyed,’ said Sunsphear with some relief. He dismissed the wych’s image as he opened his mouth to speak again.

‘Yes,’ said Forlissiar. ‘But how long will the Phoenix Host be delayed?’

Altariiec clicked his staff upon the ground. ‘No matter! What is done is done. The voidspawn no longer have this world to themselves, and they will not devour it uncontested,’ he said. His body language was of support for the commander, but all could hear his disappointment.

As if in proof of Altariiec’s words, the clouds above flared with light as grav-vehicles broke through from the labyrinth dimension, a few at first, then a great many, so that the red clouds looked wracked with lightning from the webgates’ flashing. Brightly painted Vypers, bearing warriors whose diamond-patterned wargear declared their allegiance to the Laughing God, flew to battlegrounds of their own choosing. Bladed skimmers carried the Dark Kin off to wait over the valley, where they would fight by prior agreement. Guardians and their support batteries came from the main gate on foot, arraying themselves in a defensive perimeter around the mountain peaks to await the arrival of the Fireheart.

Elsewhere, as before, webway portals sung into being by wayseers cracked open, and eldar squads strode through, dispersing into the rocks all around the Valley of the Gods and the peak.

‘What are they doing?’ said Kellian, pointing out a pair of great assault beasts who fought as hard as ambull males at the rut. ‘Why do they fight?’

‘I have seen this from seized mon-keigh records,’ said Sunsphear. ‘Their purpose is done. They await the command to abandon their form and return to their component matter. Our cousins were fortunate the invasion of Iyanden never reached this stage.’

‘Fortunate?’ said Kellian. ‘I do not think so. I have experienced the destruction in a sensorium. Iyanden is in ruins.’

Sunsphear fixed Kellian with a grim eye. ‘Fortunate, for if the consumption of their craftworld had reached this pass, they would all have been dead. The malice of the Great Dragon knows no end. Iyanden is ruined, but it lives on.’

Kellian twisted his hands around his spear. ‘That is a misinterpretation, noble autarch. There is no malice here. The Great Dragon is a force of nature, nothing more. It is not evil as the Doom of Souls is, but merely terrible in its endless hunger. A force of nature, nothing more, but awful for that. We are leaves before the hurricane.’

A chime in Sunsphear’s helmet broke off their conversation. ‘Autarch, Irein Tardoen of Flight of Amberwings Over Water. I have something to report.’

‘Go ahead, Irein.’

The Vyper squadron leader sent an image feed to the Inner Command. Aloec accepted it, and a shared viewing globe materialised.

‘Something unusual, autarch.’

The Vypers transmitted multiple views of a trail of corpses leading to a massive mound of dead. The eater beasts did not approach this great heap. Rather, warriors of both hive fleets surrounded it.

‘Fighting?’ said Sunsphear.

‘Yes, autarch. Not each other. There is weapons discharge there, and a movement of large numbers of Far Ranging Hunger’s beasts that way.’

‘Quickly,’ said Sunspear, hope tugging at him. ‘Take me there.’

He left his Wave Serpent with the Inner Command. Hethaeliar and other autarchs he tasked with marshalling the stream of Dark Kin and Biel-Tanians flowing through from the webway. The seers awaited the Fireheart.

Sunspear took a Falcon grav-tank alone, with six more falling in behind him bearing his honour guard, and jetbikes and Vypers flanking those.

Many weapon tyrannids were abroad below, their bio-signals crowding the Falcon’s sensors so much they appeared as thickly as a glowing fungus on the displays. For the most part they wandered aimlessly, but their presence troubled him. Sunspear signalled the Inner Command. ‘There are many more of Far Ranging Hunger than we hoped,’ he said. ‘Many to the north. They have been reinforced.’

‘Low orbital passes by hive ships suggest so, autarch,’ came Hethaeliar’s perpetually distracted voice. Sunspear thought he heard the note of something else to it. She affected detachment, but he had heard whispers from his supporters that she sought to supplant him as Lord Autarch. His defeat must have been the cause of some joy to her. ‘There is another wave approaching. Feedships follow in their wake. The consumption phase has begun. Dûriel has a matter of cycles remaining, no more.’

‘Then we are back where we began,’ he said. ‘Far Ranging Hunger to the north, Starving Dragon to the south, the pair about to mate and the last of the Eldanar caught betwixt the jaws. It is almost as if they anticipate us!’

‘It is possible, autarch.’

‘Is there yet any sign of Prince Yriel?’

‘The fleet has not entered the system as best we can tell,’ said Hethaeliar. ‘He may have arrived. He is operating cloaked and under silence. Such a vaunted steersman as he should have piloted his ship here by now, I would have thought.’

Sunspear grew irritated with Hethaeliar’s tone. ‘Keep me informed,’ he said, and severed contact. Yriel’s tardiness was indeed grave. They had discovered late that the Fireheart could not be brought through the webway. Sarnak’s flagship was heavily shielded and had gone through the greatest conduits; those from Biel-Tan required smaller vessels, and the possibility of the Fireheart activating accidentally within such a delicate and constrained part of the labyrinth would have been disastrous. Thus Yriel escorted it along with his Titans, and every moment he was late brought the merging of the hive fleets closer.

‘The die is cast, I must work within the situation,’ he said to himself. He went back to studying his viewing globes until the pilot called him.

‘We approach, autarch.’

Sunspear brought up an external view to replace his maps. The mound of Far Ranging Hunger’s corpses appeared bigger close to. North of the Godpeak, three triads of Vypers zoomed around it high above, hidden from the voidspawn by their own spores and the eldar’s technology.

A ring of creatures surrounded the mound, clambering over their dead to get to whatever had slain them. There was a flash of firelight, playing through the interlocked limbs of dead voidspawn.

‘No, it can’t be...’ His heart quickened. Involuntarily, he leaned closer to the viewing globe. The globe responded to his movement by expanding and zooming in.

There was a flare of orange fire. A spear burst through the chest of a broad-mouthed serpent rearing atop the pile. A bloody fist pulled a warrior beast’s feet from under it, then grabbed at the hissing creature and crushed its skull.

From the heap of dead, the god of war emerged.

‘The Avatar! The Avatar of Khaine lives!’ Sunspear said. He keyed his communications net to

widecast, and shouted it again to all the eldar upon Dûriel. ‘The Avatar is with us!’

The Avatar strode down the mound, into the heart of the horde surrounding him. His body leaked molten iron from a dozen wounds, but his fires were undimmed. He cast the Suin Daellae, sending it in a wide circle where it punched through alien after alien. The Avatar punched its fist into the side of a living tank, and pulled out a handful of clotted matter that ignited in its furnace grip. The living statue held out its other hand and snatched the spear from the air as it returned, spinning on its heel to smash it through the face of a warrior beast that ran at him.

‘Attack! Attack!’ cried Sunspear. ‘Aid our Avatar!’

The Falcons following in his wake split wide to either side, the jetbikes and Vypers peeling away. They dropped from the clouds, weapons firing. At the back of his mind, Sunspear felt the deadly intelligence of the hive mind shift, its attention drawn to this troublesome spot on the world. But it was of no matter to him, when some small part of his honour might be restored. ‘Aid the Avatar! For the glory of Khaine!’

The tanks set up a complex fire pattern of interlocked laser blasts, felling voidspawn monstrosities by the score. ‘Create a cordon! Set us down, set us down here! Hethaeliar, send immediate reinforcement!’

Sunspear’s Falcon was first down, others following, swiftly deploying their cargoes of Aspect Warriors before zooming off to take up firing circuits in the air. The Aspect Warriors set about destroying the aliens near the mound, allowing the tanks to range further out.

‘This is it,’ said Sunspear, surveying the carnage wrought by the Avatar. The summit of the Godpeak reared over him to the south, where webway portals twinkled with new arrivals still. ‘This is where we will make our stand!’

On the plain, surrounded by his defeated foes, the Avatar swung his head from side to side, seeking new victims. There were none near, and the autarch urged the idol to return to his side. In the crowded psychic space of Dûriel, where the hive mind choked all communication, still the god-fragment heard, and deigned to accept. It turned, and climbed back up the hill of woe, iron feet leaving smouldering prints on the hides of the vanquished. Sunspear’s blood quickened, his nostrils flared, eager to drink in the stink of blood and hot metal. The Avatar stood by him, radiating fierce heat.

Drawn by the presence of their war god, the Biel-Tanians were already converging upon the place of death. Transports swooped down unbidden from the clouds. Aspect Warriors by the score disembarked, arraying themselves in disciplined ranks around the autarch. Sunspear let them come.

Sunspear took off his helm, and regarded them with eyes made fierce. The spore-heavy air burned his nose, but he did not care. ‘The Guardian host will guard the peak! The Dark Kin will reave the valley, but we of the shrines, we of the Path of the Warrior, here we shall make our stand! This is the sign of our undying supremacy! This is the sign of our right to the stars, that no hunger, no matter how vile,’ he clasped his hand around his waystone, ‘will defeat us! Here we will fight, to buy with our lives the time the seers will need to activate the Fireheart and destroy this threat to us once and for all! Far Ranging Hunger will not pass! We will not allow it to join with Starving Dragon!’

A great shout went up from six hundred warriors. Aloec smiled with savage glee, but as he did so he glanced to the sky. A fresh wave of drop spores were streaking fiery trails through the air.

And still there was no sign of Prince Yriel.

Four hundred million paces astern of the *Flame of Asuryan*, the majority of Yriel’s fleet engaged the tyranids in space as Yriel and five squadrons of escorts drove planetwards like a spear, forcing their way through a cordon of Kraken ships. The shelled monstrosities were fast for void ships, acting as a

screen for those larger hive vessels descending to feast upon Dûriel. Yriel's task force rushed past them, leaving the creatures lumbering in their wake. High-velocity boarding worms shot across space. Most missed, the eyes of the hive fleet baffled by the holo-field-shattered silhouettes of the ships, but in such great volume the torpedoes came that some hit home. A couple of vessels lagged behind as they were penetrated and warrior beasts disgorged into their interiors. Screams and the sounds of fighting echoed through the communications webs, those conveyed psychically distorted by the hive mind's crushing might.

The input from one hundred and ninety-seven ships would have been overwhelming for most commanders – tactical displays and bridge views, external images of close engagements, voice feeds, psy-feeds, all coming into the bridge of the *Flame of Asuryan* – but Yriel was no ordinary admiral. Burdened by the spear, he hunched like a crow, but he watched the displays with a hawk's eye.

Audio reports sounded from every quarter.

‘Get those cruisers away from *Vaul's Caress*!’

‘Under heavy fire, taking damage...’

‘We shall draw away the thirteenth echelon from the rearguard...’

Every so often, the sober reports of Iyanden and Biel-Tan's captains were interrupted by the whooping shouts of some of the more free-spirited corsairs or Dark Kin, or the hysterical laughter of Lord Sarnak as another hive ship detonated, spilling its entrails into the void.

‘Sarnak is bold,’ said Yaleanar.

‘He is reckless, my shadow,’ said Yriel, watching as the Kabal of the Black Heart's void cutters sliced deep into the hive fleet's heart.

‘Sounds like someone I know,’ said Yaleanar.

‘He seeks to kill the norn ship, the queen at the heart of the swarm, and garner glory for himself. He mocks us also for our supposed timidity. He should wait until we have delivered *Vaul's Caress* to the surface. Sarnak!’ he said loudly. ‘Do not penetrate too deeply. Pull your fleet back. You cannot hope to take the heart of the swarm yourself.’

Sarnak appeared in an image sphere. ‘Oh, don't be so tiresome. Could you leave me be, I am a little occupied.’ The picture broke up as his ship took a hit. The bridge juddered, and Sarnak and his crew were thrown from their feet. A scream followed. ‘On the other hand, perhaps we should reconsider our tactics,’ said Sarnak, more soberly than Yriel had ever heard him speak. ‘Yes, I will do as you say.’

‘Concentrate your efforts on drawing away their quicker vessels. Keep them off my fleet until the Fireheart is delivered. If you can destroy the swifter escorts, we will have a greater advantage when we attack.’

‘You send me into danger to save yourself?’ Sarnak raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you sure you are not a Commorrite, Lord Yriel?’

The *Flame of Asuryan* jibbed sharply to starboard, the violence of the motion overcoming its dampening fields and causing Yriel to lean into it to keep his balance. ‘I assure you, it is equally perilous here. If you do not do as I ask, breaking through to the core ships will be impossible and no matter what the result on the surface, we will have lost. Draw them off, destroy them piecemeal. If you dare the swarm entire, they will overwhelm and destroy you.’

‘Aha! The death of a thousand cuts, I like it. A particular favourite.’ Sarnak looked directly at Yriel, eyes alive with amusement over his preposterous grin. ‘I ask you again, are you sure you are not a Commorrite, Lord Yriel?’

‘Will you do it or not, Sarnak?’

Wrath kindled in the kabalite's eyes at being addressed so, but another massive detonation rocked

his craft and he nodded. Yriel cut the feed, switching back to a remote view of the Dark Kin's impressive fleet. They sped through space alive with void-hardened organisms as they broke off from their attack run. One of their larger cruisers was not quite nimble enough, and was snared by the thousand-kilometre tentacles of a Kraken ship. Delicate spars were wrenched free from the vessel and it was brought to an abrupt halt. The ship opened up with its weapons batteries, blasting directly into the creature's shell aperture. The Dark Kin's vessels had been equipped with toxin cannons, and the tentacles blackened rapidly and the creature drifted away.

'Their weaponry is efficacious,' said Yaleanar. 'Next time, we should do the same.'

'There will be no next time. And they are not efficacious enough, my dear Yaleanar. Watch.'

Three more ships grabbed at the cruiser as it limped away. One made straight for the vessel, energy fields playing over its stubby tentacles. There was a flash as a massive discharge of bio-electricity shorted out the dark eldar ship's shields. It was rapidly torn apart.

'A costly loss,' said Yriel.

Yaleanar reached for his friend, placing a hand on his shoulder. 'Leave them to it, my prince. We have monsters of our own to slay.'

Yriel nodded, directing his attention to a frontal view. Dûriel rapidly approached, its atmosphere swirling with red cloud, lit from within by lightning. A swarm of ten space-borne leviathans, strange organs within them counteracting the pull of Dûriel's gravity, were descending into the upper reaches of the atmosphere, their feed tentacles probing down from their undersides. Their sides rippled as they ejected mycetic spores.

'In all my life, I have never seen anything like this,' said Yaleanar. 'At once I am astounded by what the galaxy has to offer, and surprised how the same forms are repeated endlessly. To look upon the voidspawn from above, like fish in a pond, I do not know whether to be amazed or bored.'

'These fish have a powerful bite,' murmured Yriel. His quick eyes darted over the image, tactical scenarios playing in his mind. He spied a weakness quickly enough; not a fatal one, but one that would allow *Vaul's Caress* through and that was all that was required of them at this stage. 'Squadrons Kurnous's Eye, Isha's Grace, the Star Wraiths, target the creature on my mark. Honourable Way, The Third Imperative, drive its friends away.' Targeting runes locked on one of the beasts, slightly off the group's centre. 'On three, two, one. Now!'

Swift eldar vessels sped ahead of the *Flame of Asuryan*. At the same time, the *Flame* opened up with every forward facing weapon it had, a barrage of lasers and torpedoes cutting across the void and slicing into the flesh of the beast.

The *Flame of Asuryan* sailed close to the planet, the last tenuous wisps of Dûriel's sheath of air dragging at the keel, *Vaul's Caress* and its escorts close behind.

'Come about, go for another pass!'

The *Flame* banked, broadsides raking across the group of creatures. To their stern, the Wraithborne acted as fleet rearguard. They turned side on, tempting the Krakens to snare them in their tentacles. The creatures on the boarding worms were quickly overpowered by the ghost warriors crewing the ships. The dead eldar then boarded the craft holding their own ships, blasting the Krakens apart from the inside with their distortion cannons.

'So far so good,' said Yaleanar.

'Let us not count our blessings yet, my shadow,' said Yriel as the *Flame* lined up again on the targeted bio-ship. Its fellows were being herded back by flights of fighters and bombers and the harrying actions of his other escorts. The bio-ships had anti-gravity, of a type, but their beast munitions did not, and Yriel had the advantage of being higher in the gravity well.

‘Again!’ he shouted. Another fusillade ripped along the voidspawn, and gaseous clouds of atomised body fluid billowed out. *Vaul’s Caress* opened fire a second later, adding its lesser fire to that of the *Flame*. The bio-ship slid to one side, tentacles flailing feebly. ‘Again!’

The *Flame* turned sharply, dodging a Kraken that had made it through the Wraithborne. Behind the flagship one of the wraithships exploded in a brief nova-flash. Below it, laser and plasma fire stitched bright lines of blue and red across the roiling mass of Dûriel’s atmosphere.

‘Admiral!’ said Yaleanar excitedly. ‘The ship is dying, it is dropping! A masterly stroke!’

‘Again!’ said Yriel through gritted teeth.

The *Flame* sent another broadside smashing into the wallowing bio-vessel. The port side of it split open entirely and it fell with sudden rapidity, its skin glowing hot with the stresses of atmospheric entry.

‘Fighter wings, form up. *Vaul’s Caress*, go now. May Asuryan guide you safely to the surface.’

The Naiad-class cruiser shot out from behind the *Flame*, sails folding as it drove into the atmosphere at great speed, friction fire streaking from its energy shield. Fighters flew either side as they punched through the hole in the feedships’ swarm.

‘Three-tenths until Starving Dragon makes contact with the fleet, admiral,’ said the master of the ship’s eye.

Yriel gave a dry laugh. He wore a rictus grin not dissimilar to Sarnak’s. ‘They are slow, we will be long gone by then. Destroy the rest of those wallowing below us, then we shall go and help our Dark Kin take their prize. Far Ranging Hunger will trouble the galaxy no more after this day, I swear. Charge all weapons! We engage at close quarters.’

In the thick air of Dûriel, *Vaul’s Caress* burned bright, and then was swallowed by the cloud. In its wake, bio-ships died under Yriel’s relentless barrage.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Battle for Dûriel

The eldar were an island of colour in a ravening sea of bone and blood. Sunspear stood at the peak of the island, a bold figure atop a promontory of the dead. Far Ranging Hunger's weapon creatures were ranged against them from one side of the plain to the other, an endless tide coming at the Aspect Warriors of Biel-Tan. Immense gun beasts carrying symbiotic cannon were crawling into range, their waddling gait sending their high backs rocking, so that they looked like bizarre, knobbled ships bobbing on a swell of claws. Sunspear directed his tanks and aircraft against these creatures, gunning them down before they could bring their own guns to bear. This still left his Aspect Warriors to deal with the heavier assault beasts. No matter how many his shrines of Fire Dragons brought low, there were always more. And yet more came in their wake; a steady rain of spores came in heavy over the northern plains, each landing with a wet crack that could be heard over the racket of battle, disgorging yet more warrior creatures.

Hethaeliar the Fourth-Blooded's contemptuous purr sounded in his ears. 'Autarch, Starving Dragon attacks.' Images of the other hive fleet, the mass of its creatures writhing as if they were one organism surging up the valley, came into his viewing sphere. The roars of the beasts were clear through Hethaeliar's audio pick-up. 'We have no contact yet upon the peak. Our warrior-seers are ready, but the device and the rest of the council have yet to arrive.'

Sunspear looked heavenwards. The hive ships were invisible behind Dûriel's atmospheric death shroud, but his helmet lenses painted their outlines onto his retina. Fiery trails cut through high altitude clouds, but from what the debris came, he could not tell; eldar or voidspawn, it could so easily have been either.

The meteor storm intensified. The rain of spores diminished, replaced by much larger chunks of burning matter. Several were of many megatonnes, and came rushing through the sky trailing smoke and fire. They came to ground tens of thousands of paces distant, their impacts shaking his position. His instinct was to tell his troops to take cover, but there was nowhere to hide. His heart lifted a moment as he saw a wreck that was identifiably voidspawn. The massive creature floundered in the sky, crumpling under the influence of gravity it was not bred for. Eldar cheered as it fell sideways towards the earth.

'We must fight on,' said Sunspear. 'Prince Yriel approaches.'

Vaul's Caress shook, a toy in the hand of a mad giant. Ariadien gritted his teeth. He was helpless in his cockpit, the *Sound of Sunlight* strapped fast into the hold of the cruiser. He was frightened, more frightened than he had ever been. The roar of gases against the hull was the roar of the Dragon, the fire its fire, the swiftly approaching ground its maw... He could see it in his imagination, coming up at them remorselessly, the jaws ready to snap shut.

The ship bucked, throwing him about in his steersman's chair. He bit his tongue, and tasted blood in his mouth.

+Brother.+ His sister's voice in his mind. +Be calm, brother. Do not be afraid.+

She was unafraid, her soul peaceful. Her calm enveloped him as surely as a caress, driving back the

thunder of descent. He pictured her, cradling his head against her breast. Ariadien burned with shame at his cowardice. +It is I who should be brave for you. You never wanted this.+

She laughed sadly in his mind. +Can a poet not be brave? To write the heart's desires and present them, raw and bloody, to an uncaring audience is more terrifying than war!+ In his mind's eye she kissed his brow, a tender sending from her. +You are no coward, brother. All your life you have sickened yourself with worry for me, and I thank you, but it was needless. I am your twin, and am as strong as you. Together we are stronger than any other. Do not be frightened.+

+Neidaria...+

A psychic pulse rushed from the spirit core of *Vaul's Caress*. The *Sound of Sunlight's* systems came to life, its own spirits stirring at the command of the ship. Ariadien came back to the present with a rush, his mind slipping from that of his sister and into abrupt communion with the souls of the Titan's core.

'The doors open, let Khaine set forth his bloody plans and take his tally of blood,' spoke the captain.

Immense g-forces tugged at Ariadien as the ship pulled up from its dive and levelled off, its inertial fields useless in the gravity well of the world. Another shift in gravity as it banked around, and a sudden, chest-crushing halt.

The restraints holding the *Sound of Sunlight* whipped free. Ariadien turned his – the *Sound of Sunlight's* – head to the right, and watched as the *Curse of Yriel* stepped out from its throne, head bowed against the low ceiling. Its weapons appeared from the wall, and it took them up in huge hands. The rear doors of the cruiser swung open with haste, and red light flooded into the hold from outside.

The *Curse of Yriel* drew itself up to its full height, and strode off, framed against a boiling red sky.

The *Sound of Sunlight* looked to its sibling, the *Silent Scream*, seated opposite.

+After you, dear sister, + it said.

Their souls bonded to each other and the spirits of their Titan's cores, now it was for Ariadien and Neidaria to be giants, and to take their turn at shaking the world.

Around Khaine's mound, voidspawn died in their hundreds, but each successive wave came closer to the lines of Aspect Warriors, and in two places assault beasts had broken through and were being destroyed only with much loss. In the centre of the worst of these conflicts, the Avatar of Khaine fought, his spear bringing death with every thrust. Confident that the god-shard would bring victory there, Sunspear turned his attention to the right, where four living tanks bellowed out the hive mind's anger, tossing their heads and sending brave warriors flying from their brow horns.

'Shrines Ninth Blackened Hearth and Words of Reason to the right flank. Destroy the breakthrough of Far Ranging Hunger.'

'Yes, autarch,' said the exarchs of the shrines together. Sunspear looked down the hill of corpses. The two shrines pulled back smoothly from the front line and moved the hundred paces to the breakthrough, traversing the treacherous, ichor-slick carapaces of the dead tyranids quickly. He waited for them to engage, watched Ninth Blackened Hearth melt half a living tank with concentrated fusion fire before turning away to find another target.

He was alone on the mound of the dead, the rest of the Inner Command remaining upon the Godpeak. He checked his multiple viewing orbs. He itched to join the fight, to hold his sword in his hand and spill blood by the side of Khaine, but his place was to oversee. His honour had been compromised by failures in command, not in combat. His direct involvement would have to wait.

A sonic boom shattered the sky, rolling across the battlefield. A few of his warriors looked up, and several were pulled down by their foe in doing so, for the Great Devourer's creatures were of more

singular purpose.

Sunspear looked up himself, as a flight of twenty bright yellow fighter craft came towards the ground, engines howling. They pulled up at the last moment, screeching scant dozens of paces from the ground over the horde besetting Biel-Tan's Aspect Warriors. Baleful energies crackled around their prows and were released, a crescent of howling, horrifying force that carried with it the cries of the dead. Sunspear felt a shadow upon his soul, a bitter taste on his tongue.

'They have made weapons of the souls of the dead,' he said unbelievably. 'Now Iyanden goes too far...'

His outrage dissipated when he looked again to the horde of aliens. Broad swathes of them had been felled, as neatly as crop stalks fallen to a scythe. The aircraft came hurtling round, eldritch weapons charging again. He watched this time as the discharge rippled out over the heads of the voidspawn, and saw them collapse like puppets with their strings cut. The pressure on his lines abated. The assault beasts assailing the right lost their support, and were soon surrounded and shot down.

A second later, another peal of ship thunder, and a larger shape came tearing down from the heavens, as roaring and deadly as the rage of Asuryan himself.

Vaul's Caress plummeted earthwards, fire streaming from its fins and weapons blisters. To see a void-runner in atmosphere was a rare thing, for even the ships of the eldar struggled against the heavy embrace of a planet, and yet here one was. Sunspear gazed up at it, transfixed. It seemed as if it would crash down on his very head, but it too corrected course several thousand paces over the battlefield, its gravity generators halting its downward trajectory in short order. Its momentum redirected, the great craft swept on towards the Godpeak, weapons suited to the great destruction of space combat blasting huge holes in Far Ranging Hunger's endless hordes, sending spumes of earth high into the sky and eliciting a loud cheer from the Biel-Tanians.

'The Fireheart has arrived, my brave warriors!' he communicated to his men. 'Prince Yriel is winning the battle in space. We must fight on!'

A rain of fire began, the burning debris of dead hive ships, bringing with it the stench of burnt meat.

Battle raged fiercely in the webway. The Iyandeni had advanced down the tunnel they had initially walked. Close to the webgate to Dûriel, tunnels branched in bewildering profusion. The swarm had been shattered, its intellect driven back into the shadows. Eldar in small groups fought with the splintered remnants in many of the tunnel mouths. 'Leave none alive!' shouted Taec. 'The stain of the Dragon must be removed from the sacred labyrinth!'

Jetbikes screeched overhead, blasting apart a group of warrior creatures advancing on a gang of wyches. The bikes barrel-rolled, dodging through their Commorrite counterparts coming the other way. One of the Dark Kin came within paces of Taec, laughing insanely. Where Herinim was, he had no idea.

Another laugh caught his ear. He ignored it, thinking it to be that of another half-mad Commorrite. He grabbed at the arm of a Guardian and sent his squad down another tunnel where a glimmer of the hive mind lurked.

The mind of the aliens was coming apart, he sensed it. There had been many come into the labyrinth, but their leaders had been hacked down by the Phoenix Lords. Although the roar of the hive mind was deafening, its influence in the realm of the webway was much reduced. Cut off from the warp and real space, the creatures of Far Ranging Hunger were adrift from the Dragon's psychic direction, and the small submind that had formed among the swarm was breaking down. The synaptic web of the aliens was close to folding in on itself completely.

‘Victory is only a few deaths away!’ he called.

Laughter again.

This time he turned to face it. He caught sight of bright cloth disappearing around a corner. On impulse, he followed.

An eldar in motley, her face hooded and masked in silver, waited for him. Taec stopped short of her in amazement.

‘You must come with me. The battle is nearly over, and your doom is not here.’

‘Who are you, Harlequin?’ said Taec. ‘I see from your garb that you are Shadowseer.’

‘That I am. Sylandri Veilwalker they call me.’ She curtsied deeply, lifting imaginary skirts.

He drew himself up, trying to capture an authority he had never truly felt. He was wary of Cegorach’s dancers. ‘And why are you here?’

‘Why, to see what must be, is, and what must not be, isn’t.’ She giggled. ‘If you see what I mean. To wit, in this instance, to guide you to Dûriel. Your thread has taken an inopportune kink. A friend of mine told me it should be pushed back in the correct direction and trimmed.’

‘Only Morai-Heg can trim a thread.’

‘Or another god,’ she said with an equable shrug. ‘Morai-Heg is dead, after all.’

‘And if I do not come with you?’

She held thumb and forefinger together, making a circle. She held it up to her eye and made a show of peering through it.

‘We have many dooms, which do you want? You’re the farseer. You tell me. Look far!’

‘How do we leave?’ said Taec, avoiding her question. ‘I see no door.’

‘That is because you do not know where to look, Silvereye, far-seeing though you are. Now, choose. Come with me, or not. A useful death now, or a pointless one later?’

‘And what of my other death?’ he said, his mouth dry.

‘There is no “other death”, Taec Silvereye of House Delgari. Even eternity is a temporary affair. Only laughter lasts.’

She reached out a hand. Taec looked over his shoulder to the eldar behind him. They were intent on the battle. The screeches of dying aliens filled the webway.

‘Will you come or not? The fate of a world turns on your head, and the fate of our kind turns upon that.’

The vision of him dying, his waystone cracking in the heat, the waiting caresses of She Who Thirsts, rose unbidden in his mind.

He hesitated only a moment.

He nodded reluctantly and took her hand. She wore a soft glove of light green. There was no reassurance in her touch, only destiny.

‘My place is upon Dûriel,’ he said.

‘Then follow me, through a door where there is no door.’

She stepped towards the webway wall. The energy that defined it did not constrain her, and her foot slid through with barely a ripple. Taec went through, and disappeared once more from the host of Iyanden.

Taec and Sylandri traversed a tunnel so small that Taec had to stoop, his staff held out in front of him. The walls of the way touched his elbows as he went. When they did, shocks of power ran up the crystallised parts of his body, and he became uncomfortably aware of watching eyes on the other side.

‘I have never seen such a tight passageway,’ said Taec.

‘Few have,’ said Sylandri. ‘No eldar remembers truly the full extent of the webway, nor how to

correctly use it. The dark ones, the exodites, the craftworlds, corsairs – outcasts all, they squander the legacy of our kind and the Old Ones through fear and hubris. No one knows it well, no one, except we of the wandering folk, and the Guardians of the Black Library, perhaps. But Cegorach knows all the tricks, and he teaches us generously.’

‘Why do you not share this knowledge? It would help bring us together again.’

‘Or drive us apart. The shattered kindreds are incautious in their senescence, old old old!’ she trilled, and laughed. ‘We keep the knowledge, we guard it. Upon the advent of a new generation, a strong generation, mayhap we will share, but the time of renewal is not yet on us.’

The tunnel became steep, twisting as it climbed. Sylandri stepped lightly along its undulations.

‘We are nearly there,’ said Sylandri. ‘Close to the peak of gods, where your efforts are most required.’

‘My efforts and my demise. You are my executioner, Veilwalker.’

Sylandri shrugged. ‘You are a seer as I am, you have seen what must be done for our kind to have a future. The end times approach, Taec Silvereye. You see that clearer than all. The great struggle of this age looms ever nearer.’ She looked at him over her shoulder, the rippling energies of the webway reflecting in her silvered mask. ‘Will you tell me it is not true?’ she said. ‘I will know whether you believe it yourself or not.’

He shook his head. ‘I would not attempt to mock the mockers.’

She laughed. ‘It matters not how skilfully the jest is woven, it is better to laugh in death’s face. We laugh, we prosper, and so our souls are safe.’

‘Mine is not.’

‘No,’ she said baldly. ‘But that is your doom, as to wear this mask is mine. I laugh, but you will never know if I am crying or not, for none shall see my face. Aha!’ she said brightly. ‘We are here.’

The tunnel narrowed to nothing. Ordinarily, the tunnels of the labyrinth seemed endless, but here was a tapered end.

‘This crevice?’

‘A crack of doom,’ she said gleefully. Somehow within the constrained space she managed a small dance that ended in a bow. She ushered him on. ‘Please. Go with the graces of what few gods remain.’

Taec set his face and stepped forwards.

‘I thank you, my executioner.’

A hand on the crook of his elbow stayed his progress. The silver-masked head shook. ‘What executioner would let their charge go free?’

‘And you would?’

‘You are free to go, if that is your choice. Your own feet carry you to your death, not mine, farseer.’

Taec stared into the mask for a moment, at his distorted reflection. He made to go, but the hand gripped him tighter.

‘I would apologise, but those who belong to the Laughing God do not sorrow for themselves or for others. Laughter is the best tonic, do you not think? Laughter will not come easily to you in the coming arcs, but one day, Silvereye, when all this is done and your torment is over, we will meet again under happier skies where we will laugh long and hard together. You can be sure of that. If you can hold onto that thought, think it often, and laugh in the face of our enemy. She really doesn’t like that very much.’

Then with a movement so swift it took him completely by surprise, Sylandri turned and shoved him, sending him headfirst into the fissure of energy. He shouted in alarm.

A soft laugh answered him.

Taec did not fall. He found stone under his feet, and a bitter scent on the air even through his helm's filters. A stormy sky loomed over him, cliffs on many sides. He blinked, dislocated. He looked for Sylandri, but the Shadowseer had disappeared, and there was no sign of a webgate that he could detect with his mundane or uncanny senses.

He stepped out from behind a rock, and into the end of the world. The skies were red, as in his vision, choked with life alien to the world. Lightning flickered within them. A strong, hot wind scoured the surface, the scent of acid and vinegary putrefaction thick upon it. The very rock groaned with pain, what little was left of the world spirit gnawing in agony on itself. Flights of eldar vehicles sped through the tortured heavens. Screeches of alien nightmares sounded endlessly, along with the distant thunder of many weapons.

He looked upon the place of his doom. 'Dûriel,' he said.

He was on the Godpeak as promised, some way from the main webgate.

Vaul's Caress hung over the mountaintop, its gravity engines whining loudly against the pull of the planet. The Titans of Iyanden stalked from its holds; lesser doors had opened, and a stream of Guardians in blue and yellow were emerging to bolster those of Biel-Tan guarding the peak. Tall among them was the building-sized Fireheart, a tower floating on repulsor fields, shepherded by robed eldar who moved with final purpose.

As Taec walked down the hillside to the rocky plateau, *Vaul's Caress* finished its rapid deployment and shot off into the sky, guns vaporising airborne tyranids that dared its power. Clouds streamed over its sleek hull, and it disappeared.

He watched the hole it had punched in the sky for a moment, then walked to join the seer council of Biel-Tan.

'The Fireheart must be set here,' Kellian was saying. 'The signs are quite clear.'

'The geological survey is not, however,' Altariet replied. 'Our senses say here, our sensors say there, where the old volcano's principal vent was.' He pointed to a cave in a crag a few hundred paces away.

'There, brothers,' said Taec, walking into their midst. He pointed to another pinnacle of stone. The seer council started, because he had approached them unheard and unseen; shielded still by the glammers of Cegorach, perhaps. 'That outcrop there is close to the last active fault upon this mountain, and also to a crystal branching of the dead world spirit. Place it there, and the Fireheart will consume the planet and its dead soul. This is why the portents and mundane knowledge differ.'

Kellian nodded. Altariet went away to direct the technicians and seers bringing the great device into place.

'How came you here?' said Kellian. 'Where are the forces of Iyanden?'

Taec walked to his side with slow steps. His limbs were stiffer than they had ever been. 'I came by another path. The others will arrive soon. The webway was infested. Only by the efforts of the Dark Kin wych cult, our Phoenix Host and the Phoenix Lords was disaster averted.'

'The five...?' whispered Kellian.

Taec nodded. 'All of them, Asurmen at the fore.'

Kellian looked upwards, arms spread. 'So much is obscured. We are blind and deafened by the noise of the Great Dragon! Great things are happening here.'

'More I suspect than we shall ever know, Kellian of Biel-Tan,' said Taec.

There was a mighty bang as the Fireheart reached its position, and its repulsor field was shut off.

Kellian looked to the towering construct. 'I remain here. The Inner Command must direct the fight still, glean what little the skein can show us.'

‘And I must go,’ said Taec. ‘I am needed for the activation.’

They exchanged a profound, wordless farewell, and walked their own path away from each other.

Taec entered the circle of seers. Despite the clamour of battle ringing from the valley at the mountain’s feet, a strange peace settled on them. Taec looked up at the Fireheart. It was old, as old as the ancient empire. The architecture of it was neither that of Commorragh nor that of the craftworlds, but somewhere between the two – sharply fluted sides sweeping up to an angular parapet that resembled a crown. Held in the arms of the summit was a gem so large five eldar would be needed to link arms around its girth. This gem, and the many that ran up the fluting of the sides, were milky and without spark of life. Otherwise it was a deep, glossy green so dark as to be near black, and without other adornment.

The seers gathered around it, twenty-four of them in total, the greatest Biel-Tan had to offer. Taec was humbled by their sacrifice, one from which Biel-Tan might never recover. He was taking the eyes and ears of that worldship for the fulfilment of his plan, and he felt sick even though he was certain it must be done.

Without signal, the seers rested the butts of their staffs butts upon the ground, dipped their heads, and thrust the staff heads forward, the runes dangling from them chiming. They stood a moment in silence, the wind souging over them, stirring their robes in the dust.

Then they began to sing.

One by one, each added his voice to the choir, a complex song of interwoven melody that, when all the seers had begun voice, told twenty-four stories at once. Upon the skein, their minds reached for one another. They were fireflies in the face of the vast presence of the hive mind, glowing motes beneath its contempt. The attention of the Great Dragon, its two consciousnesses nearly blended, was elsewhere.

+The Great Dragon is a predator, and fights those who dare to fight back. Great it may be, and ancient, but it is also weak in its single-mindedness,+ thought Taec, and the others shared his thoughts.

+We are not weak,+ they thought back. +We will see the ancient days reborn.+

They bent their mental might to one point, interfacing with the psychic circuitry of the Fireheart. Gems lit, starting at the ground, the light rushing up all of them until the great gem at the top glowed from milky white to a dull red.

Responding to their mental touch, the Fireheart activated.

The machine directed their minds and amplified them, pushing their strength down, down into the rock. Taec and the seers went with the Fireheart as its semi-sentient core sought the fault that had once fed the eruptions of the Godpeak. It thrust down, past a domed magma chamber empty of heat, through plugged tubes that had once rushed with molten rock, down, down to the mantle, whose currents of molten stone were as yet unperturbed by the war on the surface.

And on, on to the core, a ball of iron as large as a moon, spinning quickly, the seat of life of all Dûriel, and the centre of the world’s essence.

The Fireheart took the seers’ minds, moulded them into a hand, reached for the liquid metal of the core and, as one might take the temperature of a bath, perturbed its tranquillity.

Under the seers’ feet, a faint tremble troubled the rock. They sang louder.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Final Battle

Yriel's crew cheered as the last of the hive ships died, the matter of its body breaking up in a fiery end.

'Full power to all engines! Let full sail!' the admiral ordered.

Behind the flagship, the squadrons keeping the Kraken vessels at bay broke off their fight. Three remained. The low orbit of Dûriel was choked with shattered shell fragments and the bloody chunks of dead voidspawn. Amid the slaughter's aftermath floated delicate flinders of wraithbone.

'The attack has not been without cost, Prince Admiral,' said Yaleanar. 'Endless Glory has lost two-thirds of its number, and we have suffered five other wrecks among the other squadrons.'

'A fair price,' said Yriel levelly.

'What of the remaining three tyranid ships?' Yaleanar said. He brought them up on a viewing orb with a thought. The holographic image showed them close, curved shells like those of sea beasts or ram's horns, their wide, fluted apertures alive with writhing tentacles tens of thousands of paces long.

Yriel gave the image a cursory glance. 'Leave them. They are slow. They are too close to Dûriel. They will not break free before the destruction of the planet.' He ran his hands over targeting jewels, selecting vessels of priority in the greater part of Far Ranging Hunger that Sarnak and the others kept at bay. 'Look at them,' he said. 'Weak, lumbering things. It is in space that the Great Dragon is at its weakest. These are vessels suited for long travel, not war. They may move quickly between systems, but once within sight of their prey they are vulnerable.'

'Yes, my prince,' agreed Yaleanar. 'But still, there are a great many of them.'

'That is their only advantage, my shadow,' said Yriel. 'Steersmen! Take us on around Dûriel!'

'Prince, is this wise?' said Yaleanar. 'That will take us right into Starving Dragon's fleet.'

'You are the only one who dares to question me, brave Yaleanar, but you will never make a voidsman.' System cartography blinked up, pushing the various bubbles of visual feed aside. 'We drive past them, not into them. They come for us; if we sweep under their noses, they will chase.'

'I see,' said Yaleanar, not seeing.

'Predators and fast targets, my friend,' explained Yriel. 'The hive mind will be unable to resist. But we are by far the quicker. We will be past them before they can close, and they will follow us around the planet, taking a longer road than the one they are currently upon. They will catch nothing, we will be gone.'

'You use the world to slingshot us.'

Yriel stabbed a finger at his friend. 'Exactly!' He flung his hands wide, and called out with theatricality, 'All ships, into formation!'

Behind the *Flame*, *Vaul's Caress* and the dozen or so remaining escorts fell into line, captains apprised of their admiral's plan. Sails filled with solar energy, pumping power into the vessels' stardrives. They sped on, outpacing the remaining Kraken ships of Far Ranging Hunger. Dûriel's bruised sky slid beneath their keels, and then they were over the terminator, from day into night.

'Steady at the helm, we come at them now,' said Yriel.

'Asuryan's grace,' said Yaleanar hoarsely.

Ahead was the vast fleet of Starving Dragon, that which the Imperium named Leviathan. It was a name well chosen. Starving Dragon attacked like Far Ranging Hunger, spreading itself as tendrils across a broad range of space. But the hive mind had learned, and the fleets of Starving Dragon, though divided, were far bigger than those of Far Ranging Hunger. There were so many voidspawn vessels in the Dûriel fleet they blotted out the stars, a long, snaking line of them a billion paces across stretching far back into space.

‘Quickly now! Make all speed. We are seen,’ said Yriel. He snarled. The shaking in his limbs subsided to nothing. A dry heat burned in him.

The small taskforce whipped around Dûriel. The hive mind saw them – they all felt it, its immense, alien psyche reaching across the stars to crush them – but they were too fast. The ships crashed through the picket line of Starving Dragon’s Kraken ships – these of mottled purple and slightly different evolutionary form to those of Far Ranging Hunger – and went hurtling through the crowd of hive ships dipping their beaks to the feast below. A lucky volley of bony torpedoes clattered on the hull of the *Flame*, and they were through, outpacing the bio-ships before they could come around to face them. From night to day they went again, accelerating to a substantial fraction of the speed of light under the impetus of Dûriel’s gravity. The wraithbone core of the *Flame* pulsed with the delight of its resident spirits, and they were away. Dûriel fell behind them until it was a coin of light and Sarnak’s rearguard came speeding into view, heavily invested against the larger part of Far Ranging Hunger’s void swarm.

‘Drop sails! Prepare for immediate attack!’

The battle here had gone worse for the eldar. Far Ranging Hunger’s hive fleet was vast, and the sons of Eldanesh had been forced to abandon some of their speed in order to tempt the voidspawn to stay in place and keep them clear of Prince Yriel and the Fireheart. The flotsam of broken eldar vessels spun everywhere. The *Flame* dodged past a dark eldar cruiser snared in the crushing embrace of a Kraken ship. Squadrons of escorts duelled with void-hardened fighter creatures propelled on daggers of bio-plasma.

‘This,’ said Yriel angrily, ‘is an unforgivable mess. Sarnak! Lord Sarnak of the Black Heart Kabal! I call upon you! Answer me!’

An image, much disrupted by rainbows of interference, sprang into life. Sarnak was bloodied, his bridge even darker than before. Sparks showered in one corner. A dead eldar hung from a wrecked steering console behind him. Gunfire could be heard from some distant quarter. His ship, the *Poison Leer*, had taken a good deal of damage, but Sarnak, true to himself, was still smiling.

‘Ah! Prince Yriel!’ he said, as if they met upon a pleasant boulevard rather than in deadly battle. ‘So good of you to join us. You were successful in your venture, I trust?’

‘The Fireheart is delivered, we were successful. You less so.’

‘This is no pleasant feast, my prince,’ said Sarnak. ‘You see their numbers. We have done what was asked of us, and might I add, only at the charitable intention of my Lord Vect.’

‘You did not listen. You did not do what was asked of you. You are glory-mad. I told you to wait for my aid, and you did not.’

Sarnak’s eyes narrowed. ‘Nobody speaks to me like that, prince. I should blast you from the sky this very...’

‘Cease your idiocy, Commorrite!’ shouted Yriel. ‘Your ship is coming apart at the seams. Are we to fall to blows while our common enemy waits to pick our flesh from the void? Truly you of Commorragh have become insane!’ He slammed his spear shaft hard upon the deck, setting it ringing.

Sarnak’s expression darkened further. Yriel sighed deeply, collecting himself. He spoke quickly

before Sarnak could retort.

‘Tell me, Sarnak, do you wish to survive this engagement?’

Sarnak looked at him with amazement, and his hostility turned to a laugh. ‘Why, yes. That would be an agreeable outcome.’

‘Then have your ships withdraw to this quadrant. This is our prize, the lair of their queen.’ Bright lines delineated a huge, slug-like shape hidden at the heart of the fleet. ‘Destroy the norn ship, and these three ships here – her consorts – and their defence will falter. Are you with me?’

‘Yes, my prince!’ shouted the crew.

‘As you say, we have tried, with no success,’ said Sarnak.

‘I said, Lord Sarnak of the Black Heart, are you with me?’ Yriel hissed the words, spittle flying from his mouth, the Spear of Twilight across his chest.

Sarnak’s eyes flicked to the blade of the ancient spear. Slowly, he nodded. For a brief second, his eternal grin slipped from his face. ‘So be it.’ His smile returned. ‘It is the prize I wished for anyway,’ he said with forced breeziness, then, behind him: ‘We are in the hands of the exile now, all ships follow the Prince Yriel’s lead! This I, Lord Sarnak of the Black Heart, command!’

Upon the Godpeak the farseers sang. The subsonic pulses of the Fireheart grew stronger with every moment, resonating throughout the crust of Dûriel. Tremors erupted periodically, sending skittering avalanches down the flanks of the awakening volcano.

At the head of the valley, Ariadien and his sister flanked the *Curse of Yriel*, volleying fire into the swarming voidspawn of Starving Dragon. The eater beasts had retreated, and tens of thousands of warrior and weapons creatures had replaced them. Ariadien picked out the larger creatures as he had been instructed. He had not known which were the higher priority, but he had quickly identified which deaths had the most impact. The synaptic web of the hive mind was almost tangible to him in his heightened psychic state, and he felt it quiver with each of the leader creatures he killed.

His sister used her vibro-cannons to send shockwaves through the ground, ripping up linear plumes of rock dust across the valley floor, flattening aliens to paste. These tremors joined those of the Fireheart, creating complex earth music Ariadien found as pleasing as he did disconcerting.

As he rained fire on their enemies, he watched the other eldar forces. He and his sister were fortunate, as their guns far outranged those of the enemy. Although terrible in effect, the convulsive muscle mechanisms most of them utilised to propel their ammunition restricted them to closer quarters, and so far the twins had avoided any form of direct contact.

Others were deeper in the thick of it. Another Gemini squadron stalked the battlefield, these of Biel-Tan. More twins. One giant was all of white with a green helm, the other reversed, both with curling patterns of black thorns decorating their limbs. They stalked through the heaving swarm, crushing tyrannids underfoot. He briefly wondered what it would be like to meet them, but the only communication they had shared was a brief dip of weapons by way of salute.

The sky was clotted with eldar grav- and aircraft. Starving Dragon had begun the battle with a terrifying aerial force; but that had been dealt with, mainly thanks to the large number of sky-runners the Dark Kin had brought with them, and now speeding jetbikes of both kindreds strafed the seemingly endless ground horde. Hemlock fighters arriving with *Vaul’s Caress* cut swathes through the masses, and the pulse of missile detonations launched by Crimson Hunters knocked hundreds of aliens flat. Ariadien zoomed in on different parts of the conflict; to the west, cult wyches of Commorrhagh leapt over giant creatures sporting huge symbiotic cannons, other wyches fought daring battles of speed with snake-like creatures that erupted from the ground. At the foot of the mountain the Great Troupe

of Harlequins battled a horde of six-armed, bulbous-headed horrors that were possessed of reflexes almost to match their own. Almost. The motley-clad warriors were even more graceful in battle than they were in war.

At various points, Aspect Warriors guarded the way to the summit and the Fireheart, while around Ariadien and his sister was ranged a host of Guardians from both craftworlds, more of their own kind here than elsewhere. He heard occasional reports and orders coming from Sunspear's position to the north, but how they fared, and where the rest of the Phoenix Host were, remained unknown to him. Near their position debris burned as it fell from orbit, and it was possible it was falling on the autarch's force.

'Be alert! Starving Dragon attempts to force a passage,' said the triple voice of the *Curse of Yriel*. Ariadien followed indicators to the disturbance. There, at the foot of the mountain. His Titan brought up a close-in image, partly obscured by a shoulder of rock. A thick formation of Starving Dragon was forcing its way upwards. A guard of heavily armoured creatures was at its front, many dozen of the large warrior beasts behind them. A number of the larger snake-creatures followed and, at the centre, three of the great generals of the Dragon, hive lords, whose minds focused the diffuse attention of the hive mind to needled immediacy. Shining Spears and the Reavers of the Dark Kin darted around them, shooting many down, but they came in such multitude, and with such ferocity at arms, that the eldar's valour made small mark upon the horde.

'Direct fire upon the leaders and their guard. They must not get through,' the haughty female Biel-Tanian autarch ordered them.

Ariadien dutifully swung his pulsar weapon arms around and opened up on the swarm. It was a poor angle, and many of his shots blasted red-hot scores into the rock between himself and the advancing aliens, but some got through. A blast of jets washed over him. He looked up to see his sister leap into the air, landing on a bluff where her vibro-cannons would have a better line of fire.

With foreboding in his heart, Ariadien followed.

The *Poison Leer* and the *Flame of Asuryan* flew side by side, their path cleared before them by the Wraithborne. On their flanks, eldar ships flew daring, jinking paths, drawing Kraken vessels away from the flagships. Dark eldar cruisers lured them close, before ravaging them with poisonous broadsides.

A wall of vessels, each tipped with a staggeringly-scaled bone ram, was forming up in front of the speeding eldar craft, blocking their final attack run to the norn ship. Dazzling light poured from one of the many viewing orbs on the bridge as another of the Wraithborne's craft detonated. The five dark eldar destroyers that had been following it broke away in every direction in an attempt to dodge the debris cloud. One was too slow, or unlucky, and caught a chunk of wraithbone across its primary sail. Rolling out of control, it was easy prey for a darting shoal of attack annelids who latched onto it and, squirming obscenely, injected floods of acid into its hull.

'Hard to port!' shouted Yriel. The *Flame* heaved over violently, the remnants of the Wraithborne ship flaring up as they hit the flagship's energy shields. They were closing on the ram ships, who were accelerating towards Yriel and Sarnak's vessels. Long straight shells made up a third of their length, housing bio-plasmic drives. The remainder was taken up by their immense beaks. These were living missiles.

'Concentrate fire on my mark!' ordered Yriel. He selected three ships, painted them in the runes of firing, and sent his orders on.

The *Poison Leer* and the *Flame of Asuryan* blasted away at the ram ships accelerating towards them.

At first, the laser blasts and torpedoes they flung at the tyrannid vessels seemed to have little effect, exploding on the bone prows with no visible damage, or scoring deep gouges in shells intended to survive the worst the void could throw at them. But then one, and then a second, began to emit colourful clouds of burning gas from ruptures in their sides. The first detonated; the other drifted, propelled off course by the gas it vented, into the path of its brood mates.

‘Now!’ screamed Yriel. He wrenched control of the ship from his bridge crew. His fingers playing with supernatural speed over the control jewels of his command pod, he channelled power to the engines and adjusted the trim of the sails, sending the *Flame* leaping ahead of Sarnak’s ship. The gap in the wall of ram ships was closing. Two smaller eldar vessels shot through; a third attempting a bold manoeuvre impacted against one of the larger voidspawn craft, sending flame roaring around the bio-ship as it exploded. Wings of fighters ran out ahead of the *Flame*, guns silent. The pilots were aware that they could not harm the horned hides of the ramming ships, and saved their energy and concentration for evasion.

‘Sarnak! Follow!’ said Yriel.

All weapons blazing, the *Flame of Asuryan* blasted through the wall of ram ships, the *Poison Leer* behind it. More of the vessels collapsed or exploded as eldar broadsides opened up all around.

Then they were clear, and the norn ship was ahead of them.

‘And now the real test begins,’ said Yriel.

Half a dozen ships had made it through, along with several wings of fighters and bombers. The rest of the fleet remained entangled with the wall of ram ships; although the bio-ships could not catch the fleet eldar, they prevented them from proceeding to reinforce their admiral. To their rear Kraken vessels, tentacles waving, were closing.

‘Guard our backs, save yourselves,’ said Yriel. ‘Lord Sarnak and I shall kill the brain, and then we shall dismantle this swarm from the inside out.’

‘How delightful,’ said Sarnak. ‘I can’t wait to tell my friends about this at home. They will be so envious.’

Dark eldar, Biel-Tanian and Iyandeni ships rushed towards the norn vessel, a gargantuan slug-like thing a hundred times the length of an eldar battleship. What could be described as a head was apparent at one end, an arachnid protuberance surrounded by a fringe of pseudopods. The body was massive behind this tick-like thing, covered in a sheath of bone and horn armour that was pockmarked by long passage through the void. As the eldar started their attack run, glittering puffs erupted from spiracles studded all over the ship’s integument. The heavy presence of the hive mind grew thicker, muffling the eldar’s minds, and dulling their senses as if they were underwater. A sense of incredible terror came with it.

‘Ignore your fear, my Eldritch Raiders, it is a projection, intended to scare us away! Be more aware of the passive defensive systems,’ said Yriel. ‘Clouds of crystal and aggressive organisms. They will refract your laser fire and punch through your hull using your own velocity against you.’

‘I have done this before, you know,’ said Sarnak. ‘You speak to me as if this is my first battle.’ But his words lacked bite, his voice strained.

The two battleships, their escorts and attack craft sped on, running fast over the head of the norn ship and down its length. Laser banks set to a broad spread vaporised the clouds of living chaff, but one after another the smaller craft flew into unseen banks of the stuff. Their shields overloaded with sparkling flashes of light before their hulls were shredded, eaten through by suddenly active organisms whose instincts were triggered on contact, or the armour stripped away simply by dint of high-velocity collision.

‘Be wary of the clouds!’ screamed Yriel. ‘We are losing too many,’ he said to Yaleanar.

‘Incoming fire!’ shouted a bridge officer.

Banks of orifices along the flanks of the hive ship spasmed, shooting out larger munitions of bone and bio-crystal. Complex subsidiary creatures bedded into the norn ship convulsed, and balls of greenish plasma rushed at the oncoming vessels. More eldar craft were caught, wreathed in ghostly blue flames before exploding.

‘Here! It is here we must attack,’ said Yriel. He highlighted a portion of the hive ship’s body that looked much like any other.

‘Not the head?’ asked Sarnak.

‘Not the head,’ said Yriel. ‘That is only the sensory cluster of the vessel, and most probably a decoy. The seat of the hive mind dwells within the belly of the beast. Load vorpal torpedoes!’

The eldar ships yawed over, spiralling into the shadow of the creature. The underbelly of the bio-ship rushed over them, a strange landscape of wrinkled skin. Lesser tyrannids scurried over it, closing its wounds with silk, while others toting weapons symbiotes headed to more advantageous firing positions. Eldar fire picked them off, smearing their juices over the body of their mother where they rapidly froze in the chill of space.

‘There!’ said Yriel. ‘The ship-birthing canal.’ A sphincter the size of an asteroid came into view, set into a ridged crater. Horn plates were closing over it as they approached.

‘All ships, open fire! Torpedo banks, loose on my order...’

The entire fleet swarmed around the orifice, launching hundreds of volleys of missiles into its depths. The weapons, directed by their own sophisticated guidance systems – the psy-links the armymen normally used were non-functional in the face of the hive mind – flew under the horny plates and exploded. The sphincter was caught by the concentrated blasts and twitched, exposing the innards of the vessel for just a second.

‘Now!’ screamed Yriel, leaping to his feet and brandishing the Spear of Twilight. Its dark power burned through him. Time slowed. He saw the spread of vorpal torpedoes flung out from the bow of his ship, twisting deftly through scattered debris and chaff clouds. One exploded, brought down by a spread of hyper-velocity interception grubs, but the other four flew on, through the gaps in the horn plates as they slid closed over the torpedoes.

‘It is done!’ said Yriel. ‘All craft, break off or we will die with it.’

The eldar ships swooped around, tearing away from the massive norn ship as fast as they could. The flash of explosions was visible around the plates covering the birthing canal. Distortion warheads in the vorpal torpedoes activated, opening short-lived portals into the warp. The raw power of the Othersea seized at every eldar mind as the norn ship was torn apart from the inside, the rear section imploding with great violence. The front half of the vessel came away, leaving what was left of its rear end wreathed in flickering warp lightning.

And then the breaches collapsed, and the fury of the warp went from the eldar’s mind sense.

The hive mind went with it.

Psy-links all over the fleet sprang into life. The battle leapt into sudden clarity for the eldar. At the same time, the tyrannid fleet collapsed. Ships blundered into one another, or stopped moving. As on Iyanden, Yriel reckoned a quarter of them died on severance from their guiding intellect.

He snarled. ‘Now, let us destroy them all. Let none live lest we must repeat this experience again!’

The hive lords of Starving Dragon and their horde continued their inexorable ascent of the mountain, defying all the attempts of the Guardian host to stop them. Bundles of monofilament wire landed in

their path, pulse blasts hammered down on them, distortion cannons ripped open the walls of reality itself and spilled them into the warp, but on the aliens came. The smaller creatures died in their hundreds, but were constantly funnelled forward to take the brunt of the eldar's fire, and the leader-beasts at the attack's head remained unscathed. Elsewhere, the individual elements of the eldar army were being isolated, kept from counter-attacking against the alien push up the mountain. Separated and bogged down, the eldar's efficiency as a fighting force was much reduced. They began to die in some numbers. Ariadien lent his support to others where he could, whenever the advancing prong of Starving Dragon's purple monsters went out of sight behind a shoulder of rock or cliff, but he and his sister were detailed to keep back the tyrants and their assault and when they reappeared he sent all the fire he could that way. The war in the air had ceased to be so one-sided, as creatures flocked to the last remaining point of conflict on the planet. Every eldar craft and warrior that flew was duelling in the clouds over the Godpeak. The battle was turning into one of attrition, and it was not one they could win.

By now, the mountain was pulsing as if to the beat of a mighty heart. The ground rumbled with tremors. The rock shifted under Ariadien's feet. Cracks were opening in the ground.

+All we need is a little more time!+ said Neidaria, catching her brother's thoughts, their birthlink and Titan relays allowing them to communicate mind to mind even over the howl of the hive mind.

A terrible screech split the air. Full of foreboding, Ariadien turned to the source of the noise.

Stalking from a side valley to the east came a bio-titan, the largest of the voidspawn's weapon-kinds. The Harlequins and wyches there had become bottled up by the swarm, leaving the way to the mountain clear. There were precious few defenders on the lower cliffs, the majority having been drawn off to stymie the attack of the hive tyrants to the south-west.

'Enemy titan!' said Ariadien.

The *Sound of Sunlight* spun on its heel gracefully, pulsars volleying shots at the monster. The titan was a hunchbacked horror supported on four long insectile legs, the forelimbs gene-tweaked to carry two enormous cannon symbiotes.

'They are seeking to exploit our weakened left flank,' said Hethaeliar. 'Titans of Iyanden, move to engage.'

They acknowledged reception of the order. The *Curse of Yriel* went first, tongues of sun-bright flame stabbing from its jump pack as it vaulted into the air. Neidaria and Ariadien followed close by. Leaping from crag to crag, they bounded down the lower reaches of the mountain into the valley proper, firing at stray knots of aliens or kicking them from the mountainside as they went.

They landed in the swarm, crushing voidspawn and incinerating them with their jets. Seeing this new threat, the tyranid monster shrieked and turned upon them, scuttling with surprising speed at them.

Neidaria ran forwards, sonic lances ripping her targets messily apart. The *Curse of Yriel* levelled its twin pulsars at the approaching bio-titan and let fire, stabbing beams of energy into it. The beast lowered its head, covering its face with crossed arms, and ran head on at the Titans. Ariadien leapt to one side, his jets carrying him out of the way. He landed easily, his own pulsars vaporising three serpentine monsters slithering after the *Curse of Yriel*.

The bio-titan slammed home, its high back connecting with the Phantom Titan's groin and staggering it backwards. Ariadien and Neidaria ran to its rescue, attacking from both sides at once, his beams of light and hers of sound intersecting at the creature's midriff. The monster roared, but did not stop its battery of the Phantom. It fired its wide-mouthed arm cannons at point-blank range into the Phantom's chest. Armour smoking with acid, the *Curse of Yriel* staggered backwards, kicking itself

free from the bio-titan's pinning feet, smashing down with an elbow upon its back and cracking its armour.

The great creature raised its cannons again, pointing them at the weakened area on the *Curse of Yriel's* chest.

'No!' shouted Neidaria. She ran at the side of the bio-titan, sonic lances singing. The air rippled with the passing of her sound beams. Armour shattered where they touched the creature, thick ichor spouting from its side. As she neared, she jumped into the air, lance arms up, feet before her. She engaged her jump pack at full blast, sending her Titan as a living missile at the cracked bio-titan's plating.

Ariadien felt her excitement at the battle, her fear for the fate of the Phantom, her need to act. Her strike connected, staggering the bio-titan sideways. But her feet slipped on the creature's shell as it moved under her, and she fell backwards. Her Titan landed heavily on the scoured rock. Screeching horribly, the bio-titan rounded on her.

She made to get to her feet. The *Silent Scream* was halfway up and nearly out of the way when the bio-titan's cannons vomited a tide of thick, acidic gruel all over her.

The flood caught the *Silent Scream's* left leg and arm. It ate through Neidaria's armour in heartbeats. Her pulsar dropped free and her knee joint gave way, sending her back to the ground. Pulsar fire from Ariadien and the *Curse of Yriel* hammered into the creature, filling it with holes, but so intent it was upon its prey, the bio-titan ignored its own death. With a final scream, it drove its pointed foot through the chest of the *Silent Scream*. The Titan twitched around the piercing limb, and lay still.

Firing madly at the enemy bio-titan, Ariadien felt his sister slip away, her mind overwhelmed by the psychic shock of the creature's death. 'Neidaria!' he screamed. He fired his weapons until they glowed red, ignoring the chiming alarms that filled his cockpit and his mind.

The creature toppled over, and was still.

'Neidaria,' he said. +*Neidaria!*+ The *Sound of Sunlight* shouldered the dead bio-titan aside with two hard pushes, and knelt by the corpse of its sister.

'Mourn her later,' came Hethaeliar's command. 'You must fight on or more will die.'

A shadow fell over him. Ariadien looked upwards. The Phantom stared down at him. Wordlessly, its triplet pilots and spirits reached out to him, and urged him to rise.

All around them, aliens were closing in.

Another wave of Far Ranging Hunger's creatures crashed against the mound of dead. Sunspear was weary now, and his weapons had been blooded. Twice the enemy had fought their way through the line and he had been forced into combat. His cordon was thinning; but there was hope. A vortex swirled high over the Godpeak. Another earthquake shook their position.

'Autarch, they retreat!'

Sunspear looked over the heads of the creatures attacking his force. Those beyond the front no longer came towards him, but moved off to the south-east.

'They do not retreat. They are moving on the mountain.' He looked upwards. No more spores were descending. 'Prince Yriel has been true to his word, it appears. Autarch Hethaeliar, what news from the peak?'

The other autarch responded instantly. 'We are assailed on two fronts, Autarch Sunspear. Forces are attacking from the south-east and south-west. We have them stalled for now, but I do not know how much longer we can hold out. All my own troops are committed and I have no reserves to bolster the

lines or stop any breakthrough.’ Her audio feed was full of screaming and the noise of weapons fire. ‘I have dispatched the Iyandeni Titans to stop a bio-construct to the south-west, but a large number of Starving Dragon’s creatures are attempting an ascent, and they are succeeding.’

Sunspear looked away to the peak, over the back of the remainder of Far Ranging Hunger’s creatures making all haste there.

‘That must be it. Far Ranging Hunger is moving off. They detect your weakness. You will soon be attacked on three fronts, Hethaeliar. I am still engaged here, it will take some time to extricate myself.’

‘Then we better pray to the dead gods that Iyanden’s Phoenix Host arrives soon.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Tide Turns

Yriel's Wave Serpents deployed from drop-craft in the high atmosphere, and fell earthwards. The whole world was in turmoil; the clouds of spores were dissipating, either having served their purpose or being consumed by the death of the planet. Away from the Godpeak, the tectonic plates were coming apart. Lines of bright fire glowed through the murk. For the time being they were restricted to the ocean boundaries where the crust was thinnest, but it would not be long before the mountains became unstitched. Dûriel's surface was a roil of black and red. Yriel was put in mind of a burned head, the meat black and raw, the glowing faultlines the revealed sutures in the bone.

Away to the west, an ocean of lava glowed bright in the encroaching night.

'A red ocean,' he said to himself. 'Now all makes sense.' The spear shuddered in his hand.

'My prince?' asked Yaleanar.

'Nothing, my faithful shadow.' Yriel gave him a smile that he intended to be reassuring, but from Yaleanar's reaction it was a feral one. 'An image I had in mind, bad poetry from one never destined to tread that path. Taec's plan has worked.'

'Or almost so. There is still a large concentration of voidspawn around the Godpeak.'

'Tell the fleet wayseers to begin their door-songs,' he said. 'I have a feeling that we come not as avenging warriors, but to evacuate our kin.'

The Wave Serpents pierced the dispersing cloud deck, shrieking low over the cracking plains. Voidspawn were everywhere, many dead. Ash fell like snow, cutting visibility and interfering with their telemetry systems. The pilots adjusted their power fields, setting them to filter the air around their engines' intakes, in case fine ash should be drawn in and coat their workings with glass.

There was a knot of aliens fighting Aspect Warriors in the colours of Biel-Tan on the plain near the mountain. The enemy's numbers were few, and already transports were flocking to collect the eldar there. They banked around the scene.

'Sunspear needs no aid, onwards to the mountain!' ordered Yriel. He had trouble maintaining his outward calm, for the spear thirsted for blood.

They sped up the mountain flanks. Here were many more of Far Ranging Hunger's creatures, making their way towards the summit in a broad spread, unperturbed by the rocks falling past them.

'See, Yaleanar, here is where the true battle is, perhaps we should put down... Ah.'

Yriel's eyes went to the towering Fireheart, an island of calm in a sea of war. Beyond that was revealed a much larger host of the aliens, these of the purple and white of Starving Dragon.

'Perhaps there instead,' he said.

'I do not see the Phoenix Host, my prince,' said Yaleanar.

'Some of Iyanden at least is here to fight. Come! To battle.'

The Wave Serpents swept in, depositing Yriel and fifty of his corsairs at a gap in between two rocks. Starving Dragon would have to pass them to attack the Fireheart. The vehicles drew off, turret weapons running hot.

The hive lords tore through the last line of Guardians.

'They swat them as easily as we would a fly, my prince,' said Yaleanar.

Yriel hefted the spear, and threw back his coat to free his legs. Under his helmet he looked terrible, he knew, pallid and beaded with sweat. Not the way he wished to appear in his final battle. He trusted to whatever artist would depict his fall to paint away such flaws. ‘They will find these flies are not so easily crushed.’

‘You speak truly,’ said Yaleanar, unslinging his preferred weapon, a large las-blaster. ‘Luckily for you, this is more my arena than space warfare.’ He sighted down the barrel of his gun, and dropped a large alien warrior before it could smite a fleeing Guardian. ‘You see?’

Yriel’s soul was running out, the dreadful spirit of the Spear of Twilight taking its place. He could manage no more than a smile. It was all he could do not to hurl himself headlong at the aliens and bite at them.

‘Aha, here they come!’ said Yaleanar, either not noticing or choosing to ignore his lord’s silence. The hive lords charged.

Battle raged on the plateaus below the summit of the Godpeak. Taec licked his lips nervously. The hive lords and grand serpents of Starving Dragon clambered up the final slopes, their claws slick with eldar blood. The Guardians in their way put up a brave fight, but they could only slow the monstrous creatures, no matter that the numbers of warrior beasts had been whittled from thousands to a few dozen.

On the other side of the plateau, the red and bone creatures of Far Ranging Hunger approached, led by a single, immense swarmlord of dreadful aspect. Four swords of bone slashed before it, felling whoever sought to stop it. It was further away than the lords of Starving Dragon, but closing faster. There resistance was much lighter, and the aliens made headway fast even as the Guardian host to the south bowed under the assault of the lords of Starving Dragon. To make matters worse, fresh hordes of airborne monstrosities had flown in and the pressure of the hive mind was intolerable, squeezing the eldar’s souls as the gestalt being’s immense intelligence regarded them with its full malice.

All around the Godpeak and the valley below, the eldar fought. Isolated, embattled, unable to support each other; the way to the peak was open.

Time was running out.

A gale blew over the device, a vortex whirled in the clouds over the control gem, ringed with lightning. The tremors were constant. The machine was protected by a hard exclusion field, to ensure it functioned to the bitter end. Outside its limits the rocks shifted, opening up fissures all around the Fireheart’s base, leaving only the circle of stone protected by the field unmarred.

Taec stared up at the pulsing gem at the top of the Fireheart. ‘We must not falter! You must sing!’ he called. ‘The enemy is nearly at the gates, we must finish the ritual!’

A violent earthquake rocked the land around the Fireheart, but it did not move. The land groaned in pain. Taec felt the dead world spirit matrix fizz with unnatural energy. The ground rumbled again, the tremor going on for several seconds. A great roar, and thousands of tonnes of rock slid down the mountainsides.

The Fireheart worked on mercilessly, multiplying the seers’ psychic energies to agitate the core, sending it off its axis and perturbing the rotation of the whole world. The lava chamber beneath the mountain’s feet would be filling for the first time in hundreds of thousands of years. Already the lands beyond the extinct volcano were coming apart.

The drone of the seers was swept up by the howl of the building wind. Psychic energies blazed from sky, earthing themselves in the gem atop the device. With it came the attentions of She Who Thirsts. The times Taec had experienced her gaze had been uncomfortable, there was a wildness and despair to

her, but this cycle brought also curiosity. She watched this fragment of her parents' past glory in action with great interest.

A spark of hope lifted in Taec as he saw a flight of seven Wave Serpents come thundering down through the sky, bearing the colours of Prince Yriel.

It was a hope short-lived.

There was a tremendous bellowing, and a bow wave of terror coming thick on the warp. Taec fought his impulse to flee, and turned to face the source.

The swarmlord of Far Ranging Hunger had made it to the seer circle, and behind it came several hundred lesser beasts. Huge and ancient it was, with respiration chimneys on its back billowing red gases. Its armour was deep red, patterned with mottled black, darkened by age. This creature had lived a long time in this form; it was wise and dreadful, and yellow eyes glowed with fell intelligence beneath a horned brow. It hissed as it approached the farseers.

A squad of Guardians ran to intercept this leader, their shuriken catapults spitting razored death at it. The discs *thunked* into its armour without effect. Its swords moved in a blur, impossible to dodge, each blow severing a thread of destiny and leaving an eldar dead on the ground. Dozens of bolts of light hammered into it, fired off by the Guardians' support weapon platform. The swarmlord turned to it, smashing Guardians aside with its fists and tail. It ran at the weapon. One of the Guardians held his ground, and died under a bonesword for his bravery; the other ran screaming, clutching at his pointed helmet as the terror of the hive mind drove him mad. A second blade fell, cutting the cannon in two with a shower of sparks.

There was nothing to stop it.

Tail swishing, the swarmlord of Far Ranging Hunger strode towards Taec, as if it knew – as if it *knew* – what they were attempting, and who led them.

‘Do not stop!’ he cried without taking his eyes from the monster. ‘We are almost done! The doom of the world is upon us!’ The wind was a hurricane, the ground shook as if it were a blanket tossed by children.

Taec stepped from the group, actinic light blazing from his upraised staff.

The tyrant raised all four swords. Roaring, it charged at the farseer. It brought its weapons down. Light flared brightly around Taec. Swords hammered into his force dome one after another. Taec struggled to keep up his defences in the face of such aggression. He waited for the chance to retaliate, hoping to strike out at the beast with his mind, although it was almost certainly a futile gesture. None came. The swarmlord's swords blurred through the air, hitting his psychic shield repeatedly. The barrier of energy glowed brighter and brighter, and Taec fell to his knees with a cry.

He could endure no longer. With a sob, he fell, the protective dome winking out.

The swarmlord of Far Ranging Hunger reared over him, its head cocked on one side. Taec looked up into its alien eyes. Two minds looked back at him: the individual thread of the swarmlord was strong and readily apparent to the seer, but like all the creatures, it was but an extension of the hive mind. Its individuality was a useful illusion. Even in his terror, Taec found it somewhat fascinating.

Snorting, the swarmlord turned towards the seer council. It cut one down, then another. The psychic choir faltered, the song grew weak. The seers bravely kept up their ritual. The swarmlord's followers were finishing the remainder of the Guardians protecting the south passage. Only a tiny group of corsairs and Prince Yriel stood between the Fireheart and the lords of Starving Dragon on the southern side of the peak. The jaws of the Great Devourer were about to snap shut.

Yriel's veins burned with the power of the Spear of Twilight. His weak and aching body retreated

from his consciousness, and he became only motion. One of the hive tyrants of Starving Dragon carried some secondary beast, a creature bent into the shape of a cannon: long-snouted, vestigial eyes at the root of an immense proboscis, tiny legs gripping the wrist of the creature that carried it. Ridged tubes led from its rear into the hive tyrant's elbow, joining them as one. A flaccid sac pulsed sickeningly beneath it. The palpitations of the sac became rapid, and the tyrant raised its weapon to fire.

Yriel ran past the foremost leader-beasts, dodging their blows. A scythe-like claw whistled through the air at him. Empowered by the spear, he leapt clean over it, spinning as he went. Pushing off a chitinous limb with his feet, he landed upon the back of the cannon-carrying tyrant. He gripped the respiration chimneys on its back, raised the Spear of Twilight one-handed, and drove it down, aiming for a join between the armour plates. The spear's tip blazed with heat as it penetrated. An almighty *crack* sounded, and the blade went through the outer armour layer. Slowed only a little by ablative cartilaginous layers under the exoskeleton, the spear passed right on into the soft meat beneath. Yriel let the spear take the merest sip of the creature's soul, then yanked it free. Denying his weapon its feast took all his effort.

The hive lord howled and reared backwards, stamping its feet. Yriel clung on for a moment, then used its motion to leap free, landing on his feet as it hit the ground.

He felt psychic impulses – orders, no, thoughts, thoughts that moved the lesser beasts as he might move his limbs. Creatures rushed at him from all sides, the hive lords pressed on into the mass of his corsairs, unwilling perhaps to attack him.

Yriel opened his eye.

Lightning spewed from the Eye of Wrath, stabbing at the creatures, burning holes in their bodies. They fell shrieking.

Yriel reeled a little; the Eye was not used lightly, and it taxed him further. He stepped forwards, leaving smoking bodies behind him.

He set the spear's butt on the ground, and whistled.

'I am not yet done, Starving Dragon!'

Another of the hive tyrants turned. A further was staggering, close to death, ichor leaking from a hundred small wounds inflicted by his corsairs.

Roaring a challenge, the hive tyrant moved to engage the prince.

Taec closed his eyes and awaited the deathblow. 'So it has all been for nothing,' he murmured.

A deafening scream hit him. He opened his eyes. The swarmlord was writhing, bright starpoints glowing from its body. More light shone behind it. With a wet crack, the creature collapsed in on itself, and Taec's soul was buffeted by the open warp.

Through the dying beast strode the Phoenix Host of Iyanden. Five silent wraithguard marched at their head, their wraithcannons smoking. Althenian Armourlost was behind them, Kelmon the wraithseer at his side. With them was Iyanna Arienal. The webgate flared wider and wider, and a stream of grav-tanks and bikes shot out into the storm-troubled skies of Dûriel. In their wake came Asurmen himself, leading his legendary Crystal Sons. Iyanden's Avatar of Khaine came behind them, its fury pouring into the heart of every eldar atop the mountain.

For the first time in a long time, Taec felt awe. Here was the glory of the elder days born anew.

The wraithguard deployed in a line, crashing into the tyranids following in the swarmlord's wake. Taec sensed the enemy's disorganisation; the last of their leader-beasts destroyed, the creatures of Far Ranging Hunger cried for Starving Dragon's guidance, but it was taking time to assert its dominance

over them.

‘Destroy all, let weapons sing songs of death, end them now,’ said Althenian, his fusion guns turning warrior beasts to steam. He smashed one to a pulp with a blow from his fist. ‘Drive them back, let the living do their work, dead make dead!’

Asurmen led his crystal warriors into the fray, their weapons slaying dozens of warrior beasts. In short order, the voidspawn were driven back from the Fireheart.

The seers recovered. The faltering song re-established itself. Iyanna and Kelmon joined Taec. Seven seers of Iyanden silently filed around the Fireheart, filling the spaces made by the dead seers of Biel-Tan.

‘You took your time,’ he said to Iyanna.

‘We are here now,’ she replied.

‘Yriel is below.’ He inclined his head. ‘The three of us. It appears the High Council is gathered for the final battle.’

Iyanna looked about. ‘The end comes. We will begin evacuation, the spirit stones of the fallen will be retrieved.’ Already eldar spiritseers were plucking glowing jewels from the breasts of the dead. Others were taking to the air, borne away by swift transports or jetbikes to seek out others. The ritual collection bags they carried were empty. Taec knew they would come back filled with woe.

‘I will join the song,’ said Kelmon.

‘I have business elsewhere,’ said Iyanna. She looked from Taec to the statuesque Kelmon. They were both battle-worn; his armour was scratched in a dozen places, her face bloodied. ‘We share the burden.’

Taec hurried back to the circle. Iyanden’s warhost was deploying rapidly from webway gates crackling into life all over the peak. The remainder of Far Ranging Hunger’s attack from the north-west was isolated and butchered. Hive node creatures were tackled first, and once the coherency of the synaptic web was disrupted, the creatures of both fleets became easy prey.

Taec joined the song close by Kelmon. Bolstered by the newly arrived seers of Iyanden, the chanting of the group grew in intensity. The Fireheart pulsed with renewed rapidity. Gems blinked in sequence. Subsonics vibrated the ground at their feet. The mountain rumbled. Fissures opened around the device, running away in all directions. Steam spouted from them.

Eldar craft were taking to the air all around the mountain, troops falling back to their transports. The forces of Iyanden left their webway gates open, wraithguard and Guardians providing covering fire as they beckoned warriors to retreat from the shaking earth. With an almighty crack, the valley floor split, draining digestion pools in an instant. Lava welled up through the fissure, making the Valley of the Gods a lake of fire. The voidspawn were consumed by the hundred, and eldar too, cooking in their armour. The psychic perturbations of waystones shattering rippled over the skein as eldar experienced the horrors of the true death, their souls falling into Slaanesh’s waiting maw.

Still the seers sang.

A half-tenth cycle passed. The Fireheart stood on a tall column of rock, only its power fields maintaining its integrity. A vast pit had opened around the farseers, and they were lit by a fierce orange glow. The shields of the Fireheart rippled like oil on water as tephra pattered into them.

Still the seers sang.

Yriel plunged his spear deep into the rearing serpent. It keened terribly, and Yriel salivated as his weapon drank. Since the day he had lost his eye due to the spear feasting on the limitless hive mind, he had managed to control its fell power and its obscene appetites, but at this final pass he no longer

had the strength, and the spear's murderous soul overwhelmed him. He could not stop it feeding, drawing upon the infinity of spirit the Great Devourer possessed. Yriel felt the hive mind, heard it howl. It thrashed about, and Yriel was battered by its anger. Its thoughts were utterly, unimaginably alien. But one thing came through strong and loud. Hatred, hatred for this creature that had for the first time in untold aeons wounded it.

The spear drank and drank. Yriel's spirit swelled with stolen soul-stuff, a tsunami of alien experiences drowning his mind. As it engulfed him, so it threatened to subsume him. Here was an ocean, an ocean of thought of a scale that was unimaginable. Only a god could drink an ocean. This ocean was pure poison, and Yriel no god.

For a moment his spirit flame flickered between two threads – that of Prince Yriel, and the immense cable of fate that was the hive mind, the Spear of Twilight black betwixt them.

The light of his being glowed low. With one last effort, Yriel plucked at the greedy sentience of the Spear of Twilight and dragged it free of its meal.

He staggered from the dead serpent, the spear rasping on the ground, for he no longer had the strength to lift it. The last moments of the battle raged around him, confusing and confused. All but a handful of the assault swarm were dead. His remaining warriors were snatching up the waystones of the dead, and calling the transports back to their position. The air was thick with grav-craft fleeing into the webway. As far as the eye could see, fountains of lava shot skywards, growing more violent with each tremor. The valley ran with molten rock. Screams of dying eldar sounded from everywhere, but they were brittle in Yriel's ears, and his vision was lined by shadow. He breathed hard, but no air seemed to fill his lungs. His head pounded, the veins in his temples throbbed like wardrums.

He was dying. His heart ran slow, slow as a human's. The spear pulsed with each beat, savouring the end of its meal.

He wavered at the edge of the precipice. A number of eldar bounded past him, driving back more of the creatures, breaking their assault. Yriel could not say from which kindred they hailed.

Slowly, he fell to his knees.

And then a hand, armoured and sure on his shoulder.

Yriel's head lolled on a neck gone weak as rope. He tumbled, and the other stooped low to catch him across his knees. 'Yaleanar? Is that you, my shadow?'

'My prince,' said his lieutenant, his voice clear despite being emitted by his helmet. 'We will take you from here, your battle is done.'

'No, not my battle.' He managed a smile. 'My time is done, loyal Yaleanar. Leave me, save yourself.'

Yaleanar unclasped his helm, and let it fall to the ground. His perfect face smiled down at the prince.

'The eldar need you, my prince. Iyanden needs you.' He set Yriel down gently, propping him against a fallen weapon-beast whose shattered cannon dribbled reeking fluids onto the rock. 'I will summon aid. I love you, my prince, I will not abandon you.' Yaleanar spoke aside, to others. 'They will be here soon,' he said when he had finished.

Yriel's mouth ran with the bitter precursor to vomit, soaking his cloak and armour, but no vomit came. 'Faithful, brave Yaleanar, there is nothing to be done,' said Yriel, 'it is the spear...' He looked about him, suddenly frantic. 'Where is it? Where is the Spear of Twilight?'

'It is in your hand, my dear prince.'

Yriel gasped and clutched it to his bosom. He coughed, the pain of it ripping at his lungs. He closed his eyes. 'I cannot give it up, even as it drinks the last of me.'

There was a surprised cry. Warmth came into him. 'I feel stronger, a little. Stay with me, Yaleanar, stay with me as I pass. I will pass on my regards to Iyanna's new god.'

There was no reply.

'Yaleanar?'

Yriel opened his eyes. He was not sitting as he thought, but standing in a steady combat stance, the spear held out before him.

Transfixed by the spear's tip was Yaleanar, his mouth round with shock.

Yriel's eyes widened in horror. 'Yaleanar!' he screamed. He tugged the spear free. Yaleanar fell forwards. The waystone in the centre of his chest was lightless. Yriel rushed to catch him, moving with the pure energy the spear had taken from his friend. Still he was weak, and staggered under the armoured weight of Yaleanar.

'No! No, no!' he howled. He knelt upon the lip of the cliff, his friend's corpse in his arms, as cries fuelled by the stolen soul of Yaleanar escaped his lips.

Below him, wide sheets of lava covered the lowlands of Dûriel. The ground roared and shook, and a plume of ejecta rained from the summit of the Godpeak.

Yriel wept before a red ocean.

A shadow fell over him, something in the sky blocking out the rain of rock and ash, but he was past noticing.

Yriel fell across Yaleanar's soulless corpse, and the oceans all were gone.

'Retreat! Retreat!' shouted Sunspear, sending out the order by every means at his disposal.

Falcons dropped from the sky, and Aspect Warriors ran into them. The world was dying around them, and the voidspawn had been driven into a frenzy. They came on at speed, leaping the fissures spreading over the ground. Sunspear's warriors fired as they fell back into their transports. A Falcon waited to evacuate him, together with four exarchs and their remaining warriors who had joined him at the peak, sniping from the summit of the dead, felling aliens so that more of the eldar could escape. He watched as the Avatar was guided into the hold of a Wave Serpent by a patient warlock. It bowed its plumed head, and entered.

He followed the craft with satisfaction. There was a stain removed from his honour.

'My autarch, you must go now, swiftly,' Oskirithil of the Sorrows, exarch of the Burning Rebuke, said to him urgently.

Sunspear shook his head. 'Not until every last eldar here is safely off the ground.'

Earthquakes rocked the plain furiously. To the north, where the bulk of Far Ranging Hunger had begun the short war, a lake of lava covered the ground. A fountain of molten rock spewed from its centre ceaselessly.

Black clouds of ash had replaced the red. Through them a fresh rain of tyrannid drop spores came plummeting.

'They come too late,' he said with satisfaction.

Vaul's Caress came from the sky, descending over the Godpeak itself, four smaller ships in its wake. Their shields sparkled with the constant impact of volcanic debris.

'It is time for you to depart,' said Hethaeliar. 'Join us on the peak.'

Sunspear looked again at his men. There were few voidspawn near now. The last of the Falcons climbed skywards, heading for the webway gates over the mountain.

'Very well.'

He took one last look around the battlefield. How much the planet had changed, two transformations

in the space of four cycles.

‘It is the season of destruction,’ he said. ‘And the falling leaves have made their cuts. Away!’

The Falcon rose up from the heaped bodies. Lava was rushing towards it, the corpses it encountered bursting into brief pillars of fire. Before they had made it a thousand paces into the air, the lava was at the foot of the pile of dead.

Then they were up into the clouds, joining the streams of craft heading for the webway.

Sunspear brought up a viewing globe of the valley, and his heart turned to stone as he saw the many eldar of all kindreds falling into gaps in the rock, or being rent asunder by alien claws. Their souls would be forfeit to She Who Thirsts, for their spirit stones would surely be consumed by the fires of the world’s death. Some were stranded. He saw one group of a dozen trapped on a lump of rock. They clasped hands and bowed their heads as their refuge split, the pieces dissolving, sending them tumbling to their true deaths. Many others were leaping from rocky island to rocky island, heading for webway portals springing up all around the valley. A number of these, opening over beacon sites set at the beginning of the war, were suspended now over burning stone.

He watched as grav-craft performed daring swoops to catch as many of the stranded as they could. He lingered for a moment on the image of a group of winged scourges carrying Biel-Tanians away from the fires, and he wondered at that.

He had the Falcon set him down not far from the Fireheart. It was here that the end would come last, consuming the device when it had fulfilled its purpose. The mountain shook around it, and splits gaped in the stone as hungry as tyrannid mouths. He ran down the boarding ramp and sent the craft away.

All was pandemonium. Eldar fled the planet with little order or discipline, breaking from their units, stopping only to help one another or let off shots at pursuing weapon-beasts.

An explosion sounded. The mountain rocked, sending Sunspear reeling. A cloud of grey ash spewed from the volcano’s side. His attention drawn to this, his eye caught movement beyond.

Out on the plains to the south, capillary towers stood tall. Most had collapsed or were collapsing, falling to burn in the planet’s lifeblood. But this one cluster stood tall, and above them were the looming shapes of hive ships. Prow down, they lowered questing feeder tendrils from their mouthparts. They locked one by one onto the capillary towers. With mounting horror, he watched variegated tubes pulse with peristaltic motion, pumping the biogruel of Dûriel up to the waiting ships.

Within were the combined essences of Far Ranging Hunger and Starving Dragon, rich with the genetic codes of man, ork, and eldar.

Sunspear cried out in despair.

Once more, he had lost.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Red Death of Dûriel

‘Fly faster!’ Hesperax ordered. Her Venom skimmed over the boiling lava, gobbets of it splattering on the hull with every convulsion of the planet. Several Raiders followed her.

‘We have them ahead, my mistress,’ said Khulo Khale. ‘We shall have our prizes!’

On a large island of rock, wyches goaded large creatures into eight hex cages, hollow, polyhedral balls adorned with runes. Five of them were already full.

Eldar were everywhere fleeing to their transports, or hurling themselves into webway portals. In the chaos, no one noticed the wych cult trapping their beasts.

‘Some of each, as I commanded, and the largest too. Very good,’ she said. Khulo Khale smiled with pleasure at her praise. He banked the Venom around, bringing it to hover a safe distance over the island of rock. The others went lower, taking position over the cages, grappling arms latching onto those that were already occupied.

The last creatures were lured by leaping wyches into their cages, blasted with high voltage goads where they strayed away. Hesperax laughed as one of the goaders was crushed by a crab-like claw. Lapilli rained on her warriors, burning unprotected skin. Their fear was quite delicious.

‘Quickly now! I will have my prizes and I will have them intact! We do not have much time, this world is finished!’

Other eldar took the place of the dead wych. A stream of anaesthetic crystals were shot into the creature’s vulnerable mouth, and finally it was herded into the cage. The runes on the bars flared, the spars of the door flowed, melding seamlessly with the cage.

The wyches looked at her expectantly. She nodded.

They leapt into action, running for their transports. No doubt they were relieved. They were weak. The Raiders picked up the last few cages with supple claws, then rose high.

‘We are successful, my mistress,’ came the voice of Uriqa in her ear-beads.

The skimmers retreated upwards from the unbearable heat of the lava.

‘A good hunt, my mistress,’ said Khulo Khale.

It had been a good hunt, but Hesperax did not answer her lover to agree. She was imagining what she was going to do to Khale by way of celebration. The anticipation of his screams made her smile. If his pain pleased her, she might resurrect him and do it all over again.

‘Away to home! We return to the dark city in triumph!’

The wych craft rushed for the safety of the webway as red-hot rock fountained into the air behind them.

Giant winged creatures dived at the *Curse of Yriel*, scoring its armour with their diamond claws. They came in a line, each one attempting to hit the same mark and slice through to the wraithbone core beneath, but the *Curse of Yriel* was too quick for them and their blades bit all over, wounding the machine only superficially. A chance hit cut into the infinity conduit running down its left arm, and light leaked from it. It retaliated, blasting the creature’s fragile wings to pieces as it flew by, sending it spinning into the magma.

Lava erupted into the air on three sides of the Titans. The land was cracked and hellish with red light. Only the mountain to their backs remained dark.

+We must depart, defend me!+ the triple voice of the Phantom pilots sounded in Ariadien's mind. The Phantom lifted its wounded arm. The clasps of its pulsar retracted, and it jettisoned the broken weapon.

Ariadien was numb from the soul outwards, and obeyed without thought. He sprayed rapid pulsar fire across the rupturing landscape, gunning down the few beasts left capable of hurting them. The greatest threat came from the sky, but the increasingly violent geysers of lava vomiting from the ground kept the airspace close by free of the enemy. Nevertheless, he could spare little attention for the Titan as it went to the fallen *Silent Scream*. It reached out one long finger to a panel in the downed Revenant's chest. A large gem rose up in a housing, and the Phantom plucked it free, then reached forward and wrenched the Titan's corroded head from its neck mounting.

+The dead are retrieved,+ the Titan said. The ground screamed. A fresh crevasse opened up between it and the *Sound of Sunlight* and sheets of steam whistled into the sky, lit orange from below. +We must depart.+

The Phantom Titan's jump jets flared, and it bounded up the mountainside. Sparing one final glance for the ruined form of his sister's mount, Ariadien followed.

They leapt up from rock to cliff. The entire mountain shook, boulders rolled free from their seats, and more than once Ariadien almost lost his footing. But the triplet exarchs of the *Curse of Yriel* were swift and sure, and he followed the larger Titan closely. By this way they came to the summit of the mountain. *Vaul's Caress* awaited them, struggling to maintain position in the hurricane of fire sweeping over the planet. The main webgate flashed over and again as eldar craft streamed into it.

They ran leaning into the wind, their long legs carrying them over the ground in few strides. The captain of *Vaul's Caress* saw them coming, and the ship rotated on the spot, opening its doors to them.

The *Curse of Yriel* was in first, jumping clean into the hold. The ship dipped as the Titan landed inside, then again as Ariadien jetted in after it. The ship began to rise even as they positioned themselves for restraint, their mounts struggling to maintain their balance.

Only when the *Sound of Sunlight* was strapped into its transit throne and deactivated, did Ariadien allow his tears to fall.

The world disintegrated around Aloec Sunspear. *Vaul's Caress* and the smaller ships hovered near to the Fireheart, its shields absorbing a punishing barrage of volcanic ejecta. The land as far as he could see to the north, west and east was covered in lava, that to the south riven with cracks, molten rock boiling from the mantle as the world began its final convulsions. The Fireheart pulsed, its subsonics shaking his bones, its psychic resonance his mind. Thunder cracked as lightning stabbed the melting surface of Dûriel.

Eldar fled. Those of the craftworlds went both ways, rushing in and out of the gates, trying to evacuate as many of the warriors as possible. The Dark Kin carried their more wholesome cousins from the field too, although they did not return once they had departed. Bravest of all were the spiritseers riding grav-vehicles, snatching up waystones before they could be consumed by the molten rock. The shrill psychic screams of those whose stones were breached came often, chilling shrieks against the ever-present mind-roar of the voidspawn.

Sunspear's Falcon came back down. The ramp opened. Warriors beckoned to him. 'My autarch, we must go! We have to leave now!'

Sunspear did not listen. Dûriel died in a tempest of fire, and yet the despair that filled his mind and

heart was the greater storm. He sank to his knees.

‘We must go now! They are about to seal the gates!’ Hands reached out to him, humble Guardians and ancient exarch alike shouted his name. Beyond the tank, the gates to Dûriel winked out one by one, sealed forever against the death of the world. The forces at work here would gravely damage the webway, should the gates remain open.

‘I cannot leave,’ he whispered. His eyes dropped. ‘I die here with my failure.’

A loud bang had his eyes searching the boiling clouds.

That was no thunder.

Nine Razorwings hurtled through the clouds, weaving their way through the globs of lava falling through the air. Their pilots’ skill was breathtaking. They were heading for the capillary towers.

‘They are too few, they cannot do it...’ whispered Sunspear, tortured by hope. His warriors had ceased calling to him, they watched too. All held their breath. The ribbed tubes of the capillary towers pulsed, pushing the chyme of Dûriel’s biomass towards the waiting stomachs of the hive craft.

The Dark Kin’s fighter craft did not open fire. In perfect formation, they flew directly for the tubes and accelerated. Sunspear’s hand clenched into fists.

With a supersonic scream, the Razorwings hit the tubes with their sharp, forward-swept wings. The flesh of the capillary towers’ oesophagi parted easily, sending a shower of acidic gruel spurting out in all directions. In rains it fell upon the rising flood of molten stone, in steam it rose, obscuring the capillary towers.

The ground rocked mightily. Slabs of crust thrust upwards, tilted vertical, then slid under the seething orange sea of fire.

‘Now, autarch!’

Sunspear nodded, and stood. The despair receded. They had won. He dashed for his Falcon grav-tank. The door eased shut, and the craft sped for the waiting holds of *Vaul’s Caress*.

‘Go! Go, my friends!’ shouted Taec. He sent a powerful psychic impulse to wake the seers from their trance. ‘Your work is done! Save yourselves,’ he said.

Kelmon stared down at him. ‘You remain.’

‘I remain,’ said Taec. ‘The Fireheart will cease to operate if we all depart. One must stay to the end. It is my doom.’ He tried a smile. It was a lie on his lips.

‘We have both seen it,’ agreed Kelmon. He said no more; there was nothing else to say, for destiny’s will is inviolable in the end, no matter how hard one seeks to change it. ‘Farewell, Taec Silvereye of House Delgari.’

Liquid stone fell brightly behind Taec, framing his ancient face.

‘Farewell, Wraithseer Kelmon Firesight of House Haladesh. May we meet again when the gods return.’

Kelmon went, following the still-singing seers into the hold of a waiting void-runner. Taec watched them go, he felt their sorrow and horror at his fate as the ship departed. But most of all he felt their relief that it was he and not they that would face She Who Thirsts.

He began the song again. His voice faltered, and so he started over. Lifting his staff over his head, he forced every iota of psychic might he possessed into his voice. Runes whipped out of his pouch, orbiting his head in one final, complex pattern.

The void-runner shot off at speed, heading for the horizon like an arrow, then climbing vertically until suddenly it pierced the clouds. Scores of smaller craft followed in its wake. A thrum announced the departure of *Vaul’s Caress*; it turned and presented its prow to the sky, then it too accelerated to

enormous speed in the blink of an eye and vanished. The remaining ships followed slowly, holds still open, welcoming in the last of the fleeing eldar.

Mercifully, the ships departed without further loss, their shields and armour weathering the worst the planet had to throw at them. Taec felt the terrible despair of the last few eldar on the world, followed swiftly by their deaths, and the crack of their spirit stones.

The skein resounded to the triumphant laughter of She Who Thirsts. She was waiting for him now. Her presence pushed aside the limitless mind of the voidspawn. The horrors of the flesh had been displaced by that of the spirit.

He would die the true death, and know unending torment.

Still he sang.

The throbbing of the Fireheart beat quicker and quicker. The mountaintop shook as the device's voice became a single note, rising in pitch until it screamed like a dying god.

With a cataclysmic detonation, three pillars of fire erupted from the Godpeak, sending plumes of molten rock spuming thousands of paces into the air. The world shook violently, and this earthquake did not cease, but built in intensity as Dûriel's tectonic plates tore themselves one from the other in final convulsion.

The air ignited, billows of fire rocketed around the planet. Protected by the Fireheart's exclusion field, Taec saw this. He was still there when the core, influenced by the Fireheart's deadly harmonics, ruptured.

The Godpeak exploded. The Fireheart, its work done, finally succumbed to the fury it had unleashed, and toppled into ruin.

Taec lived outside the field for less than a second before his body was incinerated. His flesh turned black and then to ash in an eyeblink, his crystallising limbs melting like glass. His death was mercifully short and painless.

The same could not be said for the aftermath. His waystone glowed, then shattered. He was pulled from this world. Before Slaanesh dragged him to her embrace, he saw the skein as he never had before, free of form's material trammels. It stretched away in all directions, a multiplicity of universes and futures. There, ahead of him, he saw the future of his race.

Taec Silvereye's soul sparkled with joy before She Who Thirsts pulled him into her thrall.

Vaul's Caress rushed from the planet, its engines pushed to the limit by its steersmen. From the epicentre of the Godpeak, a blast of fire radiated around the planet as the atmosphere caught fire. Pillars of lava chased the eldar ships through the burning air into orbit.

The ships broke from the gravity well and accelerated, leaving the final death throes of Dûriel behind, heading towards the combined warfleet of the three kindreds. The hive ships of Starving Dragon were also breaking from the planet, but they were too slow to avoid the debris flung out when the planet's core detonated. Two-thirds of the planet disintegrated, cast out as continent-sized lumps into space. The leading edge of Starving Dragon was decimated, hive ships smashed to pieces by the thousand.

The eldar were quicker, and outpaced the asteroid storm that had been Dûriel.

For fourteen cycles after the war, the husk of Dûriel glowed dimly in the long night of space, becoming briefly the lambent flame of Taec Silvereye's cryptic prophecy, long enough to light the destruction of Dûriel's orphaned moon by the wreckage of its parent.

Only then did it burn out. Dûriel was no more.

Wherever he was met within *Vaul's Caress*, Aloec was formally but sincerely congratulated. Eldar of all kindreds crowded the corridors, soot-stained and weary. The craftworlders avoided conversation, centring themselves in private meditations to avoid the extremes of sorrow and triumph victory brought. The Dark Kin and Aspect Warriors had no such qualms, and openly celebrated their victory. To see the followers of Khaine, still wearing their war masks, celebrate so was right and proper, but the Commorrites disgusted Sunspear. They gloated about their survival, laughing over the deaths of their unfortunate companions. Worst of all, they appeared rejuvenated, glowing eyes betraying souls fat and sleek on the suffering of those who had not survived. Sunspear could not look at them; his awareness was keen that but for them he would have failed. Such ignominy was too much for his pride to bear and he grew more withdrawn with every passing cycle.

Shame clawing him, he retreated to the quarters loaned him by the Iyandeni whenever he could. By day he attended council after council. Great good had come from the victory, no matter how it was bought; part of him saw that. The hive mind had retreated. The future of Taec's vision had been averted. New vistas of possibility were opening up on the skein, the renewed alliance between the craftworlds of Iyanden and Biel-Tan a fulcrum upon which fate could be swung in the eldar's favour. The Fireheart too could be replicated, much to the councils' surprise, and already there was talk of deploying it again, a bold scheme to present the approaching hive fleets with a desert of scorched worlds. Where once such grand strategy would have enthused Sunspear, appealing to his sense of manifest destiny, he felt instead a little sick; the eldar no longer had the power to bring life to worlds, but they once more had the power to inflict death upon them.

Those were conversations for the day. He did not sleep. At night he bade the others of the craftworlds' councils goodnight, and went to the ship's small shrine. The night was for him and him alone. The night was when Aloec Sunspear knelt before the idols of dead gods.

He could not shake the feeling of shame. It gnawed at him. He, the greatest general of the Swordwind, had demonstrated his limitations most publicly, once certainly, and twice as he saw it. This feeling of inadequacy grew from a seed to a tree of despair. He went to the shrine in an increasingly vain attempt to uproot its dark boughs from his soul, but the tree only grew under the sunlight of his anxiety.

On the night of the third cycle, he went into the shrine once more. He entered head down, long fingers worrying his chin as he brooded on his failures. It was not until he had walked the length of the chapel that he realised he was not alone.

A spiritseer in the robes of Iyanden, clean but marked with burns, stood facing away from him, her long braid falling the length of her back.

'I am sorry,' he said. 'I thought to find the chapel unoccupied.'

The spiritseer did not turn, but continued to regard the statuettes of the gods in their niches.

'It has been kept clear for you, Autarch Sunspear,' she said. 'Please, continue your meditations. I mean not to disturb you, but to help.' She turned her head.

'Iyanna Arienal?' Sunspear took a step back. She was as beautiful as they said – more so – and he almost blurted this out. A kernel of self-deprecatory humour surfaced through his shame, that he of all people should be struck this way. She had a burn on her chin, dark blisters on her cheek from the hot ash of Dûriel, but these imperfections highlighted her beauty rather than diminished it. It was a cold, hard beauty. There was nothing of joy in her features, it was as if they had ossified, and she were a memorial to herself. He was not surprised, knowing what he did of her family history.

She nodded. 'We have not been formally introduced.'

Sunspear recovered. 'Your efforts on the battlefield at the side of my warriors are all the

introduction I need, my lady.'

She laughed at that, a sudden, bright sound as swift in passing as a breeze through leaves, gone as quick as it came, no less glorious for its brevity. 'You of Biel-Tan are so formal. Do you know this is what we think of you?'

He gave a little bow of acquiescence. 'Ours is a martial world, lady.'

She smiled, again quickly. There was a hint of mischief to it, and he wondered what kind of woman she had been before her family had been slain, laughter had left her and she had taken up with the dead. 'Please, autarch. My title or name will suffice.'

'As you wish... Spiritseer Iyanna.'

She gave a sharp nod, and turned back to the statues.

'We thought you were dead,' he said.

'I very nearly joined my charges, it is true. I was not evacuated with the seer councils, but returned with the other spiritseers. My duties and injuries prevented me from rejoining the High Council, until today.'

'Injuries that appear almost healed, I am glad to say.'

'Your healers are proficient.'

'They have much practice,' he said. 'You gathered many waystones?'

'Not enough. Over five hundred souls were lost to She Who Thirsts, and I do not know how many of the Dark Kin were consumed. They are black-hearted, scoundrels at the best, evil at the worst. But they are eldar nonetheless, and I mourn their spirits' loss.'

Sunspear sank to his knees with a heavy sigh, dropping his head in the ritual aspect of prayer. 'A high price to pay.'

'No price was too high to secure this victory, autarch. You speak as the loser. Recall, I beg of you, that it was your victory, not your defeat.' She paused. 'Is this why you pray, to expiate some secret shame? Prayer is a hollow action, autarch, all the gods are dead.'

'And yet you are here.'

'I honour their memory as we honour the memories of all our ancestors. I commit an act of remembrance, not worship.'

'Prayer calms me,' he said. Already, he could feel his self-control slipping; his shame called for his tears. He could weep an ocean.

'There are those who are worried about you, autarch.' She looked down at him. 'Do they worry without cause? I sense your shame. It is needless.'

Sunspear shook his head. His throat was closing with emotion. He could not keep his shame bottled any longer. It came close to overwhelming him.

'There are only two cycles before the fleet returns to Biel-Tan, where I will be greeted as a hero. But I am no hero. Only the blackest of villains assured our victory, not Aloec Sunspear of Biel-Tan. I do not deserve the approbation of my people, nor the honours I will be given.' He raised his face to the idol of Kurnous, father of the eldar. 'I failed. How can I bear that?'

Iyanna knelt beside him with a sudden movement, bowing her head in the same manner as he. Her arm came free from its sleeve. He saw through the clear dressing on it that it was badly burned.

'There are no heroes or villains, not now, autarch. In these black days, the two are one and the same. We must take aid from who we can, or we will perish. We succeeded, in greater part thanks to you. Do not turn from your path, autarch, if that is even possible.'

'It is possible,' he said. 'I do not have to abandon the path completely as did your Yriel. I can withdraw from the Path of the Leader. Although it is rare for one to do so, it is possible.'

‘Then keep such occasion rare!’ she admonished. ‘We need leaders, Autarch Sunspear, not another wailing self-obsessive crawling the sharp-toothed path of shame. Only through the actions of the likes of you will Ynnead be born and our race free of the depredations that await us beyond the veil of this life. Put aside your pride, the eldar need you more than you need yourself.’ She began the hand talk, her gestures stiff and ritualistic, adding supplementary meaning to her words that did him great honour.

‘Perhaps that is so,’ said Sunspear. ‘But although I am greatly impressed by your armies of the willing dead, I do not trust your new god,’ he said carefully. ‘Kysaduras’s idea is a fairytale, a dangerous one at that, because it distracts us from the only path that will lead to our reinstatement as rulers of this galaxy.’

Iyanna downcast her eyes. He feared she was mocking him, and looked at her quizzically. His worries evaporated as he watched her. She was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her lips were especially full when viewed from the side, and Sunspear found himself captivated by the space between them changing as she formed her words. Only belatedly did he remember that she was a powerful psychic, and his thoughts would be as an open book to her, and he dropped his gaze again.

If that were so, and he was certain it was, she made no acknowledgement of them. ‘Your trust means nothing, your opinion on Kysaduras less. Ynnead already is, and Ynnead will be. How can something not be that is eternal? She is already there, Sunspear. Kysaduras was a visionary. Your thoughts on the matter are irrelevant. You pray to the old gods, but they are dead, autarch.’

‘Like I said, it calms me.’

‘You do not feel calm to me. Do they answer?’

Sunspear looked at the idols, all beautiful sculptures by Kereth Lorainareath of Iyanden, a sculptor famous even on Biel-Tan. It was a lifeless beauty, the faces and blank stone eyes as dead as the beings they represented; a deliberate choice on the sculptor’s part.

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘They do not answer.’

She looked at him until he returned her gaze. Her expression was still grave, but her eyes had come alive. She took his hand in her uninjured own. He flinched, almost withdrew from this unlooked-for intimacy, but let her cool fingers slip between his.

‘I pray to a god that answers. I have the tools to bring her awakening soon. Tell me you are not intrigued? Surely every avenue must be explored, if there is but a chance of salvation to it?’

Aloec agreed reluctantly, by mien and gesture.

She relaxed, and he realised his favourable reaction meant something important to her. ‘Come then,’ she said, standing and pulling at his hand. ‘Let me show you something wonderful.’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Day of the Dead

The ships opened their doors, and sombre warriors came out. No celebration attended their victory. There were so many who would not be returning home.

The laying of the dead took over Iyanden. Too many caskets bearing freshly inhabited spirit stones came out of the ships' holds, only a few with corpses, for most material remains had been consumed by fire and that made the eldar's woe greater. Those on the Path of Mourning marched one to each lost soul: in groups by the waystone chests, singly by each coffin, others in long train behind the material remains of the dead, and one further for each eldar spirit lost to She Who Thirsts.

The mourners wept openly, a few rending their garments or pulling at their hair, crying not only for those whose loss they had been asked to remember, but for all eldar dead upon Dûriel. With so many killed, there was much grief. They pummelled themselves and wailed in place of all the others, for those who dare not grieve for fear that grief would overwhelm them. The families and kinsfolk of the dead stood in utter silence, faces set behind veils of white, as the funeral procession wound onwards toward the Dome of Final Contemplations. No songs were sung that day but those that addressed the true death, and the end of all things, and they were sung over and again.

But in the procession there was one who grieved openly in open defiance of custom. Ariadien, cradling the waystone of his sister, his mind enwrapping her somnolent spirit as hard as his hand clutched the stone it dwelt within.

'They tried to take you from me, but I would not let them,' he whispered to it. 'They tried to take you, and I fought them. They look at me with contempt, for I grieve you myself. Let them look.'

Neidaria's spirit stone was warm in his hand, and when he spoke to it he thought it became warmer.

He staggered on only for a short way. As soon as the procession left the docks, he stumbled from the lines of dead and mourners. 'Let me through! Let me through!' he shouted. He was behaving without decorum, and worried looks were cast his way. Someone tried to stop him, Ariadien did not know his name. The eldar spoke words to calm him, but retreated when Ariadien snarled at him. He shoved his way out of the crowd, ducking through the wraithkind lining the route of the funeral. They had come to welcome the dead in their own way, and were unmoved by the crowd's reaction to Ariadien. Back in the procession, someone called out after him; other voices joined the first, but he was away, running with the waystone of his slaughtered sister clamped tight to his chest, his face a waterfall of tears.

Away from the crowds, Iyanden was eerily quiet. 'Death is everywhere,' he whispered. 'Oh my sister, my sister! I am sorry, if it were not for me, perhaps they would not have chosen us as a Geminiad. I am sorry, I am sorry!' He choked on his own words, barking out an ugly cough. Grief coiled in his gut, its hooked fangs buried deep in the tender places of his belly. It bit harder with each sob. His sorrow was a physical, unendurable pain.

He staggered home to the domes of House Haladesh. He came through a twisted forest of new wraithbone whose semi-sentient branches reached out to touch his pain, and the whispered voices of other dead murmured plaintively in his mind.

Through this way and others less canny, he came to those parts where the living yet ruled, and

thence made his way to the apartments he shared with his sister, now his alone.

He stumbled into the door, so anguished that the mechanism at first did not recognise his psyche. He clawed at it with one weakening hand, beseeching it to open and let him pass. It did so, though whether by his design or its own, he never understood.

Once inside he blundered like a mad thing. Howling daemoniacally he upended furniture and smashed all that came to hand regardless of its beauty or value, Neidaria's hot waystone at his breast all the while. His sister's things in particular enraged his despair, and he treated them most cruelly of all, dashing her poetry crystals against the walls, ripping at her favoured garments with his fingernails.

Eventually, exhausted, he collapsed. He found the strength to crawl to his cabinet of best liqueurs, and pulled forth a potent darkvine spiked with dreamleaf and other, less acceptable narcotics. He put it to his lips and drank a great draught, hiccuping it so that it poured from his open mouth like the blood from his broken heart. Retching with misery, he drank the remainder down.

He fell into a fugue, losing himself deep in woe. He floated on a sea of cerise water. In the distance, his sister waved to him from a shore of grey sand, but he could not reach her, and as he paddled towards her she turned away and walked up towards the dunes, to where a figure in motley played a shrill and heartless tune upon a pipe carved from a thighbone. She did not look back.

In the end, blackness overtook him.

Ariadien awoke an unknown time later. He was enwrapped in velvet darkness, but he was awake. He was quite sure of that.

'Ariadien, can you hear me?' A voice spoke close by, stentorian and slow, the voice of an eldar drugged or lost to ennui. The voice of the dead.

'Wh-where am I?' he said. He did not feel his lips move, and the voice he heard was not his own. He realised then with mounting panic that he could not move at all, nor could he see. Reaching out with his mind he sought his sister, looking for her presence. He found it readily enough, close at hand. But it was the sluggish dead thing he had closed his mind around on the terrible journey back from Dûriel, and not the vibrant soul she had been. He wailed anew. 'Dead! Dead! She is dead!'

'Dead,' said the voice, 'but not yet gone. Calm yourself, Ariadien.'

Tranquillity was imposed upon his mind, not true relaxation, but more akin to the bars of a cage.

'A seer,' he said. 'You are a seer.'

'I am a seer. Kelmon Wraithseer, I for whom duty did not end when life ended. I fight on, to make reparation for the mistakes I made in life. Tell me, Ariadien, if you were given the choice, would you choose to serve Iyanden after your demise?'

'Why? Why should I? I have done all I can. I have fought for Iyanden, and if I did not do so unwillingly, having my sister appropriated to the same cause without her assent was worth two lifetimes of obedience. I watched my sister die, fighting a war she should not have fought. I have lost all I cared for! Let me be.'

'This war is the war of all eldar, willing or not. It is the Rhana Dandra begun, surely you can see this?'

'She wanted to be a poet!' he screamed. 'The path was to be of our own choosing, so said Asurmen himself, but she and I, we had no choice! Curse you and all the seers! You betray the Asurya!'

'And yet Asurmen was trapped on one branch. He is trapped still.'

'By his own connivance,' sobbed Ariadien. 'By his own doing.'

'By necessity,' said Kelmon out of the dark. 'A necessity he embraced. Necessity dogs our steps on the path closely, Ariadien. Whether we will a branch or it is thrust upon us, we must tread it as best we

can.'

Icy calm descended on Ariadien. 'What have you done to me? What have you done to us? Why are you telling me this?'

'Iyanden is reliant upon the dead, Ariadien. The dead dwell within the Tears of Isha. They feed the new god, Ynnead, who will break the Dark Prince and free us all.'

'Fanaticism! The gods are dead, wraithseer, as dead as you.' Dread held fast to Ariadien's soul.

'The truth, and not the truth. Nothing ever dies. The gods never died. They live within our enemy, as all the souls she has consumed since the Fall dwell within her. They wait to break free. The time approaches. Ynnead will free them. Tell me, Ariadien, whence come the waystones, the spirit traps that guard our souls?'

'The crone worlds,' whispered Ariadien. Kelmon used part of a mnemonic chant, inculcated into him in his earliest schooling. Ariadien was compelled to answer.

'Who gathers the tears? Who risks the thirst? Who are our greatest heroes?'

Ariadien resisted. 'Vagabonds! Renegades! Pathfinders, rangers, sellswords and sell-souls!'

'Who are our greatest heroes?' repeated Kelmon patiently.

'The knights,' said Ariadien feebly, his strength spent. 'The wraithknights. They find the tears.'

A sense of satisfaction emanated from Kelmon. 'Open your eyes.'

Ariadien could see. He looked down upon Kelmon's head from some height. The displays of various instruments flickered in his field of view, not dissimilar to those of his Revenant. His body he felt too, but it was not his own.

'You will learn to use it all in time, fear not,' said Kelmon.

'Brother,' came an emotionless voice. 'We will fight again, you and I, an eternity together, until the Great Enemy is cast down and we may be reborn.'

'No!' shouted Ariadien. 'No! This was not what she wanted! This was her greatest fear! This is not fair!' He tried to lash out at Kelmon, but his arms would not move.

The wraithseer raised his arms and spoke. 'Arise, Ariadien-Neidaria, united in death which in life could not be parted. Arise, knight of Iyanden. You may despair of your fate for a while, but it will pass, and you will be a hero. You are the future of our race. That, or...' His arms dropped, and he paused. 'Or you, Ariadien, may walk away now. You may exit the knight and begone to whatever fate you feel you deserve. But let me tell you this, Ariadien of House Haladesh, if you choose this path, if you choose self over selflessness, you will never be in your sister's presence again.'

The wraithseer turned away.

'I leave you now to think on it. Discuss it between yourselves. On the morrow, I shall return to hear your answer.'

Kelmon went from Ariadien's perception. Either the lights went out or the vision of the knight was deactivated. Neidaria's presence was a candle beside him in the dark, the only warmth in an uncaring universe, and it was not lit with her consent.

Ariadien's screams went unheard.

Iyanna Arienal, last of her house, led a procession of spiritseers deep into the infinity core. They sang as they descended, complex melodies woven with the names of the newly dead. Fifteen of them, all of the most senior of their path, with four-score wraithguard following. Between the towering wraithbone warriors, forty caskets floated on anti-grav fields, each carrying twenty spirit stones. The procession went down the spiral ramp running around the shaft of the core. The shaft was the central node of the infinity circuit, brainstem of Iyanden. Three hundred paces across, its smooth walls glowed yellow,

shot through with a tracery of veins which shone a brighter light. The circuit's capillaries were close to the surface here. This was the closest one could get to being in the circuit physically. It was the borderlands of death, a place for crossing over from one realm to the next.

The procession went slowly, their laments loud yet tinged with hope of rebirth in the distant futures yet to come, when the Great Enemy's thirst was quenched and the hurt to the world undone.

The spirits of the dead crowded curiously around the group. They had grown quieter, many of them sinking into lethargy and forgetfulness now that vengeance had been delivered and the threat of the Great Dragon's merging averted.

Iyanna and her seers reached the bottom of the shaft. They moved in ritual pattern, the wraithguard gathering the spirit stone caskets in the centre of the shaft.

The song continued as the casket lids slid open.

'As we pass from spirit to flesh, this is the first passing,' said Iyanna. 'As we pass from flesh to spirit, this is the second passing. As we pass from spirit to wraithkind, this is the third passing,' she continued. 'As we pass back from wraithkind to spirit, this is the Fourth Passing. You have served again, O dead, now return to your rest.'

No other speech was made, all that needed to be said was sung. The spirit stones were lifted carefully, one at a time, from their resting places and set against the wall. 'This is the Fourth Passing,' the spiritseers sang as they placed the stones on the wall. Here, in this place of power, the process of wraithbone growth was swift, and the spirit stones were engulfed into the fabric of the walls. A flaring of lights speckled the walls around the embedded stones as the dead welcomed their own back to the infinity circuit. The light in each glowing waystone went out, the waystones reappeared as the wraithbone drew back, and the empty vessels were taken down and replaced into the caskets. No other eldar could use these emptied stones; they were retained against future necessity, should the spirit that once dwelled inside need to be called back to serve Iyanden anew. As those who had served in the Phoenix Host departed, the seers sent them back to their rest with songs of thanks.

Iyanna and the others wept behind their masks as they went through the ritual. These stones were of those ghost warriors who had expressed a strong desire to return to the circuit. A quarter of them all told. Many remained ambulant; still Iyanden was a city of the dead.

The seers wept not for these departed souls, for they were safe and home, but for the dead whose waystones had been lost in the volcanic tumult of Dûriel's red death, Taec Silvereye's among them. Iyanna could only hope that her plan would come to fruition, and the Dark Prince be defeated finally by the god of the dead. Iyanna could feel the presence of the new god, right on the edge of her psychic senses. A powerful presence, moving closer to wakefulness with each eldar spirit that was added to its aggregate soul.

The Ritual of the Fourth Passing went on for two cycles. There was no climax – it ended as simply as it had begun, the seers departing the way they had come and still in song, their dead honour guard marching after them.

Iyanna was tired when they returned to the Dome of Final Contemplations, the centre of her path's power. She underwent the rituals with her colleagues, and unmasked they embraced and wept all the harder for those they had not been able to save.

But Iyanna could not rest yet. There was still one spirit that needed to return home.

Althenian was waiting for Iyanna by the door to his shrine, patient as only the dead can be.

'You are here,' he said, his voice sepulchral as the rest of wraithkind. The fire that ordinarily set him apart from the others was absent. 'I am gladdened by this, I thank you.'

‘I came,’ she agreed sadly.

He nodded his great head, the runes and charms depending from it jingling. Iyanna could not read what that nod meant. Whether he was pleased or in agreement with himself on some matter was impossible to discern; his blank face was inscrutable as it ever was.

The door to the shrine slid open at his touch.

‘We go in, both of us for the final time, not again. I reborn, this door closes to you always. No return. Do not come, the way will be perilous, this is truth.’

‘I am aware of this,’ she said. ‘Khaine’s wrath will scorch my soul.’

‘Fear for form. New dragons are often wild. Dangerous. Do not come. Not all encountered within, will be tame.’ He led the way, limping from damage to his wraithbone shell suffered in the battle.

The Shrine of the Fire’s Heart had changed greatly since their last visit. The dome had been landscaped with sharp ridges of volcanic rock. Cliffs reared up in front of them, razor-edged and ominous, obscuring the view of the shrine’s central temple. Basilisks grown from Iyanden’s biological databanks basked on stones overlooking cracks in the ground. These had a ruddy effulgence, and steam shot from them in short-lived blasts. It was hot, volcanically so, reminding Iyanna uncomfortably of the Fireheart’s activation.

‘See you here, destiny is hard at work, new Fire’s Heart,’ said Althenian.

‘All things are linked,’ she said. ‘No thread is spun in isolation of the others.’

‘This is so. Please watch your step, my lady, stone is sharp.’

He caught her looking at the reptiles. ‘Be at ease. Do not fear the basilisks, they are young. I guide you, I will protect you from them, they are weak.’

‘As you have protected me for so long.’

‘As always, and I will continue to, where I can. I swear this,’ he said. ‘Even after our bond is gone, I do so.’

They went through a maze of sharp formations of gneiss, black stone alight with the glitter of crystals. Althenian pointed out certain places where he would train his new followers, or particularly appealing formations. ‘All is here, all is as I remember it, to the last,’ he said.

‘It is as Iyanden remembers it,’ she said. Iyanna did not share his enthusiasm.

Boiling pools of mud surrounded the shrine temple, and Althenian mothered her along the correct path, much to her irritation. She was awl with emotion, close to snapping at him one moment, crying the next. She fought hard to regain her poise, knowing what she felt to be the foreshadowing of fresh grief.

The temple interior was cool after the broil outside its doors. Black sand coated its floors, and red light glowed from unseen sources. Grumbles and snapping sounds came from side passages, as if there were something living in hidden chambers, or perhaps the temple itself were alive. There was a strong, fiery presence to it that had been absent before. The Shrine of the Fire’s Heart truly had been reborn.

They passed from the open areas of the shrine, where those newly grasped by the dragon aspect of Khaine would be trained, to its inner precincts. The shrine’s long arming chambers had been filled with new battlesuits in the colours of the Fire’s Heart. Armour of deep orange plating and high crimson helms were racked upon stands, gleaming golden fusion guns by their sides. Althenian’s great head swung to and fro and he nodded appreciatively. ‘Fine weapons, I am honoured by those, on Vaul’s Path.’

When they reached the exarch’s chamber, Althenian’s pleasure increased. His sculpted body showed no sign of it, but Iyanna felt it, radiating off him in waves.

At the centre of the room was his armour, and by it a lengthy fusion pike.

The armour was exquisite, its plating most artfully made. Red light lit it from below. Sockets for spirit stones waited all over its breast and vambraces. Althenian walked over to it and looked down on it. She sensed his impatience.

‘Now I lose you,’ she said.

He turned back to where she stood in the chamber’s doorway.

‘Yes you do,’ he replied. ‘I have long been lost to Khaine, Iyanna. I change not, this is no transformation, this changing. I return, back to my rightwise being, Iyanna. I am sad. There is sadness for us both, Iyanna. Also joy, the phoenix risen again’s promise. Do not weep. Iyanna, fair Iyanna not for me, it must be. You know it, my soul was forfeit to Khaine, for so long. It is now, five thousand passes since I fell, to the wrath. Iyanna, you offered me respite, it was good. For this boon, I can never repay you, to my shame. Remember, my war rages eternal, ’twas ever thus.’

‘You need offer no repayment,’ she said, and then turned from the wraithlord so that he would not see her tears.

‘Do not weep, if there were anything to give, Iyanna, only you, ever would I give it to, and gladly. Do not weep, Lady Arienal great seer, do not weep.’ He took two limping steps across the floor. With surprising tenderness, he knelt and embraced her in his long arms, the mounts for his weapons snagging in her robes. She rested her cheek on the hard panels of his pauldron for a while, and then he withdrew.

‘It is time,’ he said. ‘Do quickly what must be done, I beg you.’ He bowed his head and a seam opened in the front of his smooth helmet, dividing it in two, the twin dragons in opposition turning from each other for the last time. The great head of the wraithlord swung open, revealing layers of armour of various kinds: hard plastics, ablative soft gels, cunningly woven composites in strata like those within rock.

Under it all was a compartment, crafted with care and beauty. Within it were seven spirit stones, each set in its own recess. Six lesser surrounding one greater; those eldar that had fallen to Khaine, become exarchs and joined their essence to that of the original Althenian. Iyanna reached out carefully and removed these smaller six, leaving the greatest till last. They offered no resistance, almost falling into her hands in the same manner ripe fruit is easily plucked from the tree. She placed the six into a velvet bag at her belt, then reached out and took Althenian’s greatest spirit stone, that which housed the soul of the eldar who had originally borne his name, into her hands.

Althenian was warm to her touch, the gem of his dwelling flawless, perhaps even more so than other waystones. The light within it was a fiery orange, and this brought a smile to her lips even as she cried.

She carried the stones carefully to the waiting armour. She sang the ritual song of the Fourth Passing, homecoming, the same one she had sung in the infinity core that same day, as she installed the waystones into their mountings, although the words were different, for Althenian went to no rest. She left Althenian’s primary stone until last, holding it up in both hands, took one final look into its flickering depths, and slid it into position in the recess on his breastplate.

The stone clicked, and she stood back. Dancing orange light glowed bright in all seven spirit stones, then died back to the faintest glimmer as Althenian slipped back into dormancy, awaiting new life.

‘Goodbye for now, dear Althenian,’ she said.

She turned and walked past the kneeling wraithlord shell, and left the shrine as quickly as she could.

Once more Yriel was upon the beach of bones. It had finally become dusk, and he could not tell if the dark sea was still of blood or had become water. It tossed in front of him, white caps slapping noisily

into one another with extravagant sprays of luminescent foam glowing white in the gathering dark. A stink of iron was on the air, and of fire, but the wind from the sea blew fresh and strong, carrying the scents of war away, and replacing them with the smell of salt oceans and of life.

He sank to his knees, absent-mindedly running the bone sand through his fingers. He was so tired, even in his dreams he was tired, deriving from sleep none of the refreshment that slumber should bring. With his nightmares came the revelation of another kind of tiredness, deeper and spiritual in nature, behind the petty weariness of the body. Prince Yriel suffered from an exhaustion of the spirit.

He waited disinterestedly for tonight's tableau of horror to assail his senses. The whole thing was boringly predictable to him. He was so weary he no longer had any care for his own soul. All he desired was an end.

Time passed, nothing happened. No presence came. The sound of the waves began to relax him. The smell of war gave way entirely to that of life. The evening was refreshingly cool, the beach warm from the day's sunlight. After a time, Yriel felt his eyelids grow heavy, and lay down on the sand, letting the heat of the powdered bone soothe his limbs. He filled his hand with the bone, let it run through his hands close to his face. When he looked hard, trying to see the tiny skulls trapped in the eldritch beach, all he saw was rounded grains of sand.

Yriel slept, the rush and boom of the waves his lullaby.

Yriel awoke long before Iyanden's artificial dawn. For the first time since he had taken up the Spear of Twilight, he was calm. His palsy was stronger than ever; his pains clawed at his innards, competing with the horror at Yaleanar's death. But although his weariness remained, it was of that good, clean kind that is born of a worthy task finally done, that sort which purifies the soul, and Yriel felt at peace.

The spear called to him, and he answered, going to its cradle and staring at it. What emanated from it now was gentler.

'It is time, is it not,' Yriel said to it, crooning the words almost, as if he breathed them direct into his lover's ear. 'My last battle has been fought, our work together is over.'

He spent a portion of the night kneeling by the spear's cradle in his palace, eyes closed in silent contemplation.

At the conclusion of his vigil, Yriel dressed himself extravagantly, an attempt he supposed to recapture in funereal splendour the dash of his more carefree days. If he was to die tonight, he would die looking like the prince he was, not the walking corpse he had become. He did not call for his servants, but walked his extensive chambers alone, taking what he needed. He had always prized his freedom; dependency sickened him.

He painted his face, coloured his hair a deep blue. He put on a shimmering body suit patterned with interlocking flames of two dark blues. He donned high boots. Next he went to his armoury, and took out his armour, his life-support unit with its high pennants and his war-belt with its holsters and sheaths, and into this he put his weapons. From his rooms of armoires he took his finest chains from their boxes. Over it all went his high-collared admiral's coat. Finally, from its stand in the centre of the armoury, he took the Eye of Wrath and locked it into place over his blood-red eye.

He examined himself in his mirror hall, inspecting every angle of his body. 'Every inch the general,' he said wryly.

For the final time, he took up the spear, the tingling in his hand flaring up as he did so as if in acknowledgement of his tragic errand.

He left his chambers without word. There would be few abroad at this hour, and any who challenged him he would simply pass by, or such was his intention. He spoke no farewells, passing through his

house without comment from the few of his servants about their work. Upon reaching the wide boulevards of House Ulthanash no other seemed to see him either. As he passed more and more of his fellows in his finery without a single one seeing him, he realised he moved through them as if in a dream, that he was invisible to them. Such things had long ago ceased to surprise him, and he was glad of his easy passage.

So it went as he traversed predawn Iyanden; none noticed him. Not revellers or lovers abroad, or friends walking. Not even a pair of seers who knew him well. He glanced at the spear, hot in his hand. Doubtless it was the cause. At Red Moon's New Birthing there were three eldar in private prayer at the shrines around the walls. They too were unaware, and he walked through the energy field to the Shrine of Ulthanash unseen.

Yriel trod the precincts of the shrine slowly this time. Iyanden was quiet, perpetually in mourning, the Shrine of Ulthanash as deathly still as it had been that fateful day ten passes ago when he had taken up the Spear of Twilight.

His journey had taxed him. He was so weak, his soul spent. Pain was his constant companion; that, and guilt. His bones were like ice in his flesh, snapping agonies chased up and down his nerve endings. It was all he could do not to use the spear as a walking stick, like some decrepit mon-keigh in the last cycles of its short life. He did not, but unknowingly he let the shaft droop behind him, so that his unsteady footprints were joined for short spaces by a wavering line in the dust of the halls.

His walk through the shrine seemed an age in duration, although the light of a new cycle had still yet to be born. He regained a little of his strength as he approached the heart of the shrine; the dais with its pedestal and empty rest, the weeping statues of Ulthanash's sisters either side.

He did not hesitate this time, but walked straight to the dais to replace the spear. The light came on as he approached, and he held the spear out crosswise in front of him, meaning to slot it back into place. He bowed his head in silent prayer to devoured Asuryan, trembling with the effort of holding out the weapon where before he had done so effortlessly.

'Mighty lord of us all,' he thought, 'I thank you for the use of this gift. I now return it.'

He felt the last few particles of his being slipping into the spear as the sands in a glass run out. His waystone was dull, no resonance from his spirit to make it shine, just like poor Yaleanar's. Soon he would pass – the moment he replaced the spear, he would die. He wondered what would become of him.

'There will be no rest in the infinity circuit for Prince Yriel,' he said. He closed his eyes as he lowered the spear to its cradle, anticipating his death not unhappily.

A hand on his shoulder stayed him. He looked up to find his face reflected in the smooth silver mask of a Shadowseer.

The Harlequin shook her head slowly before springing away and laughing. Coruscating patterns of diamonds followed her movements, filling the shrine with light.

'There will be no rest anywhere for the Prince Yriel of House Ulthanash, not yet, not for ever so long.'

'Veilwalker?' he said.

The Harlequin bowed. 'The very same! Come to tell you, O scion of the defeated one, that your labours are not yet done. Fire and night come upon us, the skein is quirked. You are needed yet, no night for the prince, no rest. Not yet.'

There was a hiss from the tubes on the Veilwalker's back, a fleeting perfume. Then the shrine flickered as if lit by a fire, sheets of light and shadowplay leaping into life all around the dais. They grew in clarity, taking on form, until all around Yriel the walls danced with images.

And such things he saw.

‘What is this?’ he breathed.

‘The skein in living colour for you to see, no gnostic pronouncements from me, my friend. See the galaxy to come, see it burn. Would you leave it now, abashed, head bowed? Where is the proud son of Ulthanash when war calls?’

Gods walked the earth. Gods long thought dead. Legions of daemons fought the ranked majesty of dozens of craftworlds fighting side by side. He glimpsed exodites, the Dark Kin, a troupe of Harlequins of unprecedented size that filled a battlefield with their glittering fields and garish costumes; all branches of their shattered race reunited. The blue and yellow of Iyanden was prominent among them, and the green and white of Biel-Tan. Armies of mankind and other lesser creatures fought alongside them too. He could not see what was happening clearly; he would look at one image to have his attention snatched away to another.

‘The Rhana Dandra,’ he said. ‘The final battle.’

Then he saw himself, swollen with power, the Eye of Wrath blazing with energies its mechanisms alone could not produce. Atop a pile of broken daemons, he whirled the Spear of Twilight over his head, a flaming sword in his other hand. The image faded, its place taken by another.

‘This is the future?’ he asked.

Sylandri stopped her prancing. Legs crossed at the ankle, she placed a finger against her mask, a caricature of thought. ‘Maybe, maybe not. One future, a good one, a bad one. Who knows really, other than the Laughing God? Perhaps you would like to choose one? They are all here to see, if you but know where to look.’

‘I am no seer,’ he said. He spoke without venom, all his anger bled away. The calm he had felt when he awoke had grown; indeed, he was calmer than he had been for a long time. He simply stated a fact.

‘One does not need to be a seer, O prince, to see an empire born anew. It waits in the dawn of possibility, on the other side of night’s chaos. The stage is set, shall you provide the cue to call it from the wings?’ She pointed to another image. Iyanna, bloodied, pulling a glowing stone from the hand of a necrontyr in the throes of terminal malfunction. ‘She will find it, the last one of Morai-Heg’s tears, and then we shall see who thirsts the most!’ Sylandri laughed. ‘See, O prince, that what has withered can grow strong again!’

She bowed, holding out her hand in extravagant gesture, pointing to his arm.

Yriel looked at his right hand. He still held the spear over its cradle, as he had been doing since Veilwalker had grasped him. He was astounded at the steadiness of his hand.

‘How is this possible?’

‘It simply is, why question? Do you accept, O prince? Once more a choice is laid before you, the cup is poured, now will you sup?’

Yriel withdrew the spear and set its butt upon the floor. The click of it, the audible acceptance of this new fate, acted as a trigger for rejuvenation, and his body flooded with new strength. He gasped as it filled him, the sound turning from surprise to one of genuine pleasure. He stood tall, taller than he had for many cycles. Warmth returned to him, his soul replenished. All his pains were swept away.

‘Well done, once-exile, well done indeed! The sacrifice of your friend was not after all in vain. Come, come!’ Sylandri backed away from him in a half bow, her pace a sinuous exaggeration of temptation. She kept one fist balled behind her back, as on the other hand she crooked her forefinger and beckoned. Shadow enveloped her as she left the cone of light fixed upon the empty cradle. Yriel glanced from it to the Harlequin.

‘This way, O prince!’ she said, now totally lost in the blackness. ‘Come with me, and set your feet

upon the path of a new destiny!’

Yriel did not pause to think. Images of glory filled him, and that would once have driven him to accept alone, to swell his pride if nothing more. But far greater an impulse came from what he had glimpsed. Not war or power influenced his decision, but instead a flash of peace, brief, but unmistakable nonetheless.

Grasping the spear of his ancestor more tightly, Yriel stepped into the shadows after the seer, and was gone from Iyanden for many long cycles.

EPILOGUE

Moisture ran down the rippled walls of the dungeon. The mass of it was sculpted from living bone, raw and pink where the thick black slime growing on it had been scraped off. Tumorous lumps set into the wall ticked with the minute twitches of residual nerve activity. Veined membranes, stretched taut across apertures that would in any saner environment be windows, pulsated with agony. The pain of the building was on the air, a heady taste that fizzed on Hesperax's senses. This lounge was intended for the relaxation and enjoyment of the Ebon Sting's favoured clients, a demonstration of their arts in flesh sculpting. And, no doubt, to induce a little fear. This kind of place was uncanny even for a true eldar.

Hesperax thought it none of these things. She found it trite. What the Great Harlequin who accompanied her thought was as impenetrable as his sculpted smile. He lounged against the slimed wall as if he whiled away the hours in a corespur pleasure arcade, his pose not exactly insouciance, but perhaps an exact replica of it.

She ceased pacing the smooth floor, one giant sheet of skin that quivered with agony at her every step, and rounded upon the wrack left to attend her and the Great Harlequin.

'How long will this take?' she snapped. The wrack spread a selection of its many limbs and bowed in abject apology.

'This haemacolyte pleads for your forgiveness, mistress,' it said, its hands and instruments waving elaborately. 'One cannot hurry the work of my masters. They are artists, and true art is planned meticulously no matter how swift its execution might be. Their examination will be done when it is done, Mistress Hesperax, and not before. This one cautions that it is not wise to disturb them.'

Hesperax growled softly at the back of her throat, her eyes narrowing. She was gratified with a slight flinch from the wrack. The wrack was more self-possessed than most, and the thing's rebuff, no matter how servile, had her seething. She considered removing its head. In her mind's eye she could see the masked face arcing away from its deformed shoulder, spouting whatever it had for blood – she fancied some dark, sweet liquid, looking at the black patterning of blood vessels under the exposed skin of its chest – but she restrained herself. Slaying the servants of the haemonculi in their lair was not done, even for one as exalted as her.

'Very well,' she said. She continued to stalk around the antechamber, letting the play of her armour's fastening hooks in her flesh calm her with easy pain, and trying to ignore the milky eyes of the haemonculus's wrack on her body. After a time, she could no longer bear his lascivious gaze, and stared at him until he scurried from the antechamber. The door, two thick curtains of flesh, opened with an audible moan. Musky air billowed from them as they slapped shut behind the wrack.

Hesperax turned to the Harlequin King. Why in the fifteen worlds he had insisted on accompanying her was a mystery, and his mocking, motley clad form, so at odds with the fleshy room, irritated her greatly. 'You told me this would be a simple matter.'

The Harlequin arched supplely from the wall and bowed. His extravagantly collared coat was of many colours, his mask pure white. The mouth was fixed in a grotesque smile that put her in mind of Sarnak, the brows sharply arched, as if it enjoyed a pitiless joke. A single sapphire tear adorned one cheek, a high crest of hair that shifted colours curled over his head. He performed a complex mime.

She gaped in exasperation. ‘You said nothing, of course; very well, you conveyed to me that that would be the case. Does that satisfy your pedantry?’

The Harlequin gave another bow, accompanied by a teasing wave of its hand. There were two eldar in the immediate vicinity besides herself, and she would gladly see them both dead. The wrack she wished to kill out of spite, but the Harlequin King... Hesperax ached to test her blades on him. There were few in all the Great Wheel, the Labyrinth Dimension or the Othersea who could best her in combat. She had a sneaking suspicion that this Great Harlequin might be one of those rare individuals. As she imagined him fighting for his life in the arenas of the Cult of Strife, his motley stripped from him, his mask nailed to his face, she stared a little too long into his gemstone eyes.

He cocked his head and waved a warning finger, shaking his head slowly. To her surprise, she experienced a small rush of fear. It only served to excite her. She wet suddenly dry lips, her tongue running over the stickiness of their reactive paints.

‘One day, you and I will dance together, king of fools.’

He shrugged in exaggerated fashion. As usual, his gestures carried overt mockery.

A movement in the air. Hesperax whirled around, her ponytail whipping with near lethal force, her knife leaping with preternatural speed into her hand. She stayed it as it pricked a bead of dark blood from the wrack’s throat. He held his arms up.

‘Do not approach me without warning!’ she shouted.

‘This one is sorry!’ the wrack babbled. ‘This one comes only to say that my masters are ready, come, please, come now, mistress!’

She pulled back her knife. The wrack nodded encouragingly. ‘This way, mistress, master, come!’ It beckoned them to the door, which opened with the same moan of pain.

She followed, the Harlequin silent behind her.

Down corridors formed of fused ribs they went, the gurgling systems of the building and the soft sounds of its constant pain always with them. They came to a stairway made of iron hooked deep into the living wall, from whose wounds thick blood welled, creating rank stalactites of clotted matter. The wrack beckoned them down this, to a storey of the tower floored in more conventional means, although the marble was puddled with the building’s excretions.

Here were the oubliettes of the Ebon Sting. Cries of pain competed with those of the building, emanating from tiny cells that were little more than blisters on the wall. Cages of ribs and thick cartilage contained larger specimens. Here was life taken from all over the galaxy, and all of it in pain. Horribly mutilated creatures of all kinds called to her, begging without exception for release from their suffering. Hesperax shuddered with pleasure; the intense nature of such distilled agony excited her deliciously.

The wrack took them to a portcullis of dark metal, retracted the grating into the ceiling with much irksome pantomime, then gestured for them to follow on.

They entered a cavern at the roots of the tower. There the living bone of the tortured edifice thrust deep into the spire it parasited. The floors and walls here were of more mundane materials, and crowded with the workstations of haemonculi. Shelters of skins held upon poles by scarred slaves kept the constant rain of effluvia off the haemonculi’s work. There was space for several to work together at once, but there were only two within, attended by half a dozen wracks or so, and twice that many slave creatures.

They were working around two of Hesperax’s prizes: a pair of living tanks, still within their hex cages, one with a red carapace, the other purple. The first was missing much of its face, the wounds that had carved it away surgical in nature. The other had had its giant crustacean’s claw cut open,

exposing the workings within. Neither seemed much concerned by their vivisection.

‘What have you done to my trophies?’ hissed Hesperax. ‘How are they supposed to fight in the games?’

One of the haemonculi retreated behind the hex cages, pretending to be intent on its work. The other rose into the air, the thrum of its grafted grav-organs deliberately audible. It floated towards her, wizened feet trailing clawed nails.

‘Ah, Mistress Hesperax, welcome. Do not alarm yourself. We have ascertained the structure of these creatures. The vivisection is a necessary stage, but we are sure we can replicate as many as you might require. Their gene-weavings are delightfully simple.’

Hesperax jabbed a finger at the haemonculus. ‘That better be the case, Vral. I have paid you well for this work.’

‘It is not wise to threaten a haemonculus in his lair, Mistress Hesperax. Especially Vral Dulgyre.’

‘It is not wise to cheat the Cult of Strife,’ she retorted.

He spread his hands and shrugged. ‘Perhaps. But you will not be cheated. There are few cults of my brothers that could manage what you require, in the time you demand. But we shall. We work in concert, our coven. Art takes time, and many hands make light work.’ He lifted three of his own by way of emphasis. ‘Soon you will have your monsters, of that I assure you.’

She walked over to the cages and peered in. Vral followed after her, wringing his long fingers constantly together. The tyranids had a curious reek, almost oceanic, salt water and dimethyl sulphide, a savoury tang. She stared into their eyes. They watched back with bovine disinterest. Their eyes were animal, flat dead discs, devoid of the ferocious intelligence of the hive mind. She noticed racks of cylinders depending from booms over the cages, pipes leading from each to holes drilled into the creatures’ armour. She pointed.

‘You have drugged them?’

Vral nodded once. ‘Yes. They do not suffer. Their reactions to pain stimulus are merely reflexive, but they are extreme. To caress them with our full art would bring us no dark energy, and carry a significant risk to our laboratories.’

‘They are strong enough to break the cages?’

‘Oh, mistress, yes. They are strong enough.’

Hesperax stared at them, ignoring the wracks bustling around their strange instruments. She gave a sudden laugh. ‘Then they will gather me much glory.’

‘And dark energy, mistress. Oh, not from them, but imagine the terror they will generate in our combatants! Imagine the thrill of the crowd!’

Hesperax nodded. She could imagine just that, taste the bloodlust, hear their shouts as she stood upon one of these dead creatures, the audience chanting her name!

‘We can manipulate them, grow more.’ Vral sank lower, closer to her, his thick breath washing over her face. ‘Meld them with other creatures to create unheard-of exotica!’

Her head snapped round. ‘Never mind that now, what of what I requested? Can it be done?’

‘Oh, yes, mistress!’ Vral smiled around pointed teeth and a black tongue. ‘The two strains can be combined very easily.’ He inspected his pointed nails. ‘Child’s play. The creatures’ genetic strands are designed to be easily assimilated and altered. Our flesh vats are more than adequate for the task. The resulting menagerie will be the talk of the coespur!’

Musical laughter came from behind them. Taken aback by the sound, the succubus turned.

The Great Harlequin was chuckling, the first sound she had ever heard him make. Hesperax narrowed her eyes, went for her knives, but before her hands touched the hilts he performed a deep

bow, blew her a kiss, then flipped backwards into the shadows. Hesperax was sure she could see a second figure waiting for him, its face a smooth, mirrored bowl. They vanished into the dark together.

She sprinted over to the far side of the cavern. When she got there, the shadows were empty.

Iyanna stood alone in the Shrine of Asuryan, lost in contemplation. The shrine was dark, still scarred by the attack of Kallorax at the start of the Triple Woe. Once it had been a beacon of hope for the eldar, not merely those of Iyanden. Eldar from many worlds had come there to see the Fire of Creation. Lit from the shrine at the heart of the old empire, it had burned since the time of the Fall in the great malachite bowl at the heart of the temple. It was a symbol of Asuryan's endurance, and of the eventual rebirth of the eldar race. It was Iyanden's great shame that they had failed in its guardianship.

Now no one came. The dome was restored, but the scars of the attack remained. The architecture was blackened by the fires of cyclonic torpedoes, and the one fire that they wished to maintain had been blown out. The altar had been cold and inert since the battle all those passes ago. All attempts at rekindling it had failed, for nothing present in the material realms was sufficient to fuel it.

Iyanna looked at the broken floors, the shattered statues. The shrine's desolation was a metaphor for the fate of Iyanden's people. She came here when she felt doubt; looking at the dead shrine drove it out, making it clear to her that only Ynnead's embrace offered any hope of salvation. The old gods were dead. The coldness of the chamber was proof of that.

Thinking on the flame had her thoughts turn to Asuryan's chosen, Yriel. No one had seen Yriel for more than thirty cycles; he had vanished in the dead of night from his bedchamber, taking the Spear of Twilight with him. She was certain he still lived, but the threads of his fate were so tangled that not one of the craftworld's farseers could divine what had befallen him. Iyanna did not greatly regret Yriel's absence, for she had always found him aggressive, rude, and arrogant. He had opposed her plans as often as he had supported her. He was so obsessed with proving himself he did not see the real struggle, nor that it could not be won by force of arms. If he had ever perceived her true plans, doubtless his objections would have become difficult to surmount, especially now that Taec was gone. But Yriel's arrogance had blinded him more surely than the spear had, and he had thankfully remained ignorant to the last.

However, Iyanna could not deny that his loss had diminished Iyanden and their race. She reminded herself that it was in his nature to disappear and then return when needed, something of a double-edged blade.

With one last look around the shrine, Iyanna turned to leave. Only one tear of Morai-Heg yet remained unaccounted for, and a group of rangers in from the Winter Gulf insisted they had promising news of its location. There was much to be accomplished before Ynnead could be awoken and She Who Thirsts finally thwarted.

Iyanna's footsteps receded, her heels clicking on the shattered marble of the shrine's floor, leaving only echoes.

Silence persisted but briefly.

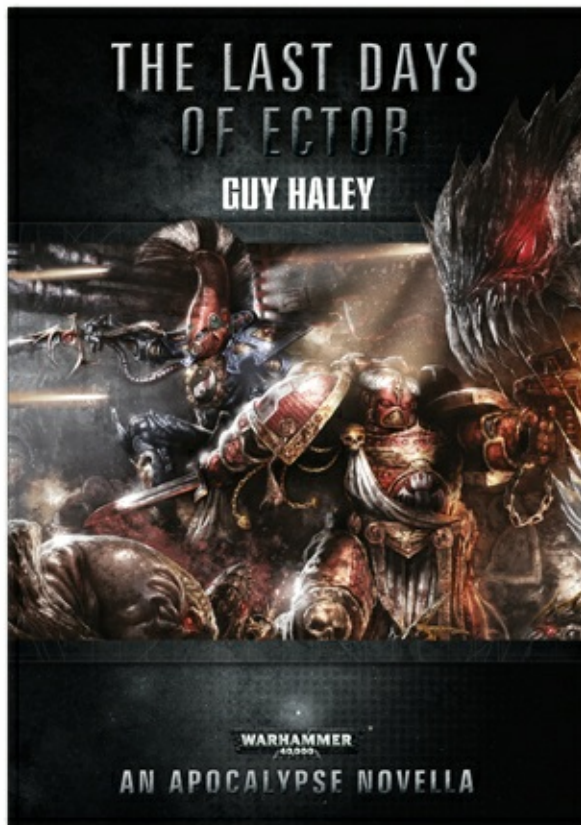
A disturbance swirled the air above the bowl of the altar. The hangings of the fane over the bowl wafted with it. A guttering sound came from within, made louder by the bowl's perfect acoustics.

There was no one to hear and no one to see as the Fire of Creation flared into sudden, brilliant life.

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GUY HALEY is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Death of Integrity*, as well as *Baneblade*, *Valedor*, *The Last Days of Ector* and the Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*. He worked for many years on magazines, including Games Workshop's *White Dwarf*. Since 2009 he has been a wandering writer, working in both magazines and novels.

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