

WARHAMMER
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RISE OF THE YNNARI

GHOST WARRIOR

GAV THORPE

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About the Author

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RISE OF THE YNNARI

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GAV THORPE



BLACK LIBRARY



WARHAMMER 40,000

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.



CHAPTER 1

CONCERNING THE YNNARI

Never trust a god.

You can be certain of one thing, if anything. Gods order the universe to their design and nothing else, and you can be sure that your wants and needs feature little in their agenda. For the aeldari, distrusting gods is in their nature, having been abandoned by one pantheon of godheads and destroyed by the birth scream of a deity forged from their own wanton excess. Such experience breeds caution if not outright contempt.

And of the gods that survived – excepting that ravenous maw of destruction known as She Who Thirsts – they are but a pale shadow of their former status. Khaine, shattered into little pieces of angry metal and scattered through the craftworlds. Cegorach, the supreme trickster, the Laughing God, dancing merrily through the webway just one step ahead of the predatory intent of the Great Enemy, plucking souls from his grasp as and when chance allows.

So imagine the towering hubris of not only serving a god in such times, but trying to create one.

Such accusation cannot be levelled wholly upon the first of our players in this plot, for she was unwittingly brought into the fold of the Ynnari, something of a cosmic side effect. Collateral deification one might call it. The hubris was that of Eldrad Ulthran, but the weight of his mistake – his error being to only partially succeed in bringing about the apotheosis of Ynnead, god of the dead – fell upon the shoulders of Yvraine, formerly the Daughter of Shadows and many other titles before and since.

Far too complex for this retelling are the tales that led to this terrible turn of events and their immediate consequence. They are but a few threads in the

tapestry of a galaxy torn asunder by the resurgence of the Dark Powers and the failures of aeldari and human alike.

But while Eldrad did not bring about the rise of Ynnead, he did succeed in part, for in the wake of his actions came the Ynnari, sworn to find and unite the croneswords of Morai-Heg to bring about the final elevation of the Whispering God.

So they believe.

Myths, like gods, should be treated with some scepticism also. They have a habit of being retold to the benefit of the teller. You would not doubt the advice of this reliable narrator would you?

In pursuing this goal, the Ynnari broke a craftworld – Biel-tan – and brought much grief to the aeldari, but from these ashes arose a new understanding with some of the servants of the Emperor. One was brought forth from the distant past, a true legend from the time when the Emperor of Mankind walked abroad among the mortals, rather than existed as a vampiric husk sustained by the souls of his own servants and technology stolen from the aeldari.

This individual was a primarch, whom humanity foolishly called a man in their ignorance of what their master had truly created. Roboute Guilliman, their finest leader and statesman, a warrior and commander beyond anything their crumbling empire could muster in the previous ten thousand orbits of their homeworld.

Even so, the tide was not stopped, but it was slowed and the dominance of the Realm of Chaos stemmed for a time.

And by roundabout means we come back to the tale of Yvraine, who had dared the heart of vileness known as the Eye of Terror, the storm that swallowed the centre of the old aeldari dominions, on an errand for Guilliman. As part of a grander scheme between aeldari and humans, she had promised to retrieve an artefact of Chaos from the clutches of a renegade primarch, the daemon prince of Nurgle, called Mortarion by the humans.

She is, unexpectedly, in danger. We join her as she flees the castle of the daemon prince with her prize, the Hand of Darkness, passing through the metaphysical Garden of Grandfather Nurgle himself to reach the relative sanctuary of the webway. Her small force was beset by plaguebearers and slobbering beasts of Nurgle, their portal to safety waning in its power.

Rancid matter dripped along the length of the Sword of Sorrows and dribbled over the knuckles of Yvraine's armoured glove. A thick swarm of red-and-black

flies closed about the daemon blood, sticking to the gelatinous filth as they sapped on escaping warp energy. She fought back her disgust and hewed *Kha-vir* into the next foe, another gangling, pot-bellied plaguebearer with a cyclopean face and protruding horn. It bared razor teeth in an inane grin even as its rusted blade shattered on the runesuit beneath her layers of courtly attire. The psychically-charged armour pulsed with silver light in the other-realm of Nurgle's garden, just as the Sword of Sorrows seemed as much a blade of keening despair as a physical object. She cleaved away the plaguebearer's arm. More ichor spewed, splashing thickly to the mouldering leaves that covered the ground.

Yvraine finished it off with another cut, severing neck and shoulder with a single blow.

Ahead she could see her goal swirling through the canopy of decaying foliage and twisted branches of a dismal forest. The shimmer of the portal ebbed, becoming a little fainter with every heartbeat, the link back to the webway succumbing to the inevitable erosion of Nurgle's power. If it closed...

She did not think any further along those lines. It was impossible to countenance failure. She had been anointed as the emissary of a god, her purpose was far higher than any mortal battle.

Beside her, clad in archaic crimson armour, the Visarch was a blur of constant motion. The corroded blades of Nurgle's tallymen cut swirls through the fly swarm around him but not once did their attacks connect with the superlative warrior, each sword blow parting nothing but small furry bodies and pestilent air. His own blade, legendary cronesword *Asu-var* – Sword of Silent Screams – danced as light as a feather on a breeze, decapitating and dismembering without effort.

Once, he had burned with the fury of Khaine, but no longer. His righteous hatred and rage had been beaten into a far deadlier weapon, his soul taken from the grasp of the Bloody-Handed One to serve Ynned. He saw everything with crystal clarity, having passed through the inferno of anger into the placid waters beyond.

Like the mistress he had sworn to protect, the Visarch paid no heed to his surroundings other than as it impeded their progress. Coming beneath the trees that surrounded their escape route, he stepped over roots that grasped at his ankles and swayed beneath creepers that flicked like serpent tongues to entangle his arms. Each time *Asu-var* licked out, it touched not only the immortal body of

a daemon but severed the questing tendrils of Nurgle's trees. He ignored the scrape and flutter of leaves on his helm, striking and flailing like lank corpse-fingers on the curves of his armour.

'Any who cannot keep up, we leave,' he told the armoured warriors around him – the Visarch's guard, known as the Coiled Blade. Incubi had been their title in the Dark City, renowned as terror-inspiring and incorruptible mercenaries. What bargain the Visarch had struck with them was not known to any outside their group, but they fought as hard in the service of Yvraine as they had for any master of the kabals. They still bore their *klaives*, double-handed blades that could shear a foe in half with a single well-timed blow, whether mortal or not.

As the Visarch's retainers fought with him, so Yvraine's stayed close to her. Alongside the Coiled Blade at the heart of the Ynnari force were the oldest converts to the cause of the Seventh Way. Lightly clad, lithe and athletic, the Bloodbrides had been Yvraine's sisters in bloodshed since her time in the Crucibael arena of Commorragh. They fought now as they did then – gladiatrices possessed of devastating speed and faultless teamwork, their weapons perfectly complementing each other as they ensnared, slashed and sliced their way into the press of plaguebearers and slithering daemons.

Together with the Coiled Blade they were known as the soulbound, the fierce heart of Yvraine's host.

Beyond this knot of warriors the other Ynnari fought through the daemonic host, a slender blade of warriors that pierced the undulating mob of lesser daemons and slathering beasts spawned from the formless despair and quashed hopes of mortals. Those that had accompanied Yvraine into the immortal Garden of Nurgle hailed originally from the dark city of Commorragh. Raised without spirit stones, their souls empty but for that which they stole from others, the former wyches and kabalites projected less presence in the Realm of Chaos than their kin of the craftworlds.

Their ancient ties to their kabals and wych cults had been severed, replaced by service to the Opener of the Seventh Way and her god. Many still fought with splinter rifle and serrated blade, the trappings of their former allegiance masked by fresh colours – armour and helms of deep red, blazoned with runes of Ynnead, and decorations of black and white.

And then there were the Harlequins. Among the dreary browns and greens of the decaying lands, the bright suits, gleaming power blades and kaleidoscope holofields of the Harlequins were stark. They moved lightly across the muddied ground and danced between the boles of the trees, laughing and delighting in the

running fight with the plaguebearers.

The Visarch was not sure what the followers of the Laughing God sought in return for their aid to Ynnead's chosen, and he did not ask lest the offer be revoked. Likely it was simply the chance to strike back at the hated Dark Powers. If Yvraine succeeded in her ultimate goal of uniting the croneswords and wakening Ynnead, the Great Enemy would be slain and the Harlequins freed as much as any other aeldari.

Which brings us to another worthy to whom attention must be drawn. He took the name of Idraesci Dreamspear when he joined the companies of the Harlequins; of his life before then only he knows, and he does not share such secrets. Dreamspear was both charming and witty, legendarily handsome and wise, of course. These and many other marvellous traits saw him ascend to the position of Great Harlequin with the Masque of the Midnight Sorrow. How his fate became entangled with that of Yvraine, and how he and his band came to follow both the Laughing God and the Whispering God is a fascinating tale full of intrigue, adventure and timelessly enchanting moments. And, alas, far too long to recount here.

Like many of the Ynnari, Dreamspear and the Midnight Sorrow were only occasional companions of Yvraine, sometimes charting their own destiny, other times rejoining the emissary on her quest to spread the creed of the Reborn. Like all of Cegorach's sons and daughters, Dreamspear was knowledgeable in the winding tracks of the webway and the guiles of Chaos, and for such reason had been sought to accompany her on the mission to retrieve the Hand of Darkness. A mission he had been happy to accept, being sworn not only to the Reborn but also the destruction of She Who Thirsts.

Two oaths he regretted heartily as he bounded and somersaulted through the melee against the daemons of Grandfather Nurgle, their rusted swords and rank claws but a hair's breadth from his throat and face.

'Pray heed my words, my merry brothers and sisters,' he called to his masque, slicing blade through daemonflesh, the beams of the neuro-disruptor in his other hand scattering the rudimentary sentience bound within the false synapses of another plaguebearer. 'It is folly to live in regret, but I regret that I am doomed to live in folly.'

Dreamspear's flashing powersword parted the chest of another wheezing, scabby foe, leaving a line of spattered pus on the dark leaves.

'And if ever you should hear me declare that one never feels so alive as when

one stares death in the face, be a good friend and remind me of this time.'

He was altogether convinced that he and his companions would meet their end in that dismal forest. This thought served to invigorate rather than cause sober despair, for if the heirs of the Laughing God know anything, it is that a life spent frugally is a life passed poorly. For all his contrite banter, Dreamspear held no real fear of death. In aligning himself not only to Cegorach but also Ynnead, he had not one but two chances at avoiding the tormenting damnation of consumption by She Who Thirsts, which when all things are considered, are better odds than most aeldari are given. It was thus that he laughed loud as he threw himself into the fight, leaping from one daemon to the next with dazzling blade. His naturally superb acrobatic ability, aided by the suspensor units within his flip belt, allowed him to use the falling corpses and the swaying tree trunks to tumble and jump to his next foe and the next, never once setting foot on the putrid earth.

And in his wake the Midnight Sorrow pranced and whirled a deadly dance, both carefree and lethal as only Harlequins can be.

Yvraine felt a weight tugging on her mind, more distracting than any physical encumbrance. It came from the object at her waist, the prize for which she had dared this lethal realm. Though kept within a psychically shielded container, the Hand of Darkness had flared into unnatural vitality the moment the Ynnari had passed the castle of Mortarion and back into the naked Realm of Chaos. She could feel it flexing talon-fingers, trying to grasp her thoughts, to claw at her heart.

'Ignore it,' said the Visarch, the words delivered between perfunctory but effective stabs of his blade. The grace of his earlier blows had been replaced with cold precision.

Yvraine swayed to avoid a rusted daemonblade before she replied.

'You can feel it too?' Her arm whipped out, the points of her warfan striking the eyes of the daemon to blind it, a heartbeat before the cronesword in her other hand parted its gut and spine. 'It's like beetles crawling through my soul.'

'We'll be well rid of it.' For several moments they fought back to back, creating a mound of dissipating offal and festering daemon flesh around them. 'Let Guilliman listen to its creaking whispers.'

A moment of respite and reflection.

The fury of the daemonic assault abated, outmatched by the ferocity and skill of the Ynnari. For each aeldari that fell, their spirit bolstered the others, their death-

cry scattering across the Whisper to fuel the blows of Yvraine and the Visarch, steeling the courage of their followers. The unnatural energies of Nurgle's garden retreated and regrouped, leaving Yvraine and her small host with an opportunity to make haste for the portal. The kabalites, incubi, wyches and Harlequins formed up about the emissary of Ynnead and the group set off into the now-dormant forest, swift but wary.

Lank leaves dragged over helms and shoulders, leaving mucus trails on their armour. Though the ground no longer bucked and tripped, underfoot was slick with moss-covered rocks, threatening to trip at a careless step. The darkness lifted for a time, the cloud-swarms of the bloatflies dispersed by a surge of Ynnead's protective power, but only to reveal a dismal, watery pair of suns like rheumy eyes glaring down at the departing group.

Ahead of them, coils of Chaotic power flowed once more, no longer content to pursue them but coalescing between the fleeing aeldari and their goal. Trickle of filthy water oozed up between the scattered rocks and a vapour seeped from knotholes and crevasses, bringing with it the stench of rotting vegetation and the slither of grotesque millipedes and other carrion eaters.

From the branches Alorynis dropped down next to Yvraine, claws thick with pungent gore, azure-furred face and silver whiskers matted with daemonblood. Shimmers of contentment pulsed from the gyrix, soothing Yvraine's troubled thoughts. Unfortunately, the gyrix's empathic link was with her alone, leaving the Visarch prey to a swelling concern.

'What if Meliniel has not held the other end of the vortex?'

'The battle was all but won when we departed,' Yvraine replied, her gown a diaphanous cloud behind her as she sped between the twisted boles on the tips of her toes. 'There is none among us better at leading a host. I summoned the Yncarne to aid him and there are few foes either mortal or daemonic that can face Ynnead's corporeal avatar. It is not like you to give credence to baseless fears.'

'Perhaps it is this place,' the warrior replied.

'No, it is something more. Something else that is giving you doubts. You cannot mask it from me.'

'Are we set on the right course?'

'The portal lies directly ahead.'

'Not that, in the wider sense.' He ducked beneath a low branch, the crest of his helm tearing through long, yellowing leaves. 'What is the point? Are we to run hither and thither at the beck and call of Eldrad and the humans? What of the

mission to bring forth Ynnead?’

‘In time it will come,’ said Yvraine, but his words struck a chord. When the Whispering God had first laid his spirit upon her, she had been filled with such zeal and purpose it had been like a cold burning. Much time had passed and though she and the Reborn had swelled in number, and achieved much in the fight against the Dark Powers, she was no closer to uniting the croneswords than when the Great Rift had sundered the galaxy and all had been upon the precipice of ruin.

‘There must be some way to fight back,’ the Visarch continued, sensing her conflicted thoughts. ‘Not simply to respond and defend, but to strike at our enemies.’

‘Perhaps we have gathered the means to do just that,’ she said, meaning the Hand of Darkness at her belt.

‘But you are happy to turn it over to the humans, a good little hunting hound.’

Yvraine skidded to a stop, her blade in her hand in a flash, its edge against the side of the Visarch’s helm as he halted. His sword was also free, point aimed towards her midriff with unthinking, instant response.

‘I am no other’s slave,’ hissed the Opener of the Seventh Way. ‘You would do well to choose your words more carefully.’

‘I speak as I see,’ said the Visarch. ‘When last did Yvraine of the Ynnari do her own bidding?’

She said nothing and the two of them stood with legendary swords poised to end one another. The soulbound gathered about them, unsure what to do while the rest of the Ynnari cast wary glances at the stirring forest, weapons readied. Harlequins circled beneath the canopy, calling out in their lilting voices, warning that the trees were waking again.

‘We are not done,’ snapped Yvraine, lowering her blade, the move matched by the Visarch.

With a surge of corrupt power, the Garden burst into fruitful destruction once more. A fresh heave of plaguebearers broke free from the miasma of polluting energy, creating bodies out of the mud and leaves, dragging half-formed physical vessels from bubbling pits of tar, creaking misshapen heads, limbs and torsos from lichen-dotted tree trunks. The resurgent stench was terrible, the freshly descending flies again an ever-present buzzing distraction.

Yvraine focused, drawing a line between herself and the diminishing portal. All that mattered was following that line. Nothing else.

Gritting her teeth, she ran on.



CHAPTER 2

OF IYANNA ARIENAL

Iyanna liked to walk among the dead.

Perhaps ‘liked’ is not the correct term. She was drawn to the deceased. Her peers bowed their heads and murmured that her whole family had died, so it was understandable. Not just her family, the entire House of Arienal had been wiped from existence by a torpedo dispatched by a human renegade. Not just the living, but the dead also, their spirits lost among the conflagration that had consumed the homes of their descendants.

But even before, Iyanna had been a spiritseer for half a lifetime; a necromancer, the kin of Commorrhagh would less charitably phrase it. One that communicates with the dead. A noble calling, if a little morbid, and a path upon which many folk of the craftworlds had trodden before and since. After all, when one’s entire home is powered by the spirits of the dead, it is best to have someone close that is willing to speak with them.

Iyanna stayed a spiritseer for just a little too long, and spent a little too much time conversing with the shades of those-that-came-before. She became colder to those whose hearts still beat, inured to the passions of the living, so her critics claimed.

Fortunately for Iyanna, her aloof nature meant she did not care for her critics, and even less for their opinions.

As the remarkable Yvraine duelled for her life against the hosts of the Father of Rot, Iyanna was to be found in an entirely different place, to which her thoughts would often stray. She walked an avenue of white stone, lined by golden pinnacles that stretched up to a sky of pale yellow, lit by a distant orb – not a sun or a star, but a burning moon. In the dance of flames across its surface could be

seen a scowling face, or at moments an expression of perverse delight. Its gleam was near-constant, only the slightest flicker of shadow moved on the pale street below.

Each illuminated building she passed was a tomb, a mausoleum of temple proportions, an edifice erected to rival those of the dead gods. Trees with silvery bark and white needles lined the pebbled gardens before each tombhouse. Their up-stretched boughs implored the skies, the weep of golden sap from knot and crack bright highlights of colour in the monochrome.

White. The colour of death. The absence and the everything. The bloodless flesh of a corpse and the white flare of a dying star.

Iyanna was also clad in white, a single sash of diaphanous material woven about her limbs and torso many times, gently undulating and flowing with each step. Her hair was braided tight, as white as her surrounds, and the skin beneath her attire marble-like. At her breast pulsed a single beacon of life and colour. The slow throb of her waystone, a heartbeat of orange and deeper red.

A statue of each internee stood on the rune-engraved flags outside the rows of pillared porticoes. They waited in poses of exclamation, lament or contemplation.

She passed Hariya, her mother. Short-haired, clad in a sleeveless dress, crouched with a protective arm over an infant. Her face was upturned, features set in grim defiance of whatever threat approached. A single tear rolled down her cheek. Hariya's tomb-cathedral was adorned with roses and stars, a white flame burned from the needle that rose from among the many steeply pitched roofs.

On the opposite side of the avenue, past the row of grey-leaved whisper-trees that ran the length of the course, stood her father, Arctai. He was, at first glance, the very image of strength, dressed in an approximation of surcoat and scale armour. His marble incarnation stood with legs shoulder-width apart, fists on hips, chest and shoulders strong and straight. Yet there was weakness there. Unlike her mother, Iyanna's sire had his face cast down, looking to one side, shame written in his features.

Iyanna paced onward into the shadow of the next grave-temple, skin prickling at the momentary chill.

She looked up to the plinth set before the modest tombhouse, into the carved eyes of her younger sister. Saisath, whom Iyanna had called 'Little Me', barely an adolescent. Her statue laughed, head tilted back, eyes closed, totally unaware of what was happening around her. Iyanna paused and laid a hand upon the bare foot of the figure.

‘Hello, Little Me. Always happy.’

The silence that swallowed the words tightened around Iyanna’s heart, a taloned grip that caused her to wince and retreat from the plinth. She looked down the long road – unending it seemed – and the quiet pressed in on her thoughts, quashing all else.

A figure appeared in the distance, quickly approaching. A gleam of red resolved into a ripple of flames that encased his person, orange and yellow flickers sketched a face below a mane of darker fire.

Iyanna. Why have you come here again? You must leave.

Iyanna blinked, and at the same moment broke her affinity with the circuit of Iyanden. The tomb towers and endless street dissolved into the broken stone walls and ruined gardens of the Dome of Accentuated Night. Blue-purple twilight darkened her vision, replacing the dusky glow of the burning moon. In the dim light – artificially generated by the craftworld itself – the ruined retreats and hermitages of the dome seemed like scattered stars across undulating blankets of hills, their slopes littered with acid-burned trunks and toppled monuments.

She was no longer dressed in her mourning garb, but in the deep yellow robe of a seer of Iyanden. Her craftworld’s rune was one among many embroidered into the heavy cloth and hung upon her torqs, belt and bracelets. The physical weight of her own body was disconcerting, heavy and ungainly after her spirit immersion in the psychic network. A couple of heartbeats passed before the feeling dissipated and her mind settled fully into its mortal conveyance.

Althenian Armourlost stepped closer, his immense shadow falling across the spiritseer. The wraithlord’s spirit was encased in a shell of wraithbone thrice as tall as she, a humanoid frame of deep yellow, detailed with the same yellow as her robe. His blank domed head and slender limbs were decorated with the runes of a destroyed warrior shrine – the Fire’s Heart – as was the long cloth that hung from his waist.

The wraithlord held out a hand, articulated psychoplastic digits large enough to engulf the spiritseer’s head. The movement was accompanied by a slight creak of flexing artificial tendons, like a branch bending in a gentle wind. The featureless, elongated head tilted slightly, its polished surface catching the faint gleam of the false dusk.

‘Why did you disturb me, Khaine-touched?’ Iyanna growled.

To the spiritsenses of Althenian there was not much difference between her

projection into the ghost matrix of the craftworld and her physical incarnation. She was an ever-changing melange of grey and blue hues, a melancholy shade with flecks of even darker, colder bitterness.

At the heart, though, was still warmth. For all that her thoughts were wrapped in death, her manner aloof and dismissive, there was compassion still. The ice around it served as protection, nothing more.

Returned to her body, Iyanna's form asserted itself a little more, approximating arms and legs in the wraithlord's vision, and in her hand the bright white line of her spear. Its brightness was oddly vague, as though it originated from some place slightly beyond the physical object it represented.

He replied through sonic vocalisers, but to the mind of the spiritseer Althenian's thoughts and intent also echoed into her consciousness, carrying with them strange after-images of eddying colour and creeping fire.

'A harsh name. Even if I deserve it, it wounds me,' said the wraithlord.

'But it is true. You are a bloody-handed killer, worshipper of Khaine. You should not *be*. Your spirit should reside in a suit of exarch armour, with those that came before and after.'

'It was you who called me forth from my shrine. Only you could. You dared much, to travel so deep and far, into blood. Desperate, you walked with Khaine's acolytes, his exarchs. Your own blood, offered in free sacrifice, bound me thus. Bloody-handed, now residing in this form, forever.' Across Althenian's shoulder his bright lance lowered on its mounting, though he was careful to point the powerful laser weapon at nothing in particular. 'I asked not. You cursed us both in folly, our fate shared.'

'A mistake I will not repeat.'

'Perhaps then, a better title for me. Unique One?'

'You seem in oddly good humour. I do not appreciate it.'

'As you may, it is not my mood awry, it is yours. You departed, left me for your deceased kin, distracted,' said the wraithlord. 'You brought me to locate a spirit stone, still unfound.'

The memory seeped back into Iyanna's thoughts, forgotten during her foray into the Avenue of the Dead. It was a plaintive sigh on the edge of hearing, an almost silent shudder of loneliness and longing. She shivered at the thought of the time that had passed. Though the spirit within would be only dimly aware of such temporal concerns, and to a living aeldari the intervening period between the invasion of the tyranids and this discovery was barely one twentieth of a

lifetime, it was still an eternity to be trapped without body in the unfeeling shell of a spirit stone. The half-heard psychic moan continued still.

So distant, so quiet, so... alone. It was no wonder the others had missed it.

But not Iyanna. The psychic sob of the lost spirit had permeated her dreams, nagged her waking thoughts until she had recognised it for what it was. The sensation was sharper, now that she had located the dome where the overlooked stone would be found.

She held up her spear, the heirloom of Teuthlas, though she brandished it as a divining rod and not a weapon. The spiritseer let a portion of her psychic potential flow into the crystal structure at its core. She focused on the whispering dread of the forlorn spirit. The triangular head of the spear glowed with a blue aura and emitted a low hum as it resonated with the unworldly connection between seer and spirit.

Iyanna took a step and moved the Spear of Teuthlas gently back and forth, panning it across the landscape of gentle hills and desolation. The tip dimmed and brightened as she did so, guiding her towards the lost psychic gem.

‘This way,’ Iyanna announced, levelling the spear to point towards the tumbled ruins close to the heart of the dome.

She set off across dying grass, the wraithlord following with long strides. Since the destruction wrought by the Great Devourer, the resources of Iyanden had been directed towards those parts still habitable. Places like the Dome of Accentuated Night – in its prime only ever home to a few hundred aesthetes and antisocial philosophers – had only recently been scoured of spore-pollution and the psychic residue of the tyranid hive mind.

They walked along a meandering river, little more than a trickle across smoothed stones between banks thirty strides apart. The trail they followed was marked in places by standing stones as tall as Althenian. They were raised in different stones and psychoplastics, varying from slender monoliths and needles to trilithons and elegantly curved totems.

Each was marked with runes, the name of an Asuryani that had once resided there. Though the inhabitants had eschewed contact, broken almost entirely from the network of the infinity circuit, their stones had acted as conduits through which messages could be left and their desires made known to the wider world without direct interaction. A kind of psychic go-between for the antisocial.

The hermits and philosophers were all dead now, but their waymarkers remained. Iyanna could feel the quiet echoes of their terrified, dying thoughts as the Great Devourer’s bio-constructs had spilt through the dome, slaughtering and

digesting those whose isolation had meant they had not felt or perhaps had ignored all of the warnings of invasion. The stones were morbid reminders of those that had been lost, a coldness that pressed on Iyanna's thoughts each time she passed one.

It took them some time to traverse the carefully formed but partially devastated wilderness. As they mounted a hill to come upon the toppled building they sought, the lost spirit sensed their approach. The strengthening contact brightened the tip of Iyanna's spear while a warmth of familiarity seeped into her. She could not help but feel the relief of the forlorn aeldari soul, its pitiful surge of anticipation filling the void left by her grief. She momentarily skirted the infinity circuit with her thoughts, anchoring herself in its rune-protected channels while she allowed her mind to project further ahead, honing the connection to a point.

Guided by this, she led Althenian down a winding trail that had once been lined with glorious scarlet-barked phoenix-branch. The ancient trees had been reduced to stumps and cankered roots by the burrowing mites and bacterial plague of the tyrannid onslaught. Though all had been purged of the physical taint, the lingering pall of death hung over them, clouding Iyanna's senses and thoughts.

They came upon a small dome-ceiling abode, a shrinestone marked with runes of Asuryan and Lileath fallen across the pathway in front of it. The roof had partly collapsed, leaving four pillars standing at the corners, a pile of shattered rubble within.

'Here,' said Iyanna, the soul-burning in her thoughts as distinct as the hot presence of the wraithlord beside her. 'In here.'

The wraithlord stepped forward and stooped to pick up a piece of stone as large as the spiritseer. Articulated fingers as deft as any living digits yet more powerful than a metalworker's vice closed on the broken edges and, powered by his puissant spirit, the gigantic construct easily lifted away the debris.

'Three hundred and one battles, a hero...' he said. 'Or perhaps, counting three hundred and two, with the last.' He turned slightly to grab another slab, revealing acid-scarred wraithbone on his back. 'Now, here I am, employed as a labourer. What glory.'

'Your strength can be put to other tasks than crushing alien skulls,' Iyanna said. 'Be thankful you have a use at all.'

'Wars remain, so too those that must fight them, such as me,' Althenian replied, his projected vision-thoughts becoming a shadow of storm clouds in the

spiritseer's othersight. 'Even more, now that Ynnead has been stirred.'

'Do not confuse the God of the Dead with your master, the God of Murder. Ynnead is our salvation, not a curse.'

'Spoken well, the lips of Yvraine herself, given voice,' said Althenian. He pulled away the last piece of rubble, revealing an emerald gleam in the dust below. A spirit stone, oval, of a size to sit comfortably in the palm.

Iyanna hurried forward, plucking the stone from the floor. A flare of heat and joy flashed into her thoughts. She stroked the spirit stone, proffering empathy and sanctuary with her mind.

'For one that chose in life to eschew the company of others,' she said to the stone, 'you seem grateful for the presence of your fellow aeldari in death.'

'A stark truth, something you must think about, Iyanna,' Althenian told her, straightening. 'Know yourself. The company of the dead is too much. Unhealthy, when one is still counted among the living.'

'Do not confuse my dedication to the raising of Ynnead as a desire for death. My family are gone, no matter if Ynnead destroys the Great Enemy. It is for the sake of the living that I fight.'

She slipped the spirit stone into a pouch at her belt and stalked away.



CHAPTER 3

BATTLE IN EINERASH

At the other end of the guttering vortex created by Yvraine lay the long-dead city of Einerash. At the height of the aeldari's power Einerash had been a teeming metropolis, home to millions and a centre of culture and learning. Like all of that ancient civilisation, it was laid low by the coming of the Great Enemy. Its only saving grace was the archives of its elders, the primary reason why the creators of the fabled Black Library had dragged the bulk of the city into the webway at the point of its demise, to act as one of the hidden portals to their burgeoning creation.

That the forced transition into the webway slew any survivors of the Fall was felt to be a sad but necessary consequence.

That route into the Black Library – known by the few aware of its existence as the Endless Stair – was the reason Yvraine's portal had been opened there, and also why the city was yet wracked by intense battle. A host of daemons had been conjured by sorcerers aligned to the renegade Ahzek Ahriman, who had long desired access to the crucible of all aeldari knowledge of Chaos.

Ahriman himself was no longer present, nor those warriors of his old Legion afflicted with the curse of their kind. For those unaware of such a curse, in a bid to reverse terrible mutations inflicted upon his Thousand Sons by their reckless dabbling in the ways of the Architect of Change, the ineffable Tzeentch, Lord of Magic, Ahriman inadvertently turned his battle-brothers to dust encased within rune-sealed armour. An unfortunate series of events, to be sure, but not undeserved when one tries to harness the dark energies of Chaos.

Ahriman had presumably decided at the moment another sizable Ynnari force had arrived that his destiny was better fulfilled elsewhere. A reasonable

assumption, for he had suffered terribly at the untimely intervention of the Ynnari in a previous attempt to breach the Black Library. Battle had ensued, during which a great many of the Thousand Sons had been touched by Yvraine's powers of Rebirth and grown afresh within their powered suits. This unexpected return to mortal form had ended abruptly when the resurrected had been cast into the depths of the warp to be devoured by daemons.

Yet he had left many of his servants to continue the battle, both mortal and daemonic, no doubt in an effort to further weaken the defences of the Black Library for some future assault.

The Ynnari had gained the upper hand, driving back the sorcerous clique at the heart of the Tzeentchian host even as they had attempted to open a portal to summon more daemonic fiends. With an artefact recovered from the Black Library – the fancifully titled Rose of Isha – Yvraine had turned the portal against its perverted masters and breached the barrier between worlds into the Garden of Nurgle. About this vortex the Ynnari still held firm, fighting on though they knew not whether the Opener of the Seventh Way had succeeded or failed, lived or died.

The withdrawal of the Rubric-afflicted was a stroke of good fortune for the Ynnari, robbing the foe of their terrible weapons and relentless purpose. Of those that remained, the greater part of those aligned to the Corrupting Powers were humans, or had once claimed as such, though long exposure to the warp and the sorceries of their allies and daemonic masters had turned them into bizarre creatures. Many wore the colourful robes of acolytes, masks festooned with runic devices with elongated chins and noses, and gem-set eyes that glittered in the trails of magical discharge from the swirling energies of the webway. They carried serrated knives and crude las-weapons, or ornate staves tipped with scything blades shaped in the flame-like device of the Magisterial Power.

With them were even more deformed creatures, more beast than man, with bird visages, and feathers sprouting from body and limb. These Tzeentch-touched half-beasts were fast and strong beyond their tall, lean frames, screeching and hooting archaic cries and the incantations of debilitating hexes.

And daemons. Daemons by the hundreds, of every shape and size and maddening appearance, for Tzeentch is the god of the ever-changing and nothing beneath his sight remains stable. Cavorting fire-bound Horrors and leaping Flamers gabbled and cackled and spewed multicoloured inferno from gaping maw and quivering fingers. In the skies above, things born of drake and vulture and insanity whirled on wings of blue fire through ember-clouds, violet lightning

cracking about their fanged maws. The ground itself rippled with mutating power, the infrastructure of the webway corrupted by the presence of so much daemonic energy, became towering spiral-thrusts and edifices of gibbering mouths that spat praise to the Lord of Fate.

Against this horde of the immaterial and the cursed was ranged the remaining force of Yvraine's followers.

And what a force to behold!

Against the flat blackness of the eternal night a trio of warships shone bright, their weapons raining down the fury of tamed stars and brilliant laser. In the glitter and flare of their attack gleamed the wings of swooping hawks and crimson-hulled fighters, about which spiralled the savage barques and ravagers of Yvraine's Commorragh-born allies.

Through pale ruin of pillar and wall, across the broken arc of bridges and in the shadow of fallen towers, the red-armoured host of Ynnead clashed with the kaleidoscopic daemons of Tzeentch. Bright splashed the mutating fire from Horrors born of the demented Architect of Fate. Burning rounds from the crude bolters of the Thousand Sons sorcerers cut the cold air to leave scintillating trails. The flash of scatter laser, the slash of brightlances set shadows dancing, joined by supernatural bursts and cruel sacrificial blades to hasten many spirits to the embrace of their god, whether Chaos Power or lord of the aeldari dead.

In Nurgle's Garden, the diminishing glow of the portal was not far ahead when there came a loud droning from behind the swiftly moving aeldari.

Slashing the head from a plaguebearer, the Visarch looked over his shoulder.

Flies as big as jetbikes buzzed between the trees, the branches rising to let them pass. Upon the back of each rode a plaguebearer, pestilent swords gleaming with their own foul power. Behind them appeared a living tide of nurglings – each no larger than a fist, but numbered in the tens of thousands they would sweep through the forests and cleanse all sign of the aeldari intrusion. With them came more of the tallymen, their monotonous chanting a wall of brain-numbing sound. Larger creatures moaned in the shadows, crushing trees, plaguebearers and nurglings as they heaved their bulky, slug-like bodies after the fleeing aeldari.

'Give no heed to slaying, defend yourselves and run!' Yvraine called, waving her followers forward with her war-fan.

The Ynnari unconsciously reformed, letting the Harlequins run ahead to seize the portal's environs. Former kabalites turned and unleashed their splinter weapons, slashing down the incoming fly-riders with sharp volleys of fire. As

the fastest of the plague drones reached them, the Visarch signalled his warriors forwards, meeting the daemons' charge with their own assault. A plaguesword swept out and the Visarch ducked, a trail of rust particles settling on the fur of his cloak. He slashed his own blade upwards as he dodged between the legs of the rot fly, severing thorax from abdomen. In a spume of ichor the creature tumbled into the dirt, spilling its rider into the waiting klaive of an incubi.

In short moments the Coiled Blade had cut down their attackers, though two of their number lay amidst the ruin of plaguebearer and fly, bright splashes in the gloom. Behind, Yvraine and the others had wasted no time in capitalising on the Visarch's rearguard, and many were out of sight, lost in the fog and shadows of the trees, dim silhouettes against the fading light of the open portal.

The Visarch knew Yvraine would not wait for them.

He knew equally that she should not – her mission, her calling was more important than the lives of her followers.

Even so, as he set off in a run after the figures of his companions disappearing towards the rapidly shrinking vortex, he wished she would show just a little gratitude.

The Ynnari host that battled in Einerash was ably led by another of our major players. Before the half-wakening of Ynnead, Meliniel had trod upon the Path of Command, renowned as an autarch of the bellicose craftworld Biel-tan. As fate and poor fortune combined, Biel-tan suffered terribly during the cataclysms and convulsions that created the Great Rift. Meliniel, touched by the spirit of Ynnead and inspired by the works of Yvraine – eventually tied his destiny to that of the Ynnari.

Though he had forsaken the traditional path, Meliniel still wore the armour of an autarch, the green and white of his native craftworld replaced by the red of Ynnead, the rune of his new patron blazoned in black upon his high helm. He had brought from his craftworld an heirloom of his House, a spear of some repute called the *Ahz-ashir*, which in the dialect of the Biel-tani means 'the -striking bolt'.

He was, at the very moment Yvraine and her cohort neared the warpside of the portal, putting the spear to good use against a coven of the Tzeentchian sorcerers' cultists. The tip of Ahz-ashir blazed with lightning as it pierced the robes and armour of his foes. In the half-warp of the contested webway, their escaping psychic matter manifested as shrieking wraiths that twisted about the blade of their killer for several heartbeats before dissipating like fog in the wind.

The clatter of falling armour and flutter of empty garb accompanied the advance of the autarch and his close companions.

Of these Ynnari warriors, though exarchs and dragons, succubus of the deadly Crucibael of Commorragh and warlocks of half a dozen craftworlds, accomplished fighters all, perhaps one other is worthy of remark. Azkahr, Meliniel's subordinate and a former dragon of the Kabal of the Black Heart. His new allegiance was worn only as a scarlet sash across the black and deep blue armour he had worn for a lifetime. His whip-like agoniser sparked and snarled as though a serpent in his grasp, entangling the limbs of the Tzeentchian devoted, sending bolts of energy coursing through armour and bone.

'She is dead,' Azkahr said, coiling the agoniser around the neck of a Rubric-cursed legionnaire. He ripped the helm free and with it came the screaming apparition of the former Space Marine's soul. Gibbering, the wraith threw itself at his face in one last attempt at vengeance before it became a vanishing mist.

'She lives on,' insisted Meliniel. His spear brought the end to another pair of enemies, the trail of its head lit by forks of lightning, hence its name. 'I am sure of it. The portal would fail without her.'

'Entirely sure?' Azkahr ducked as a towering legionnaire fired its bolter, the blazing shells passing his shoulder as he lashed the agoniser around the weapon, severing the wrist of the hand that held it. 'The power came from the Rose of Isha.'

'I think the Yncarne would know if she fell,' countered the autarch.

His gaze moved to the whirling incarnation of Ynnead, avatar of the Whispering God. It roamed at will through the daemonic ranks ranged against the Ynnari, as much the stuff of the immaterium as they.

Bands of azure power wreathed the ghostly figure as it floated above the expanding melee, its uncertain flesh blazing at the strike of coruscating fire and warp-powered blast. A silver gleam in its hand was the third of the recovered croneswords – *Vilith-zhar*, the Sword of Souls. Against the immortally summoned, the mystically shifting weapon had assumed the shape of a broad tulwar, and with slashing strokes the Yncarne hewed left and right with abandon. Each daemon touched by the enchanted blade exploded into fountains of prismatic sparks, its essence scattered to the warp winds.

'It could be vengeful...' ventured Azkahr, though his confidence waned. He rallied, determined not to let his original point be missed. 'Do you think it right that we expend aeldari lives on the whim of the human champion? It is the

errand of Guilliman that brings us here, no business of the Ynnari.'

Meliniel did not reply at first. Above, startling shrieks heralded the swooping attacks of Tzeentchian Screamers accompanied by Heralds of the Master of Magic riding upon barbed-edged discs. The keening of their descent was like a talon thrumming on the nerves of those that heard it, disconcertingly alien and yet hauntingly familiar. Sorcerous green and mauve fire licked down, diverted only at the last moment by the counter-spells of the warlocks. Their rune armour burning with black fire, the aeldari battle-psykers threw back singing spears and conjured storms of crackling energy to meet the onrushing foe.

Meliniel issued a command and within a heartbeat laser fire and hails of shuriken sprang up in response as wave serpents and falcon grav-tanks turned their turret weapons skywards.

'The enemy of our enemy...' the autarch began.

'Is our enemy,' cut in the former dracon. His sneer was audible even if his masked helm concealed the lips that formed it. 'We should be using the humans as the shield they were created to be, not expending our effort and lives in their defence.'

'Our fates cross,' replied Meliniel. 'If not for our quest here, the Black Library would be beset by Ahriman's cohort. Though we seek the croneswords and serve Ynnead, we must remember that our first duty is to oppose the Dark Powers.'

Azkahr was not disposed by nature or experience to argue the trifles of loyalty to others. His rise to the rank of dracon had been liberally lubricated with the blood of many former allies, a trait he did not think worth dropping in light of his defection to the cause of the Ynnari. Even so, he had agreed to defer to the command of Meliniel without any ambition of his own, and gritted his teeth to hold back further retort.

While Meliniel saw the unfolding battle as a great concert of effort, a grand strategy unfolding in a series of movements, harmonies and discords, Azkahr viewed the bloodshed in more personal terms. The Tzeentchian cohort was a body, a being, to be taken apart in specific and painful ways. It could be ended swiftly or made to endure a lingering demise. One merely had to focus on the correct organs.

Meliniel, true to his temperament and the culture of the craftworlds, was going for the heart. Having already sundered the sorcerers from their vortex, he pursued them with vigour through the ruins of Einerash. The bulk of the Ynnari had formed a rearguard of sorts, a collapsing defence that was constantly moving, holding in one place while falling back in another, creating separation

between the greater tide of daemons and the company of the autarch.

It was a sound enough plan, minimising the casualties of the Ynnari but at the cost of inflicting little damage also. It was like a fighter parrying constantly, not once looking for the counterstrike. Azkahr itched to deploy his ravagers and raiders, to launch a surprise offensive that would slash through the oncoming daemons. He would sever a limb, isolating one part of the body, to concentrate upon it to the exclusion of all else until it was destroyed.

‘Something stirs in the vortex,’ warned one of the warlocks, Faurasah.

Their attention drawn to the swirling maw of power, Meliniel and Azkahr saw the change that had been wrought. At the heart of the roiling cloud could be seen sparks, like distant suns growing in brightness.

Almost immediately, the minions of Tzeentch changed their attacks, like a carrion flock that had been picking on a near-stripped corpse and now discovered a new cadaver close by. The daemoniac host had been fractured, drawn along different lines of attack, turned upon itself by the skillful manoeuvring of the aeldari, as a dancer twists streamers on the wrist to create interweaving patterns in the air. Now the daemons pulled back, an ebbing tide, creating a vacuum that threatened to suck in the squads and vehicles of the Ynnari.

Their intent became clear again when the reformed cohort thrust across the bridges and along the streets directly towards the vortex. The air seethed with the concentration of magical energies, distorting the fabric of reality. Claws of intemporal power raked at the substance of the webway infusing the old city.

‘They seek to swell their numbers,’ called Faurasah. His warning was redundant, the sense of impeding power burned upon even the stunted psychic senses of Azkahr and the other drukhari. A discordant, unsettled murmur and whisper rustled through the host of the Ynnari. A lull dragged at the thoughts of everyone, for it was simply a momentary peace, the eye of the storm, before the full tempest returned.

That tempest came in the shape of something vast and terrible and older even than the gods. The twilight of Einerash burst into life with glittering stars of all colours, a new galactic constellation writ upon the membrane between reality and immaterial. The webway itself shuddered, the city vibrating beneath the cosmic forces that clashed around it. With a screech of stone, a tower toppled in the midst of the daemons, their bodies of flame and magic turned to wisps of dissipating azure fume beneath the crushing blocks. Dust danced upon the broken walls, forming sigils that burned the sight and mind to look upon.

All eyes were drawn above, daemon and aeldari alike. The starfield wavered, blinking in and out of inexistence. With each fluctuation the constellation grew sharper in form.

Fiery daemons and cavorting horrors lifted up flame-wreathed limbs, chattering increasing, overlapping cackles and chants rising in volume to create a cacophony that blanketed the mind as well as hearing.

With a psychic exhalation that numbed the thoughts of the Ynnari, the stars fell. Streaks of lightning crackled about the slowly descending orbs of power, painting the broken city with strobing flashes of crimson and jade, violet and sunburst. Where they struck, symbols of change and mutation etched in blue flame upon the ground.

The counter-chants of the warlocks became horrified shrieks. Wardstones used to safely channel the power of the warp shattered, spraying shards of spark-edged crystal.

As the stars landed, they formed a shape, indistinct at first but growing with clarity as more permeated the webway. It flared within, matching the continuing spectacle of actinic power raining down from the dark sky.

Wings of cerulean feathers highlighted with grey fire spread out, and from their pulsing shadow grew taloned feet and clawed hands, extruded from the gathering psychic mass like ore deposits forming under immense geological pressures. Unreality and reality compressed and in the fault between something entirely unnatural formed a physical shell to contain its essence.

Avian and horrifying. Elegant yet awkward. A ruby-eyed vulture's visage. Its presence sketched impossibilities on the senses, the bizarre sight accompanied by the stench of thwarted ambition and the perfume of a mother's last breath. Hourglass eyes regarded the aeldari with infinite patience, looking deep into the soul and fate of every mortal present.

A Lord of Change, greater daemon, Arch-Magicker of Tzeentch the Mutator.

It threw out a clawed hand and a staff grew into its grip, made of solidified lightning, crowned with a coiling serpent whose undulating head and flicking tongue left ochre shadows in the air.

The daemon's piercing cry made Azkahr take a step back, nerves painfully taut, senses thrumming. He heard a shrill outburst as though through the crash and hush of surf. Only when his vision cleared and he saw the gaze of his companions fixed upon him did the former dracon realise the shriek had been his.

'All troops converge on the daemon,' Meliniel commanded. Always one to state

the obvious, he added, 'We cannot allow the daemon to reach the portal. We hold at all costs until Yvraine returns.'

With an unearthly wail the Yncarne rose above the Ynnari. Soulstuff whipped about its shifting body, echoes of the dead that fed its manifestation, their sorrowful dirge drowning out the resonating screech of the greater daemon. Spear thrust towards the Lord of Change in challenge, the Yncarne sped over the embattled hosts.

The weeping oaks of Nurgle lashed their branches and knotted their roots, desperate in their clawing and agitation. Beneath their sputum-blossomed boughs, the glimmering web portal was little larger than a doorway, its brightness intensified even as its size was diminished. In form its boundary had grown into a wreath of stems with dagger-long thorns, the white rose blooms of Isha ringing the entrance, their gleam holding back the dismal umbra of the Lord of Decay.

Through the woods slashed the Ynnari, Yvraine at their head. Nurglings followed them above, spitting and defecating, littering the churning mulch with their noisomeness. They dropped down upon the heads and shoulders of the sprinting aeldari, tiny clawed hands and gnawing teeth scrabbling and scratching, broken boils smearing pus and blood over the armour of those they assailed. Where it touched flesh this noxious combination burned like acid, and in the weeping whorls cut upon the exposed skin of the wyches, tiny eggs blistered into existence, the squirming pupae of unborn mites dark in centres of each milky bauble.

Alorynis stalked the canopy above Yvraine, fur crackling with psychic static as it hunted. It leapt from branch to trunk, trunk to branch, claws rending the leathery skin of the nurglings, teeth snapping on brittle daemon bones. Whiskers and fur matted with the filth, the gyrix paused occasionally to lick clean its pelt, immune to the infections of the Plague God.

With the portal almost fully diminished, the Ynnari spent no effort but that which they directed towards reaching their shrinking goal. They ran with light steps, many dropping weapons and shedding armour to speed their passage.

At the rear, the heavily armoured Coiled Blade of the Visarch retreated with slower and more determined purpose. Assisted by the volleys of nearby squads, they launched themselves into the pursuing daemons again and again, cutting a swathe through their foes to hurl them back before giving ground once more.

'We run,' the Visarch commanded at last, when he saw that Yvraine was but a

score of strides from the portal's maw.

And with that, the crimson-clad warriors turned as one and joined their companions in running as fast as possible with no thought to the baying horde at their back.

Yvraine, to her credit, spared two heartbeats to look behind as she reached the boundary of the fluctuating webgate. For one of those swift palpitations in her chest, she considered holding back, to assist the retreat of her followers. In the next, such concern was dismissed. Not only was the Hand of Darkness too valuable a prize to be lost in an act of pointless sentiment, she herself as the Opener of the Seventh Way had a grander destiny to fulfil.

Having sensed the intent of his spirit-bonded mistress, Alorynis darted past, hissing a warning as a throng of nurglings tumbled from shuddering boughs and erupted from the sodden bowers. Yvraine followed the gyrix into the swirling energies, Kha-vir burning bright in her hand.

Still some distance behind, the Visarch saw a few others follow the Emissary of Ynnead into the swirl. With a last spasm, the portal collapsed and a dark shroud of Nurgle seeped back through the limbs and trunks like a living thing, washing over the remaining aeldari. Coldness clad their bodies and permeated their hearts, the grasp of winter squeezing forth last gasps of life's vitality.

In the freezing fog booming laughter resounded, seeming to come from all directions and none.

'This is fine,' said the Visarch, the fur of his armour's mantle rimed heavy, his breath a steaming cloud around him.



CHAPTER 4

YVRAINE RETURNED

Coming upon a raging battle where she had expected to find, at worst, the force of Meliniel clearing the last of Ahriman's minions from Einerash, it was no fault of Yvraine that she did not notice the portal behind her implode.

She gazed in shock as the Yncarne and a Lord of Change duelled above the toppled buildings, a psychic storm roiling in their wake as blade rang against staff and shafts of cerulean and purple energy coruscated between the battling immortals. Beasts and beast-faced mutants and robe-clad acolytes poured through the curving thoroughfares. Alongside them, gambolling and cackling daemons like knots of iridescence amongst the streams of blue and yellow. Disk-riding magisters and half-avian champions of the Lord of Magic swept through the skies above, exchanging mutating bolts with the lasblasts of Swooping Hawks and the shrieking volleys of fire from ravagers and venoms, vipers and reaver jetbikes.

Behind her, unseen, the vortex shrank back into the Rose of Isha, which fell to the cracked stones at the feet of her followers that had made it through, petals gradually wilting.

‘Yvraine!’

With this single exclamation across the messenger-waves Meliniel shared his joy and relief – and no small amount of surprise. Later he would claim he had never once doubted the Opener of the Seventh Way would return from her quest. His happiness at her appearance was quickly tempered. ‘So few?’

The question finally brought Yvraine's attention to the lack of vortex. Dread froze her thoughts, for though she had been willing to leave behind her companions for the greater cause, she had hoped that the sacrifice would not

have been needed.

‘Here, mistress.’ One of the wyches that had accompanied her stooped to pick up the dying bloom upon the ground. Confusion creased her bile-scarred face as she lifted up the Rose of Isha.

‘It was for me...’ Yvraine quickly took the blossom. ‘When I passed through, the gateway closed.’

In the dying flower there yet remained some spark of life, the barest ember of its power remained. Yvraine let her spirit unfold, caressing the decaying bloom with her thoughts, imbuing it with the energy of Ynnead.

‘Once, you were sown by the Goddess of Life,’ she whispered to the failing rose. ‘Another power needs you now. From death, life.’

Like smoldering coals stoked and put beneath the bellows, the last fragment of Isha’s power waxed strong under the attention of Yvraine. Coldness seeped into her chest as she channelled the power of the dead, but from her it passed into the artefact. It felt lighter than air and she let go, allowing it to drift from her fingers.

Her view of the city coiled and rippled, as though reflected in a disturbed pool. Broken towers of white and grey shimmered, becoming the immense trunks of moss-clad trees.

The portal shimmered, silvery light spilling forth as it once more breached the Realm of Chaos.

Yvraine gasped as thorny tendrils flailed from the bloom, fixing about her arms and throat. She thought it an assault of Nurgle at first, but at their touch she felt not the hungering maw of decay but the loving touch of a mother. Pain followed, a thousand pinpricks across flesh and soul. The Rose of Isha turned blood red and the portal swelled, supping on the lifeforce of Yvraine.

She resisted the urge to fight the vampiric leeching, her breath short, stabs of pain in her chest. The portal bucked and she extended her will, thrusting her mind into the pulsating aura, using raw willpower to tear open the last fabric dividing realities.

Fog and stench burst through, engulfing her, choking and blinding. Shadows stumbled through the mists; wyches vomiting and clawing at pox-marked skin. After them, came the bulkier armoured silhouettes of kabalite warriors, flailing at the vapours as though the fog assailed them.

Some time passed, the wait accompanied by the slow pulling of the Rose of Isha, even now the rot in its blossom started to spread again.

Finally, the baroque form of the Visarch burst from the coiling umbra, the sword of screams slicked with ichor, his armour and half-cloak thick with mucus

and blood. His incubi followed, similarly drenched in filth.

‘Great Unclean One,’ muttered the Lord of Blades as he flicked a gobbet-crusted gauntlet. ‘Don’t ask.’

His gaze slid from Yvraine to the two immortal beings thrashing across the cityscape.

‘Meliniel, can we not trust you to even hold a breach without making matters complicated?’ the Visarch taunted across his message-carrier.

‘Are there any more?’ Yvraine asked, gritting her teeth against the bone-pain crawling along her limbs. ‘Are all recovered?’

The Visarch saw her distress and all humour evaporated.

‘Yes, mistress, we are the last,’ he assured her.

With a shuddering exhalation, the Opener of the Seventh Way tore herself from the embrace of the rose tendrils. She staggered and fell, but the Visarch was swift, ducking into the billow of her cloak and gown to catch her.

Whipping like angered snakes, the thorn-vines latched onto the edges of the throbbing portal, dragging it closed with a final spasm of power. In its place, desiccated petals and leaves circled on a dying breeze.

The return of Yvraine sealed the fate of the battle. Reunited with the emissary of its creator, the Yncarne swelled with the power of the dead. Channelling the escaping spirits of dying Ynnari, the incarnation of Ynnead set upon the Lord of Change with a haunting battle cry, cronesword in hand becoming a short stabbing blade that thrust and gouged at the unnatural flesh of the Lord of Change. Wreathed in magic, the greater daemon spat goutts of fire and lashed claws of lightning against its attacker, screeching incantations of its otherworldly master. But for all its sorcerous power, it could not match the reignited fury of Ynnead’s avatar, which bore the winged daemon to the ground, sword piercing supernal armour and flesh in a flurry of blows.

With a triumphant bellow, the Yncarne seized the serpentine throat of the daemon in one hand and plunged Vilith-zhar into its cerulean chest. Sparks of raw warp power fountained from the wound, a stream that turned into a cascade as the deadly cronesword bit deep again and again. The Yncarne crouched over the broken remains of the Lord of Change and sank ice fangs into its breast, sucking deep at the gash upon its empyreal form. Daemon plasma streamed from the mouth of Ynnead’s avatar as it set back its head and howled.

Likewise while the soulbound and Harlequins were not great in number, their emergence from the portal added a sudden and irresistible impetus to the Ynnari

attack. Daemons were put to pistol and blade while the living were left carved apart on the pale stones of the ancient aeldari streets. Escaping daemon-matter swirled in clouds through the broken towers, carrying the screams and panicked cries of the outnumbered mortals.

Freed from its duel, the Yncarne rampaged at will. Streamers of soulstuff peeled away from its floating body, wrapping about the Ynnari that advanced beneath. Invigorated by the demigodly being, the followers of Yvraine pressed on without a shred of fear, shrouded in protective energies. Splinter rifle and shuriken catapult tore robe and flesh among the oncoming horde, their whine and song sounding alongside the zip of laser and ghastly shriek of Harlequin cannons.

Renewed attacks from the starships above carved swathes through the retreating masses, cutting off the rout, leaving none to flee into the winding paths of the webway nor tear into the raw warp with spells of relocation. From the Endless Stair the white seers sallied forth, bringing with them weapons of arcane destruction that turned daemonflesh to tatters and mortal bodies to scattered particles.

‘Hi hi,’ laughed Dreamspear, at the tip of the counter-attack, his neuro-disruptor annihilating the minds of hapless cultists and croaking bird-beasts. ‘What bitter spring we bring to these foolish sons and daughters of change. Let them take heart that their misery shall be short-lived, as we rejoice in our own salvation from the murky depths.’

Behind the scintillating offensive of the Harlequins, the soulbound rejoined with their companions from the craftworlds that had been left to contest Einerash. Led by the Visarch and Yvraine, the warhost of the Ynnari swept through the remnants of Ahriman’s allies. The slightest cut from Kha-vir robbed Yvraine’s enemies of their souls to leave withered husks collapsing to dust around her. Beside her the Visarch hewed without care, his armour deflecting the few clumsy attacks made by those that eluded his deadly attention for just a moment – survivors that were not granted a second chance an instant later. Their faces, human, bestial and avian, wrung in anguish, yet not a sound issued from their throats, their voices stolen by the witchery of Asu-var.

Iyanna laid her hand upon the naked crystal of the infinity circuit. She did not allow herself to meld with it, holding back her powers while next to her the bonesinger Lietriam prepared himself also. He and others of his calling had worked tirelessly for many cycles to heal the wounds laid upon Iyanden by the

Great Devourer's invasion. They laboured in a darkened corridor, the only light the glow of their spiritstones and the aura of a lantern globe that hovered just over the bonesinger's shoulder. They worked in sealed suits, protected from the chill airless void, tethered to the floor and each other. Fully half the craftworld was still uninhabitable even after all of this time, either still breached to the vacuum, quarantined because of parasitic or psychic infection, or simply cut off from the sustaining energies of the infinity circuit.

'I remember it too,' said Lietriam, sensing her unguarded memories through the material they both touched. 'Every dome lost, every conduit severed, like losing a limb. The cancerous growth of the hive mind infecting everything...'

The spiritseer shuddered, sharing the double recollection of her own horror combined with his memory. She glimpsed a towering Hive Tyrant battering at a portal gate with snarling living blades while Lietriam held the breach on the other side, pushing his thoughts in to the darkness to meld together the fraying pieces of psychoplastic. She heard an after-echo of his chanting and felt the cold alienness of the hive mind as it encroached into his thoughts. The aliens had fired a volley of grub-projectiles at the gateway, that spattering ichor passing through the gaps. Pain had seared across his face and neck but not for a heartbeat had he faltered in his attempt to seal the door.

She turned, eyes drawn to the acid burn across his neck and cheek. Her enquiry did not need to be spoken out loud.

'While Iyanden bears its scars, so shall I,' he told her. 'The healers have deadened the pain but I will not let them erase the mark until my work is done.'

'I do not think you will live to see that labour completed,' she said, saddened by the thought. She knew well what it was like to work towards a goal she would likely not see achieved in her lifetime.

'It does not matter, it is the labour that counts.' He nodded towards the crystal structure gently gleaming beneath the skin of the craftworld floor. When complete, it would bring light and warmth to what had once been called the Avenue of the Guarded Love, linking three major domes back to the hub. 'Are you ready?'

'Begin your song,' she replied.

The harmony came not as sound but thought, emanating from the depths of the bonesinger's soul. Iyanna felt his swelling power like a nimbus about his body, bright and close in the void around them. His spirit flowed to his fingers, rippling along the formless mind-sounds of the verses to pour into the inert fabric of the circuit.

Fresh crystals started to grow beneath the light touch of his fingers, tiny tracers of diamond like the tracks of tears. She glanced at Lietriam and saw through the faceplate of his voidhelm that he was indeed crying, moisture wetting the contorted flesh of his face. From his grief came hope, his sorrow becoming a fuel for rebirth through the song of creation.

Life from the bonesinger. From Iyanna, the power of the dead.

The spiritseer let forth her thoughts, sending them into the nascent conduits of the fresh infinity circuit. Lietriam's song was precise and beautiful, but it lacked power. That was her role. She sent her spirit back along the circuit, feeling her way through the deadened links towards the light and heat at the hub of Iyanden. Her being moved through the structure without effort, both part of it and apart from it.

Her soul pulsed like a beacon, sent ahead as a signal. It was both a call and a conduit, the means to attract the souls of the dead and the power to transport them into the reforged circuitry. It did not take long for the first sparks to appear. They travelled neuron-fast along the infinity circuit, drawn from the nearby systems to investigate the song Iyanna carried into their midst.

Their whispers grew in volume, a few at first, inquisitive and bold. Each was a particle washing up against her thoughts, nestling into her mind for comfort, yet cold to the touch. They were easy to coax into the freshly laid crystal, guided by gentle impulses from Iyanna. They joined the greater song, adding notes of their own to the growing symphony. From them echoed more of Lietriam's power, linking the new with the old, the living and the dead. He drew on their energy, syphoning away their vitality to power the recreation of the damaged crystal. One by one, wearied by the exchange, the souls drifted back, grey and disorientated, floating without purpose back to the core where they were recharged by the presence of their fellow spirits.

The current of soul energy swelled as Iyanna and Lietriam's song strengthened the bonds of the new circuit, until finally souls pulsed freely along its length. Iyanna withdrew herself, leaving the raw spirit stuff of Iyanden's dead to populate the new veins. For a few heartbeats more Lietriam's song continued, fading away to a murmur before it finally ended.

'I am spent,' confessed the bonesinger, his face pale and drawn within his helm. He lifted his hand away from the bright glittering trail. 'I shall return at the beginning of the next cycle.'

She nodded, her acceptance mirrored in a gentle psychic pulse through the newly established conduit. Iyanna disconnected their tether and watched

Lietriam float away into the darkness. She reached out a thought and snuffed the lantern globe, leaving herself only in the light of the infinity circuit. It twinkled like starlight, feeling like serrated ice in the airless passageway.

Was this how it had been for her family? When the torpedoes had struck, the structure and fields breached? Who had died in the conflagration and who had survived long enough to drift into the darkness?

Not even the comfort of their recovered spirit stones; even those of her ancestors had been lost in the cowardly attack.

The crude sentience of the voidsuit resisted as she idly considered opening the faceplate. The all-enclosing suit had been created to protect her, and would not willingly allow her to expose herself to the deadly vacuum. But if she exerted herself... She raised a hand, placing gloved fingers across the plate, feeling the smooth material as though on her skin. The suit bleated another warning, voiceless but insistent.

A tremor ran through the nerveways of Iyanden's infinity circuit. To all but the most sensitive it would have been invisible; to those like Iyanna who had honed the gift of their psychic potential it was a message.

The sudden contact brought her morbid thoughts back to the present. The lantern globe flared into life and the suit exuded a faint sense of relief.

She let her thoughts touch the ripple on the fabric of the psychic network and an instant later was filled with an imperative to return. It was not just a message, it was a summons, sent with the full weight of the seer council, impossible to refuse.

Iyanna detached her tether cable and activated the grav-vanes that jutted from her back like insect spines, steering herself after her departed companion.



CHAPTER 5

FATES ENTWINE

The Ynnari were irrepressible, clearing Einerash from the place where the vortex had spun across the bridges and skyways, through avenue and plaza, all the way back to the Endless Stair. When the Tzeentchian horde was on the retreat, Meliniel descended in his wave serpent and alighted to meet his mistress, raising his spear in salute of her return.

‘Praise to the Whispering God,’ announced the autarch. He pointed with his weapon towards the few remaining pockets of resistance out in the pale city. ‘With your leave, I shall finish the task at hand.’

‘I wish it,’ Yvraine said, waving her fan imperiously, though the ghost of a smile betrayed her good humour. ‘Return Einerash to the whispers of the dead.’

She turned as Meliniel strode away snapping orders, to greet the approach of a handful of White Seers. The curators of the Black Library, or counted among such, halted a distance away, but for one of their number who raised a hand to the Opener of the Seventh Way.

‘I see you found the courage to set foot outside your demesne, Ruisafoneth.’

‘It is not cowardice to avoid certain death,’ retorted the White Seer, without rancour. ‘You have our gratitude though your intervention was unasked for. I do not think Ahriman will ever relent in his attempts to breach the Black Library, I also think he will turn much thought now to you and your people. Twice now you have thwarted him, but also in you perhaps he might find the means to serve right his age-old error.’

‘I am willing to grant the release of death to any of his followers that come. If Ahzek Ahriman wishes to know more of the tomb-lore of our people, I shall teach it to him.’ She raised the life-stealing Sword of Sorrows, its edge glinting

with cold fire. ‘But he will like not the lesson, when he too finally knows what it is like to be rendered to dust.’

‘We must now close the Endless Stair. Every attack weakens us a little, Yvraine, every setback strengthens the Great Powers.’

‘The only victory is not to fight on their terms,’ said Yvraine. ‘When Ynnead rises, everything will change.’

The White Seer did not reply but his posture suggested disagreement. With a gentle cough he changed the subject.

‘You have the tainted artefact?’ asked Ruisafoneth.

Yvraine nodded and laid a hand upon the shielded container the White Seer had given to her to hold the corrupting energy that surrounded the Hand of Darkness.

The seer held out a hand. ‘The White Seers are well-versed in dealing with such corruption given physical form. It will trouble the world of mortals no longer.’

‘I was not tasked by you to retrieve it, but another,’ Yvraine reminded him, stepping back, hiding the box with a swirl of her cloak. ‘There is a purpose grander than destruction in your rune-furnaces for this device.’

‘An error,’ Ruisafoneth said sadly, his hand dropping to his side. ‘One which many have made before you. Eldrad should be wise enough to know that the enemy’s weapons cannot be turned to any good purpose. Even he cannot bend darkness into light. And to trust the humans... It was the ignorance of a human that fashioned this vile thing in the first place.’

‘Perhaps or perhaps not, but it is a judgement I will not make. I promised to deliver the Hand of Darkness to Eldrad, and he can do with it as he deems right, to share it with the primarch if he desires.’

Yvraine felt the presence of the Visarch close at hand, radiating disapproval without saying a word. She darted a look over her shoulder at the strange warrior.

‘It is unlike you to stand idle when there is killing to be done.’

The Visarch stalked away without reply.

Ruisafoneth inclined his head, inviting Yvraine to step closer. She bent her ear to him, fan raised to hide their faces.

‘Your movement has grown strong, Yvraine, but know that you are not immortal. Choose wisely those that are close to you. Khaine does not freely pull his claws from the heart of his sworn sons and daughters.’

‘He is loyal to my cause,’ said Yvraine as she straightened. ‘Sometimes too sure of himself, but loyal.’

The White Seer’s silence was profound and lasted for some time, until he

eventually gave a tip of the head and turned back to the others. The group of mindweavers returned to the spot where the vortex of the Endless Stair coiled about itself, their arms raised as they began their chants of unmaking. Their engines drifted past, dormant again, and slipped into the stream of the diminishing portal, fading like mirages. Surrounding the kaleidoscopic whorl, the White Seers turned outwards, eyes blazing with golden power, streams of sparks falling from raised hands to create interlacing and concentric circles of intricate runes on the ancient stones.

The ring of seers contracted, pacing backwards slowly, their passage leaving a blaze of silver light until they stepped within the bounds of the Endless Stair. For a heartbeat and then another, the webway conduit continued, flashes of red and amber coruscating up the column of light.

With a sigh the portal shut, sucking in the last of the silver symbols, draining their fire like dust into a tornado until nothing but empty air remained.

Yvraine felt a moment of loss, knowing that once again the power of her people had been diminished. The tide was endless, the erosion of the aeldari and the corruption of the mortal universe as unstoppable as the turning of the stars.

Sadness turned to anger, born of frustration. The words of the Visarch haunted her, their subtle accusation all the more poignant for their accuracy. The quest for the final cronesword was her goal, but it was not the only means to fight the forces ranged against the Reborn. If they were to inherit a life worth living, there were other victories to be won along the way – victories not just in stopping the expansion of the Dark Powers but in turning them back, taking the war into the night.

Quite unaware of the life-threatening drama that engulfed her allies among the Ynnari, Iyanna returned to her home to answer the summons of the seer council. Lietriam and other bonesingers had raised a solitary tower for her, a distance from the seers' edifices that clustered about the entrance to the Dome of Crystal Seers, but still within sight of the glowing structure of the hub. Far to the rim, among the Ghost Halls of the Lost Dynasties, the estates and manses of the House of Arienal still remained, and Iyanna spent more time among the echoes of her ancestral lands than at her seer tower.

A single ascensor lifted her to the summit of her spire, its transit up the transparent elevator revealing more of the wildlands, out to the edges of the dome where slowly returning civilisation clustered about the innermost arteries and avenues of Iyanden. At the pinnacle, her chambers were sparse – a single

dormitory and adjacent washroom, with the bare minimum of furnishings to rest the body. It was rare that she would spend more than a cycle there at a time, and was often away for a dozen cycles or more. There were not heirlooms or pictures of her family. She needed no physical reminders of what had been, what she had lost. What would be the point when the Houses of the Dead were but a mind's step away at any time?

The pulse of the farseers' summons still resonated faintly along the spirit circuits, gentle but insistent, guiding her thoughts back to the present, away from the lure of morbid recollection. She shooed away the troubling signals as though swatting flies. Iyanna was of no mind to be hurried by the council, her robing routine arranged as much to order her mind as it was her garb. The meticulous, oft-repeated process laid calm her thoughts and focused her energy.

Iyanna began by divesting herself of her void suit and donned the golden ceremonial robes of her position. She laid on the plates of the Armour of Vault, feeling its embrace like the comfort of an old lover. In these times – for most of her lifetime – its protective caress was the only assurance she felt that she was still alive. Iyanna felt its heat on her, the warmth through the thick fabric of her robes, soothing away the creases in her thoughts. She responded in kind, projecting her psyche into the crystalline matrix hidden in the depths of the wraithbone until the runestones and sigils that covered the ornate breastplate glimmered with a fiery light.

Carefully, she opened the crystal-fronted cabinet upon the wall of her abode, the Spear of Teuthlas hanging upon two rune-etched hooks within. It leapt the gap to her open palm, eager to be in her grasp. She slowly closed her fingers about the haft, feeling the weightlessness of it, still amazed after so long by the mastery of craft and psychic engineering that had been its creation. It was part of her again, a limb restored, a companion returned.

If an impertinent stranger was to ask how long the spear's warlike spirit had held sway over her, she would not reply. To herself, Iyanna justified her familiarity with the deathdealer in simple terms: the galaxy was torn by war. Against this truth all philosophies and arguments failed. There was no apathy, only resistance or surrender. It was this thought, more than any other, that had guided her to support Yvraine and the Ynnari. Iyanden – and Iyanna in person – knew better than any others the power of the necromancer, of the dead raised to fight the wars of the living.

There was pleasing balance to the thought that the Great Enemy would be suffocated beneath the weight of the spirits he had tried to devour.

Her mood lightened by this thought, for there was little that Iyanna enjoyed save for the prospect that her people might yet die in peace, the spiritseer alighted upon a skyskiff and let its spirit-guided sentience take her to the Halls of the Seers within the towering crystal needles of the hub. It flitted across bridges that spanned chasms down to the bare substrate of the craftworld, and along bright tunnels painstakingly dug to avoid quarantined domes and plains still awash with alien organisms.

Two warlocks geared for battle, witchblades at their hips, awaited Iyanna at the berthing platform – a ruby-glass balcony set halfway up the hub. Before her eyes fell upon them, she knew them by the aura of their minds. Telathaus and Iyasta, twins that had experienced the peculiar life of treading exactly the same Paths together. When they spoke, they wove in and out of each other’s sentences, so it was sometimes impossible to distinguish them or their individual thoughts.

‘The council is waiting—’ one snapped.

‘—upon you, spiritseer,’ finished the other.

‘And I am arrived,’ Iyanna replied, ignoring their hostility. The cult of Ynnead was a subject of tension through the craftworld, and the twins were of the faction that believed the return of the Whispering God boded ill and efforts to bring about his ascension distracted from the labours to rebuild Iyanden.

The two parted as she alighted from the skiff, and fell in beside to escort her through the crystal-walled corridors, though she knew the way to the council chambers.

‘No,’ said Iyasta, directing her to the right at a junction.

‘We head for the Oracular,’ said Telathaus, motioning her to turn at the same time. ‘You must see—’

‘—for yourself what the seers foretell.’

They continued through the gleaming passages, passing archways beyond which the naked infinity circuit flashed and flickered. She saw other spiritseers, comforting the buzzing souls within the matrix. Even unattached to the infinity circuit, the spiritseer could feel distress permeating the atmosphere. Iyanna detached a little of her mind to discover what was amiss among the dead of Iyanden, but the warlocks intervened, interposing their thoughts between her and the infinity circuit.

‘It is better that you—’

‘—do not cloud your perceptions before you come to—’

‘—the Oracular.’

‘This is highly suspect behaviour,’ Iyanna warned them. She had an urge to stop and demand an explanation, but the merest hesitancy on her part spurred a fluttering of agitation from her escorts.

‘The farseers require your expertise, Iyanna,’ said Iyasta.

‘It is a matter both important and delicate,’ insisted Telathaus.

Their psychic nudging, the mental equivalent of a hand gently laid upon the back, encouraged her to continue, though she made her irritation known in thought and posture.

The Oracular was an open space near to the top of the hub, higher than the residence spires around it, seemingly within hand’s reach of the stars beyond the protective fields of Iyanden.

From the centre of the plateau there grew a tree, of crystal bark and bole shot through with veins of red and yellow, capillaries of the infinity circuit. It was hard to look upon the tips of its branches, where the splitting bough shifted and changed in the blink of an eye. The Tree of the Crone. A living map of the ever-changing future. Upon the branches hung dark leaves, in whose black reflections could be seen glimpses of events yet to pass.

It was not this, however, that was the purpose of the Oracular, for scrying the fates was conducted elsewhere in the hub. The Oracular was a place for the sharing of visions, so that together the seers could explore as one, working within a psychically constructed alternate reality.

Waiting there was the seer council of Iyanden. If ever a collective noun were required to describe an institution that prides itself on its vision and leadership, whilst simultaneously peddling riddle-strewn ambiguities, then seer council fits the need precisely. Here was the reason Iyanna had been drawn to the dead, for they no longer harboured mortal ego and ambition. The five senior members stood in a line in front of the Tree of the Crone, as though arranged for trial, staves in hand, faces hidden behind the jewelled masks of their ghost helms. Others watched from either side, warlocks and lesser seers among them.

Dhentiln Firesight took a step forwards, assuming the role of speaker and authority for the council, as was his custom; he would argue his right as the longest-serving member, though period of service is no sure gauge of wisdom. He had little affection for the Ynnari, who he held in blame for the turmoil and incursions that had beset Iyanden even while the craftworld attempted to recover from the ravages of the Great Devourer. In this, he was perhaps not wholly deluded, for Yvraine and her followers were as much a lodestone for danger as they were the embodiment of hope.

‘You deign to attend at our request,’ said Dhentiln, which was a bold opening considering that he supposedly required the assistance of Iyanna. Humility has never been the strongest trait of the aeldari, at any age or from any kindred. ‘I hope we did not disturb you from some overdue reverie or urgent yearning.’

‘Speak your piece, or hold your peace,’ Iyanna replied, banging the butt of her spear against the ruby floor. ‘You overstep your bounds to issue such demands of my time when there is still so much to be rebuilt.’

Firesight tilted his head a fraction of an angle, the very barest admission of an apology it was possible to give.

‘My thanks for your attendance,’ the seer mustered.

The other psykers separated, forming a ring around the chief of their order and the head spiritseer. Iyanna fought back the moment of alarm, assuring herself that had they desired ill intent for her, the farseers would have dispatched warlocks to ensure her attendance in person, rather than a mental summons.

Stroked by their thoughts, the Tree of the Crone thrummed with unleashed psychic power, the starlit shadows of its branches creeping over the red floor to form a pattern that linked the assembled seers, with Iyanna and Dhentiln at its heart.

A coldness swept into the last scion of the House of Arienal, a touch of the dead she knew well.

She closed her eyes for no more than half a heartbeat, but when she opened them the Oracular had disappeared. She and Firesight stood alone in a barren dome, the vast expanse filled with nothing but flat, grey sands. The artificial haze of the dome itself was lost in distance, a vague blue smear on the edge of consciousness.

Iyanna’s attention was drawn to the grains at her feet, and those around the boots of the farseer. The sand shuddered, dancing rhythmically to a pulse she could not feel, each perturbation forming a new structure, slowly accruing and spreading outwards from them. The coalescence gathered pace, forming walls and ceiling around them, blandly sketching out adjoining rooms until these were hidden by flowing curtains and closing gateways.

Finally, colour. Like the wash of an artist’s brush, vibrant hues painted upon the interior landscape, in pastel blues and ochres, patterns of sharper red and green upon the walls.

Then, with vertigo-inducing speed, the image fell away; or perhaps it was the aeldari witnesses that ascended, until they looked down upon a drifting

craftworld. She could see forests and mountains through the domes, and judged that it was less than a quarter the size of Iyanden, though still large enough to be considered continent-sized on many planets.

The whole process was dramatic, one might even say needlessly theatrical, but Iyanna was impressed.

‘Where are we looking?’

‘We do not know,’ confessed Dhentiln. ‘Look at the stars.’

Iyanna adjusted her focus, so that the spray of stars beyond the craftworld came into sharp view. They formed a rune, highlighted by distant galaxies and nebulae. There was no mistaking the meaning of the sigil: it was the rune of Ynnead.

‘I do not understand,’ said Iyanna. ‘A craftworld of the dead?’

‘A craftworld *from* the dead,’ corrected Dhentiln. ‘Look upon the devices marked upon the prow.’

Iyanna did as he asked, for a moment unable to decipher the interlocking bars and swirls. The lines were arranged in archaic fashion, at odds with the flow of runes she had learnt as a child. Haltingly, she translated.

‘Zaisuthra...’ she murmured. It took a moment for her to recognise the name. ‘Zaisuthra! It disappeared just after the Fall and has not been heard of since. Some say it passed beyond the galactic veil, others say it was destroyed, or devoured by the Great Abyss. Zaisuthra is a myth.’

‘So is Ynnead.’

She could not tell if his remark was a barb or not, but chose to take it thus on the balance of former evidence.

‘Is this some kind of warning? That Iyanden will die the same as Zaisuthra?’

In reply, Dhentiln merely held out his hand, for Iyanna to take it. Such enigmatic gestures are the foodstuff of farseers and Iyanna was in no mood to pander to her companion’s sense of drama.

‘Just tell me.’

‘I need to show you,’ insisted Dhentiln with a flick of his fingers, ‘if you are to believe.’

Reluctantly she slipped her gloved hand into his, and at the moment of contact their thoughts entwined. She heard a distant voice, but it was not that of Firesight. It was deeper, emanating from the image of the craftworld below.

Those that had gone, have now returned.

Even as the psychic message infiltrated her thoughts Iyanna was convinced. Ageless weight and depth carried with the communication, of such enormity that

it could not have been fabricated. The broadcast was like a beacon, resonating through the spurs of the webway, but carrying only a short distance as measured between stars.

‘It is not without precedent,’ said Dhentiln. ‘Has not Altansar been returned after long suffering?’

‘It is possible the Great Rift has freed them from some similar fate,’ she agreed. She thought on the message a little longer. ‘They are near at hand. The psychic pulse is very localised. Was it intended for Iyanden?’

Before the farseer could answer Iyanna, another realisation dawned. A thought that set her heart trembling and weakened her limbs.

‘The House of Arienal...’ she whispered.

‘Indeed,’ said Dhentiln. ‘A branch of your House was lost with Zaisuthra. This is why we need you to make contact. A connection that they will recognise.’

‘Make contact?’ The thought tightened in the pit of Iyanna’s stomach.

‘Yes. We think they are asking for help, but they do not respond to our attempts at psychic connection. We hope that one of their own, one from the bloodline of Arienal will persuade them. We will send you to Zaisuthra.’



CHAPTER 6

A SHARED AGENDA

It had been some time since Iyanna had used her seer skills to commune with the living rather than the dead. She had become so well-versed in walking in the shadows, the brightness of the star-spanning webway offended her senses at first. Lying upon her plain cot, eyes closed, she let the heat and light and energy and movement of the gathering mass that was the webway wash over her. She did not even try to form thoughts, but simply allowed the matrix to become part of her, its power flowing into and around her spirit.

She felt the twitch of her spear in its cabinet, like a pinprick on the skein. Iyanna ignored its siren call, for this was a journey she needed to make alone. Not simply for her ego, but also for more clandestine reasons.

Though she was, in theory, free to associate with whomsoever she pleased, to come and go from Iyanden as a free citizen of the Asuryani, the seer council would look dimly upon what she intended. They would never openly try to thwart the machinations and movements of the Ynnari – if only to avoid making an enemy of Eldrad Ulthran, who had proven himself far more resilient than foes more powerful than Iyanden's much depleted guiding party. Even so, they would curtail Iyanna if they knew that she communicated her movements abroad, thus it was as a thief in the darkness rather than a torch bearer that she finally allowed her full consciousness to slip into the psychic stream.

Her course was, for the most part, straightforward. She knew not where Yvraine and her cohort currently could be found, but the presence of Eldrad Ulthran was a weight upon the skein that none could ignore. His were the fingers that twisted a thousand strands of fate to his purpose, a meddler who would not balk at matching arcane wit against even the Changer of the Ways.

If anything, avoiding Eldrad was far harder than finding him.

Like a featherseed drifting from the bough of its tree, Iyanna let her thoughts fall away from her physical shell. Form released mind, mind released thought. Thought alone drifted on the currents of the aetheric link.

In time the skein formed, countless strands and knots and splits of lives and fates, of every sentient creature in the galaxy – and few beyond and less than sentient. The vast mass made up the foundation of fate, the unending cycle of birth, reproduction and death that sustained the whole mass. Occasionally, one of these seemingly inconsequential threads deviated from the warp and weft of destiny, to briefly fling out a loop or frayed end, causing momentary discord before ending or falling back within the ceaseless binding of history.

Other cords, stronger and longer, the lives of the great and the heroic, the planetary rulers, army generals and fleet commanders, the psykers with the power to break cities and the warlords that would ruin worlds.

She felt the scrutiny of farseers like beams of light crossing the dark void, scintillating and piercing as they probed the skein for means to guide their far-flung craftworlds to the most favourable future. Where their gaze paused for a moment, the threads hummed with life, keening for attention as the farseers perused the pages of destiny unfolding before them. Each story was laid bare: the rise and fall of empires, the myths and legends of peoples across time and space, every blossoming tale examined as to its import to Iyanden or Ulthwé, Biel-tan or Saim Hann and other craftworlds besides. The majority were discarded, vibrating like the plucked string of an instrument before falling to grey obscurity.

Into the gaps and gloom slipped Iyanna.

She filtered her thoughts along the fates of menials working the palace-peak of a human hive city, masked by the swarm of innocuous drudgery. Before the light of their master's destiny betrayed her presence, she danced across to the shuttle pilots bringing in goods to a starport, and from there to the labourers, caterers, slaves and a million other pointless lives of humanity.

The humans made good cover for her glittering progress, the fate of trillions ground beneath uncaring bureaucracy, milled through the stones of ten thousand wars, the dust of their souls scattered upon the tombs of long-dead heroes. An umbra of remorseless mediocrity shielded her within its bosom, the great wash of unremarked mankind a blackness far denser even than the cursed Shadow in the Warp of the Kraken.

Her thoughts gained speed as she distanced herself from the fates of the

Iyandeni.

For an age, the craftworld of Ulthwé had turned about the visions and will of a single seer – the inestimable Eldrad Ulthran. Yet all ages come to an end, and Eldrad's meddling and his thwarted attempts to bring about the rise of Ynnead had left him few allies outside the Ynnari. He had been cast out, riven of rank and influence, and for a longest time had wandered as many of the Ynnari do, seeking some fresh purpose.

In time, divides heal a little and though never more to be welcomed, nor accepted into the seer council, Eldrad was allowed to return to Ulthwé on occasion on the agreement that he would no more attempt to be puppet master of the aeldari. Such had been the assertions made, but Eldrad was the canniest of minds and even as wars were launched against the Dark Powers and alliances made and broken with the humans, he had inserted himself back into the affairs of his home, and through them had started to wield fresh influence on the wider galaxy.

Such was the state of affairs when Eldrad invited Yvraine to his private chambers in anticipation of Iyanna's contact. He had been expecting her arrival and had prepared trustworthy messengers among the Harlequins to take the Hand of Darkness to Guilliman. This task complete, thankfully without coming close to the artefact himself and all the lures of curiosity that came with it, Eldrad had returned his pondering to the raising of Ynnead. The fates were in motion again and from Iyanden he had seen that Iyanna would attempt contact, and desired Yvraine to be present also.

He could not reveal as such to the Opener of the Seventh Way. If there is one thing that seers value above enigmatic pronouncements and the veneer of otherworldly guidance, it is an occasion to remind others of their supposedly infallible foresight. To wait in expectation of an event yet to occur is to the farseer as delicious as a cup of the best wine, reinforcing not only their appearance of superiority but also disarming those wishing to contact them. Even so, it is considered crass for a farseer to answer questions before they are asked – and indeed doing so can cause strange ripples in the cause-and-effect foundations of the skein – so it was with silent patience that Eldrad Ulthran awaited the psychic visitation of his ally from Iyanden.

He had brought with him a Sphere of Projection, allowing him to act as a conduit to the incoming psychic manifestation of the spiritseer. It sat on a silver stand between him and Yvraine, not quite obscuring their view of each other, its

pale surface dappled with pastel blue and grey. Through Eldrad's runes and the sphere's carefully aligned crystal heart, Iyanna would appear in the thoughts of others – and since perception is very much the greater part of reality, that effectively meant she would, for a short time, be in the chamber with them.

Iyanna could not help but enjoy a few precious moments of unburdened selfishness. The weight of Iyanden lay far behind, the responsibility of her coming mission still lay ahead. And between, skimming and prancing across the lives of mortals and immortals alike, Iyanna remembered again the passion and excitement of her first time upon the skein.

For a short while she gloried in the sudden sensation of freedom. It had been many passes since the Great Rift had opened and her labours had multiplied a scorefold and more; a hundred orbits of the Emperor's throneworld about its unremarkable star since the renegade Abaddon had breached the defences around the Eye of Terror and his minions and allies had unleashed terror and destruction across the skies.

Her thoughts turned her attention to the Womb of Destruction, that bleeding heart torn from the centre of the skein. In the roiling darkness there lay the ruins of the aeldari civilisation, the birthplace of the Great Enemy. She Who Thirsts had waxed strong in the time since the Great Rift had torn asunder the real universe and spewed forth the polluting energy of the warp.

And through it was an echo, a persistent thought that she could not ignore, growing in her mind.

Coheria, the moon that no longer was. The site of Eldrad's attempted resurrection of Ynnead, soured by the intervention of the Space Marines. She could still feel the ripples of that disastrous ritual, washing back and forth across the skein. She could not be sure, but also could not ignore the possibility that Coheria's demise had been one of the events that had ushered in the Great Rift, one of the punctures in reality that had become an immense rip between dimensions.

Eldrad had shown himself capable of risking everything for a chance at victory, and certainly he was willing for others to pay a high price for his successes. If the humans ever knew what calamities had beset them, what wars had slain billions of their number because of his intervention... Worlds snuffed out, generations lost to Eldrad's scheming.

She admired him.

There was no binary morality, of good and evil. The only absolute was survive

or die. The aeldari had clung to survival far past their allotted span, but such had not been achieved with kind words and well wishes. War was commerce and death the currency in these times – in all times since the Fall. Eldrad spent wisely the coin of others' lives, and Iyanna herself was willing, if not happy, that her people should sacrifice themselves for a greater goal.

Death came to everyone. For many, it rendered their lives meaningless, their ambitions nought but vainglory, their achievements forgotten in a generation. Her family had literally died for nothing, extinguished in an act of spite. The Ynnari had another cause. No death would pass in vain. No life lived would be wasted.

Ynnead was the only way. In death the aeldari would find peace.

The scale of the threat and the task at hand quashed all lightness of spirit. The oppressive presence of She Who Thirsts smothered the last vestiges of Iyanna's delight, crushing the flutter of hope in her breast.

Hitching a ride on the destiny of an autarch of Ulthwé, Iyanna allowed the eternal matrix to carry her thoughts to Eldrad. There was still much work to be done.

While others debated the course of fate, the Visarch sought solitude. The nagging opinions of seers had always irritated him, though he knew himself well enough to understand that it was his inability to shape his fate that had contributed in major part to the wanderlust that had ruled much of his life. With Ynnead, and in the company of Yvraine in particular, he had found a peculiar sort of peace. A contentment that had eluded him in the service of war as an exarch and a life of mercenary killing when an incubi hierarch, but was now to be found as a servant of the dead.

Feeling prying eyes and minds on him in the domes of the seers, he sought more familiar environs where honest enquiry did not travel. To the shrines of Khaine.

He knew little enough of Ulthwé or its layout, but the beating iron heart of the Bloody-Handed God was a beacon to his thoughts, drawing him across the great plates and domes, across mountains and down the levels to the core of the craftworld. Deep within the structure of Ulthwé lay the shrines of the aspect warriors, a maze of sub-domes linked by dark tunnels and bright highways, leading to vistas and temples he could only guess at.

But if he was expecting welcome, he was mistaken.

At the first arch stood a warrior in the magnificent bone-coloured armour and

bright mane-crest of the Howling Banshees, her executioner blade held across her chest. A wave of antipathy greeted the Visarch when he stopped, the pulse of hostility enough to still the ritual greeting on his tongue. The exarch's murderous gaze followed him along the corridor as he moved on, lingering until he came into view of another – a black-clad Dark Reaper exarch stood beneath the rune of his shrine, which translated as the *Broken Storm*. His missile launcher pointed unwaveringly at the interloper.

Here, too, the Visarch was met with cold contempt. The chill hatred of the Dark Reaper crackled along the buried matrix of the infinity circuit, making itself felt at the edge of thought. A shudder of distaste trembled through the psychic network, arranged web-like through the many shrines of the craftworld, the throne room of the slumbering Avatar of Khaine at its heart. Ulthwé was an ancient domain, the aspect temples numbered in their hundreds, and ill-intent flowed towards the Visarch from all of them.

Traitor, the meme-thought snarled. *Traitor!*

Along the circuit he could feel others regarding him, standing at the thresholds of their sacred places. He could see many of them, weapons bared even as their hostility was plain to sense on the psychic matrix. They were arrayed in all the colours and styles of the aspects, some well known, others found only on Ulthwé. He spied among their multitude the blue and white of a Dire Avenger – the exarch of the Rising Dawn shrine.

The Visarch hurried along the twilight corridor, the ambiance chilling at his approach, the lighting dimming to a fiery orange to match the wrath of those he passed.

His thoughts were a whirl. The voices of those that had come before, the wearers of his armour in ages passed, crammed into his mind, distressed and angered by the circumstances. They demanded many things: answers, vengeance, escape. It was impossible to accommodate their raging, whining pressure and the Visarch faltered, assailed by the spirits' insistent presence.

They were emboldened by the circuitry of Khaine, the blood-stench of the shrines invigorating their warlike desires. The Visarch forced them back, meeting their war-hunger with the yawning emptiness of Ynnead's gift, quelling their cacophony.

He strode up to the exarch and bowed in formal greeting.

The exarch gave no such polite response, the face of her helm styled in a blank mask that watched him impassively.

'There is no place for you. These walls recall, even if you do not.'

‘Recall what?’ he asked, dismissive of the ritual speech, the ancient modes that he had once used. ‘I trod the Path of the Warrior before you were born.’

‘No longer do you walk in the shadow, as priest of the aspects. You have turned from our lord, become a dead thing, your anger a broken blade.’

‘Khaine will not save our people.’

‘Saving the aeldari, Eldanesh’s folk, has never been Khaine’s gift. We fight their wars for them, bleed for their fate, and they despise our king. It matters not to him, nor his exarchs, who lives and who will die.’

‘Then you have failed in your duties of care,’ snapped the Visarch. ‘You may be trapped in the embrace of Khaine but your shrines are dedicated to dealing with the taint from his bloody touch, not welcoming it. Your pupils fight for their souls, for their future. I have found another way to do that. There are many that agree with me – exarchs and aspect warriors that serve Khaine and Ynnead in equal part. Khaine cares not for the cause in which blood is shed.’

‘There is no future for you, Ynnead’s get, while you deny your fate. Khaine laid his hand on you, made you a son, and you disrespect him. Your fate was sealed in blood, a bond now broken, and in blood you will pay. The Hand of Khaine beckons, battle awaits, your destiny arrives.’

He turned, startled as though by someone behind him, though he saw only the long shadows of the exarchs as they had gathered around him.

Traitor, they willed, filling his soul with their condemnation.

Without thought, he pulled free Asu-var and brandished it at the priests of the Bloody-Handed God. Its blade crackled with the energy of so many nearby spirit stones, and he felt the hunger of the sword, the yearning of Ynnead to feed.

‘I do not attempt to outrun my fate,’ he told them, taking a step, parting the ring of warriors with sheer force of will. ‘Nor do I hide behind the cloak of Khaine as I once did. Death takes us all, eventually. When mine comes, I shall meet my master. Which of you can say as much?’

As he was about to leave, the Howling Banshee whom he had seen first barred his path with her glaive pointing to his chest. Her face mask wrought in a screaming visage, she was the embodiment of the banshee, one of crone Morai-Heg’s daughters. Her gaze moved to the sword in his hand.

‘That blade is not yours, it is a cronesword, gift of my mother.’

‘Your founder, Jain Zar, thinks otherwise.’ He moved the tip a fraction towards the exarch’s throat, blood racing, the spirits in his armour clamouring to answer the insult with violence. ‘This is the Sword of Silent Screams, whose touch steals your last call, draws your spirit from the final breath. Think on this,

banshee. Why would Morai-Heg allow such a weapon to be created from her hand if it was not to still the voice of her own daughters?’

The exarch staggered as though the words were blows, her executioner trembled in her grip. He tried not to take pleasure in her moment of uncertainty and failed miserably. Buoyed by his petty triumph, lauded by the crooning souls inside his head, the Visarch swept past, paying no further heed to the damned warriors around him.

Though he had been one of them, trapped in the same cage, he had broken free and, by circuitous route, returned to become their saviour.

Yvraine had spent much time with Eldrad but still knew very little about him. It was he who had first recognised the presence of Ynnead, a meta-thought existing in the ‘tween realm of the webway, feeding upon the trapped energy of the craftworlds’ infinity circuits. How long had he nurtured that secret, changing fatelines and lives to mould that slumbering deity? What manner of mind conceived of such a thing?

She had fought alongside Eldrad in battles and debated his cause in counselling chambers across the galaxy, but never before had she been welcomed into his sanctum. The Opener of the Seventh Way hated the feeling that she was privileged in some way, that this act was a recognition of her status and importance. Even so, she could not help but feel she had been allowed to look upon something few others could, so she took the opportunity to examine her surroundings in some detail, memorising every piece of furniture and ornament, every artwork, in the hopes of deciphering meaning from them later.

The farseer’s tastes were eclectic – if one was too polite to say random, gauche and prolific. At least, such was Yvraine’s initial thought as she sat on a long couch, the trail of her immaculately tailored Commorraghan court dress heaped around her. She was reminded of the throne rooms of archons that had tried to woo her – romantically and politically – laden with trophies of conquests and subjugations, declarations of power and prestige.

Except that Eldrad barely glanced at them. And his displays, such as they were, had been confined to a set of three chambers that would barely qualify as an archon’s cloakroom. In fact, it was the lack of space, except for the high-vaulted ceilings customary in aeldari architecture, that reinforced the meandering, unkempt nature of the collection.

‘It is just...’ began Eldrad, sensing Yvraine’s thoughts as her eyes roamed the room. He searched for a suitable aeldari word and found nothing that quite fitted,

and so settled for one of the few perfect human words instead. ‘*Stuff*.’

Yvraine realised immediately what he meant. These were not heirlooms or trophies, treasured possessions or valued research materials. They were cultural accretions. The accumulation of a life that had spanned five generations of his people. They had been placed with no consideration at all, simply fitted into whatever space had seemed right at the time, and never given a second thought.

He had not even spared them the mental effort of how to discard them.

She stood and gracefully paced to the adjoining chamber for a better view, her long gown sweeping across the red floor tiles. Alorynis looked up from his position on the back of a couch, one eye open, and then settled again, uninterested in her exploration.

The room beyond the archway was almost full with miscellany from a hundred different cultures across a dozen races. Most of it was piled like the spoil heap of a museum, the effluvia of fashions, trends, fads and philosophies as old as Ulthwé itself.

‘Why?’ She did not turn as she asked the question. ‘What is the point of having so much... *stuff*?’

‘Badges of allegiance. Patronage of artists. Objects of psychic significance I used to trace the fates. Bequeathed artefacts. Ambassadorial bribes. Grave goods. The gifts of suitors. Items absent-mindedly left by visitors. Borrowed objects, equally forgotten.’ The farseer shrugged, his heavy robes barely moving with the gesture. Yvraine caught a tiny flutter of pain, of ancient aching in the body and soul, attuned to his mood and thoughts through their mutual contact with Ynnead. ‘I have another tower, a dozen rooms filled with such detritus of my long life.’

‘I forget how old you are,’ said Yvraine. She sat down again, flicking open her fan in the manner of a kabalite courtier. She regarded the seer over the serrated edge, her smirk hidden. ‘How *very* old you are.’

‘Old enough to know better than trade quips with the likes of you,’ replied Eldrad, humour in his voice.

Then he grew sombre again as he pulled back the sleeve of his robe and removed his glove. Beneath, his arm was pale, the glitter of crystal veins clear under the surface. It was the curse of all seers that eventually they would become one with the infinity circuit of their craftworld. How Eldrad had so far eluded that fate was unknown to any but him, and perhaps Ynnead, and he did not share his secrets freely. Yet the grip was there, the chill touch of the Crystal Seer slowly creeping, even if much delayed.

‘It gets harder,’ confessed the seerlord of the Ynnari. ‘Every cycle now, another atom of crystal, another piece of myself lost.’

‘Is that why you dared Coheria?’ asked Yvraine, with sudden insight.

The farseer shrugged again.

‘If I really knew my mind so well, perhaps I would have been content to wither away an age ago.’

‘But you want to live long enough to see Ynnead restored.’

‘Not for myself,’ he said. ‘Not to save myself, if that is what you mean. But I have worked for a long time to see our people delivered from the fate we created, and it would be a peace to know such labours had borne fruit.’

‘They have, in me. I am the Opener of the Seventh Way, and I will recover the last cronesword and see Ynnead risen from the dead.’

‘Many uncertainties cloud your path, Yvraine,’ he told her. ‘If I knew which course to chart for you, I would guide you every step, I swear. But that is not the way of the universe. We can challenge and cajole fate, make bargains with Morai-Heg to cut a thread shorter or longer, to silence the banshee and dodge the blade of Khaine. We can do this, but we cannot stop death. And it is upon that road you tread, Emissary of Ynnead. As such, your fate is cloaked with the dark shroud of the tomb, the province of gods alone.’

This pronouncement sat heavily on Yvraine’s thoughts. She had been many things in her life – artist, warrior, courtesan, pirate and gladiatrix among others – and had never felt anything remotely like a sense of responsibility. Carefree is an overused term, but Yvraine had indeed been without a care for any other, and barely for herself, for most of her span.

It was not often that she wondered why Ynnead had chosen her. Or, if she had been chosen at all, and not simply been a random but convenient conduit for the lashing warp energy unleashed by Eldrad at Coheria.

Her musing was interrupted by movement from Eldrad. The farseer slipped his glove back on and lifted his palm towards the Sphere of Projection. Golden energy gleamed from beneath his slitted eyelids and matching wisps of power crawled across the globe.

He opened his eyes wider, orbs of pure gold, the hint of two small black skulls for pupils. The farseer stared at Yvraine, sending a shiver through her.

‘She is coming,’ he announced.

Like a beacon, the beam of Eldrad’s mind sprang out across the immaterial firmament, illuminating Iyanna with its intensity. Though it did not snare her,

there was an irresistible quality to his thoughts, drawing her to Ulthwé like a stone rolling downhill. As Iyanna's spirit-meme neared the other craftworld, her power dragged to its limits by the vast distance from Iyanden, she felt a sudden influx of energy.

It came from Eldrad himself, reaching out across the gulfs of space to connect with her dormant body back in her chambers. It was incredible, almost as blinding as the navigator-light of mankind's Emperor, yet far more personal and specific; despite the intensity of its power, Iyanna had no doubt that only she alone could feel its presence.

She covered the last moments in a rush, her mind compressed and rearranged and ordered through the intricate atomic alignments within the Sphere of Projection. One instant she was a mote of thought upon the webway, the second she had mind and form again, standing in a cluttered chamber.

Everything was... distant. A haze separated her from her surroundings, a shimmer of half-seen veil between the real and unreal. Iyanna wondered if this was how the world of the living appeared to the spirit walkers – the animated dead like Althenian.

In front of her Yvraine sat forwards on a couch, the gyrix at her shoulder wide-eyed, teeth bared, ears flattened. The spiritseer saw them as corporeal beings, their flesh and clothes, the air in their lungs, the static across the feline's fur. She also saw their otherself, the echoing aura of spirit that followed them. Yvraine's was a pale, icy rime on the skein. The gyrix a fluttering, always moving butterfly of a thing, linked to his mistress by a slender tendril of psychic connectivity.

'Welcome to Ulthwé,' said Eldrad, behind her.

His voice was muted, as though her head was bound in a scarf. Or, perhaps there was some other noise near at hand that she had to filter out to hear his words – the whisper and moans of the universe around her.

She turned, the movement making her feel somewhat insubstantial, disconnected with the floor beneath her feet. She felt the pulse of the infinity circuit more than the hardness of the craftworld, the psychic energy within the matrix more solid than the molecules of reality.

To her host and his other guest, she appeared as a ghostly figure clad in her robes of office, semi-transparent. A starfield sparkled through her, though no light or shadow fell in the space she occupied. She drifted, moving slightly away from the shimmering globe that projected her spirit, so that she could see them both at

the same time.

Yvraine soothed Alorynis, petting with a gloved hand even as she stroked with comforting mental waves.

‘Greetings, sister-of-Ynnari,’ said the Opener of the Seventh Way. She stood and regally inclined her head, her fan held to her thigh. ‘I see the purpose of Eldrad’s invitation now.’

‘You expected me?’ Iyanna’s brows creased at the thought.

‘This is an important moment, Iyanna,’ said the farseer. ‘Such events cause ripples. I sensed you would be coming, but I have not determined the purpose of this visitation.’

‘I shall not strain my power nor yours with unnecessary politeness,’ said Iyanna. ‘I request your help. The seers of Iyanden have discovered the return of a craftworld we all thought lost – fabled Zaisuthra.’

‘Interesting,’ said Eldrad. He stroked his chin with a gloved finger, the dark of the cloth stark against the whiteness of his skin. ‘I had not seen this. But then, I was not looking for it. What importance does this have for the Ynnari, or Ulthwé?’

‘They are not responding to psychic communion. Due to possible familial connections, I have been chosen to lead an expedition to the craftworld. When I heard of the return, I consulted the remains of the family archive, to see what I might learn of this distant branch of the House of Arienal. The details matter only to me, but in my reading I came across a reference to the Gate of Malice.’

‘I have heard of it,’ said Eldrad.

‘I have not,’ said Yvraine. ‘What is it?’

‘A webway gate,’ began Iyanna. ‘Zaisuthra was one of the first craftworlds to flee the dominions-core as the birth of the Great Enemy approached.’

‘It leads to the Well of the Dead,’ interrupted Eldrad, impatient. ‘A portal to the tomb of Eldanesh.’

‘The...? The resting place of the father of the aeldari?’ Yvraine took a step towards Iyanna, and reached out to touch her arm, forgetting that she was not there. Her fingers passed through the image with a flicker of purple sparks. ‘You think that the last of the croneswords might be found in Eldanesh’s tomb?’

‘A reasonable assumption,’ Eldrad answered for Iyanna, earning himself a glare from the spiritseer, who hated it when others chose to speak on her behalf. The seer had done much in Ynnead’s cause, but he was not the fulcrum of every event that turned fate to one path or another.

‘I am inviting you to join me on this expedition, Yvraine,’ she said. ‘The

council of Iyanden want to assemble a taskforce for me, but I think the Ynnari would be of more assistance. If Zaisuthra really has a means to reach the Well of the Dead, your particular... properties and abilities would be very useful.'

'I had no plan to linger on Ulthwé, my ships are ready to depart within the next cycle,' Yvraine replied. She glanced at Eldrad. 'What of our mutual ally?'

'No.' Iyanna's answer was emphatic, causing the farseer to flinch as light rippled from her projection. 'Dhentiln and the rest of the council will complain at your arrival, Yvraine, but will not intervene. If they think they are being manipulated by Eldrad, and let us be honest, they will if he comes, then they will stand in direct opposition to us.'

'I am sure I can find other matters to occupy myself,' said the farseer, petulant as only the very young and very old can be.

Iyanna and Yvraine shared a look of agreement. The spiritseer nodded, and then gestured her thanks to Eldrad.

'Your counsel is welcome, even when your presence is not, seerlord,' she said. 'I am sure the archives of Ulthwé can shed further wisdom on Zaisuthra and the Well of the Dead, and such as you can prise from its vaults before Yvraine's departure might prove invaluable.'

Mollified, for age is never a barrier to flattery even amongst the wisest, Eldrad nodded his own support. Then, with a flick of fingers and a mental twist, he severed the psychic link, and a heartbeat later the room disappeared and Iyanna opened her eyes back within her own chamber.

She lay looking at the ceiling for some time, adjusting to the physical weight. It was not the dysjunction that caused her heart to beat faster, but the prospect of what was to come.

'We have much to prepare,' Eldrad said, pushing himself to his feet. The Staff of Ultramar, which had rested against the back of his chair for the duration of the exchange, floated to his grip as he made for the door. He moved with more purpose than Yvraine had seen since her arrival, invigorated by the fresh challenge and the prospect of taking another step towards fulfilling his prophecy of Ynnead's return.

Alorynis jumped from the couch and landed next to Yvraine, rubbing himself against the softness of her gown, contentment taking the edge off her troubled thoughts. She lingered after Eldrad left, searching the room for something, a memento of the occasion.

Her eye was finally drawn to a small figurine, carved from a wax-like

substance. It looked like the master of something that would then be moulded for castings, of a naked girl kneeling, a hand laid on the body of a fawn beside her, its chest open, heart missing. She recognised it immediately as an interpretation of Lileath, maiden of the moon. Goddess of dreams and portents, Lileath had foreseen the destruction of Kaela Mensha Khaine, at the hands of her mother's mortal offspring, the aeldari. The fawn represented them, and more specifically Eldanesh, the First, murdered by the vengeful Bloody-Handed God.

There had been a time when she had scoffed at talk of myths and legends, before she had felt the touch of the Whispering God. Children's tales, morality plays and parables wrapped in mystery and portentous language for the sake of dramatic effect.

Yvraine took up the figurine and carefully wrapped it in a silken scarf, pondering the cycles of gods and mortals. Cycles that would end forever with the rise of Ynnead.



CHAPTER 7

THE ARRIVAL OF THE YNNARI

A sense of anticipation – or more accurately, apprehension – permeated the atmosphere of Iyanden. Just as an empty hall echoes with the slightest sound, so the half-deserted infinity circuit resounded with the slightest tremor of collective thoughts. And the collective thoughts of the seer council were firmly fixed upon the return of Zaisuthra. The uncertainty that accompanied this unlikely re-emergence was deepened by the news that a sizable fleet was approaching via the webway. The vibrations of future deeds came like a bow wave before the ships, setting the runes of the seers jangling with images of the dead.

In the Ghost Halls the spirits stirred, their laments heightened by the coming of their god's messengers. A psychic dirge thrummed through the minds of the living, numbing them to joy and light and warmth, so that it seemed the entire craftworld was bathed in a chill twilight of the departed.

Iyanna avoided the company of the other seers, despite several requests for her to attend the council. Preparations were underway to assemble enough living crew for a flotilla to set out for Zaisuthra. The spiritseer declined to be involved, and instead busied herself with repairs far from the hub, clouding her thoughts with the shroud of the nearby Ghost Halls, in order that she might keep secret her machinations to bring the Ynnari to Iyanden until it was too late for Dhentiln and his companions to prevent it.

Even so, when the web portal that followed astern of the half-empty craftworld dilated with power, Iyanna felt the call of Ynnead's chosen, as did others across Iyanden. She made her way to the Theatre of Becoming, a dome that adjoined the remnants of the docks set aside for the purpose of welcoming – and potentially containing – visiting contingents.

She was not alone in her interest. Many Iyandeni thronged the pale grey steps of the hall and meandered through the tree-like columns that held up a roof of green and blue crystal. Thousands had come to witness the arrival of Yvraine and her cohort, for there was little enough spectacle to amuse in the day-to-day existence of Iyanden since its invasions and woes.

The atmosphere was mixed, partly a celebration, a gathering not seen for some time. For all their aesthetic disdain, the Iyandeni were as garrulous and social as any other aeldari. It was natural that old friendships were renewed on the occasion, and fresh acquaintances made. Such was the devastation wrought by successive attacks and invasions, the Iyandeni were a microcosm of the shattered aeldari kindreds, geographically and emotionally divided by the wasteland that had been left of much of the craftworld. Isolationism had taken root in their thoughts, but the prospect of outside stimuli roused all but the most quixotic inhabitants.

Arrayed against this were the council and a crowd of Iyandeni filled with misgivings at the return of the Ynnari. Before the grand silver gates waited the seers, clad in their yellow robes, faces hidden behind their ghosthelms, their poise sombre. An entourage of warlocks and bonesingers formed a dark knot in the heart of the gathering crowd.

The dead moved among the living, as had become their wont. Some were clad in wraithbone constructs, others appeared as incorporeal mists and half-seen spectres, formed of energy leaked from the broken infinity circuit. On entering, Iyanna immediately found herself surrounded by these formless ghosts, her presence a siren call, her mind an amplifier that focused their fractured thoughts into a semblance of mortal coherence.

So it was that as she descended a long, curving flight of shallow steps to the floor of the immense hall she was followed by a parade of animated artificial bodies and swirling apparitions. The living turned at her approach, their reactions a reflection of the wider atmosphere – some grateful for her arrival, others afraid and sceptical. The spectral dead seemed as a cloak that billowed from her shoulders, and the wraith constructs formed up like an honour guard, slow, long strides pacing alongside her as she descended with an assumed air of serenity as she passed through the parting assemblage.

In truth her thoughts were in turmoil, and it was this agitation that had drawn the attention of the disembodied Iyandeni. The council turned as one to watch her approach, their body language conveying their hostility as sure as any words. There was no doubt that they suspected – knew – that she had been complicit in

the coming of the Ynnari. It was her hope that confrontation could be avoided, but only a small hope.

With a thought she settled the dead, commanding them to wait. The constructs halted, becoming as statues without her senses and thoughts to guide them. The flitting ghosts disobeyed at first, like moths about a flame, unable to curb their self-destructive instinct, until she sent them scattering with a psychic rebuke. They fled, clustering about the upper tiers of benches and the capitals of the columns, a formless cloud of the dead.

‘I do not look kindly on this,’ Dhentiln told her. These words were intended as a grave pronouncement but simply reassured Iyanna that he was not prepared to effect a more dolorous indictment. A sensible position, which took into account the simple fact that Yvraine and her several hundred Ynnari companions about to alight on Iyanden would look equally unkindly on any retribution against Iyanna.

‘No offence was intended,’ Iyanna said, seeking to calm the troubled waters between them. ‘Nor challenge to your position. I thought the assistance would be useful. Iyanden and the Ynnari can achieve more in cooperation than Iyanden alone.’

‘Yes, I am sure that was your only motivation.’

A shudder through the infinity circuit announced the docking of the first Ynnari ship. A disembodied sigh passed across the hall, a collective exhalation of the living and psychic release from the dead.

The tall gates opened inward silently, revealing a figure in long gown and ornate headdress, a feline carried in the crook of one arm, an open fan in her other hand. A heartbeat later she was joined by an armoured warrior, the pelt of an exotic animal tumbling from one shoulder, gleaming blade bared in his fist.

Yvraine appeared to glide across the tiled floor, her elaborate courtly dress barely moving, head held just a fraction up and away from the contingent awaiting her, a measured pose of aloofness. A few moments after she crossed the threshold, the Visarch sheathed his sword and followed, helmed head turning left and right as he watched the silent crowd.

Others appeared at the gate, Asuryani of the craftworlds and drukhari from the Commorraghan webway and beyond, each marked or coloured in some way to denote their allegiance to the cult of Ynnead – either the rune of the Whispering God or the scarlet of his sect. They did not encroach far, but assembled within the gateway as their lady gracefully made her way to the seers.

She stopped several paces from Dhentiln and bent low. Her eyes never left his

throughout the duration of the bow, the act of politeness conducted in such a way that it masked, but did not wholly conceal, her deadly potential. As a bowstring taut in the hand, the finger upon the trigger, Yvraine teetered upon a moment of release, yet appeared utterly relaxed in poise and expression.

‘My lady of Ynnead,’ Dhentiln said softly, returning the bow with a perfunctory dip of his own. He threw a glance towards Iyanna before he continued. ‘Let us not waste words on enquiring what brings you to Iyanden.’

‘I seek help,’ Yvraine said, her voiced pitched to carry throughout the hall. ‘Help only Iyanden can give. Ynnead has need of your dead.’

At the invitation of the seers, Yvraine departed with them and Iyanna. The Visarch moved to follow, but was summarily instructed to remain behind by a hard look from the Opener of the Seventh Way. The warrior watched her depart, eye lingering on the archway while more of the Ynnari moved into the hall, to be met by a drift of the crowd coming towards the silver gates. A shadow fell over the Visarch and he looked around to find a wraithlord towering over him, its featureless face turned in the same direction as he had gazed.

‘All wisdom, from parents to their children, meets deaf ears.’ The voice was a calm, bass thrum in his thoughts as well as in his ears.

‘You speak of Yvraine, or Iyanna?’ asked the Visarch. He laid a hand on the pommel of his sword and raised the other as a fist in salute to the massive construct. ‘Well met, Althenian. You haven’t aged a cycle.’

‘Words for both,’ the wraithlord replied, wistful. ‘Life is wasted on mortals, is it not?’

‘You have it wrong. It was we that wasted our lives. We fell in love with war, allowed Khaine to rule our hearts.’

‘With death’s touch, both of us are now released, to freedom,’ said Althenian. With an open hand, he gestured for the Visarch to move ahead, as more of the Ynnari disembarked through the docks behind them. The Iyandeni did not approach the strange pair, the crowd opening up as they walked further into the hall, respectful of the wraithlord, wary of the Sword of Ynnead.

‘I am not dead,’ said the Visarch.

‘Are you sure?’ replied the ancient one. ‘Which part of you is mortal, Laarian? The Visarch? I can see what is in you. Many souls. The name changes, but an exarch you remain, in your mind. Destiny, even if you change your armour, follows still.’

‘That is my name no more, a mantle I have shed. I am the Sword of Ynnead,

blade of Khaine no longer,' the Visarch contested hotly. His outburst immediately put the lie to his words and he growled in irritation. 'And what of you, dead one? There is a suit of armour lying abandoned in the depths of Iyanden, yearning for the return of its spirits. A shrine that requires a priest. Pupils absent their teacher. A squad that needs a leader.'

'You are right. We are both aberrations, Laarian,' admitted Althenian.

They stopped at the first bank of steps. The Visarch sat upon a stone bench, sword angled from his hip, cloak swung aside. With a quiet hum of artificial fibres, Althenian lowered to a knee beside him, arms rested on extended thigh.

'Nothing changes, history haunts our new lives,' said the wraithlord. 'As it should. A rare thing, an exarch thinking too much, seeing truth. To what end? We should not be as we are, yet we are. From others, the touch outside of ourselves, turned us thus.'

'In my case, the whisper of a god,' the Visarch pointed out.

'And for me? Could Iyanna have been moved by a god?'

The wraithlord's gesture swept the hall, indicating the scores of Ynnari mingling hesitantly with the Iyandeni. Former Commorraghans hung back, uneasy in the presence of the craftworlders, distrusted in return. Harlequins moved alone and in groups through the mass, their antics causing consternation and delight in equal measure. Corsairs and rangers, outcasts of every stripe kept to their company, interacting only when offered food and drink, eyeing their surrounds like caged animals. Those of other craftworlds seemed at ease, though a step removed from their former kindred, their allegiance to Ynnead setting them apart from those that still remained squarely upon the Path.

'No such thing, a typical Ynnari, none the same. What binds you, so disparate a people, to your cause? All alone, kin of the Whispering God. Outsiders.'

'You know the purpose of our visit?' asked the Visarch, no longer comfortable with the train of their conversation. 'Of Zaisuthra?'

'A little, gleaned from Iyanden's circuit, in passing,' answered Althenian. 'So to say, enough to see the danger, that is all.'

'In that we have agreement. Not idly do the shadows of the past return. That the craftworld comes now when all is sundered speaks of a deeper purpose.'

'Many and strange are the things beyond the sight and knowledge of our people, and Zaisuthra has travelled into that darkness.'

'Let us hope they bring nothing of darkness back with them.'

They stayed in silence for some time after, both knowing that hope of any kind was a rare commodity for the aeldari.

Accord was found between Yvraine and Dhentiln, and by extension the Ynnari and Iyandeni. Jointly they would reach out to the aeldari of Zaisuthra. The seer admonished Iyanna for what he saw as duplicity, and insisted that Iyasta and Telathaus would accompany the expedition to ensure the interests of Iyanden were represented.

The discussion took place in the great Hall of Truths, intended for the open debate of thousands, massive for the handful who negotiated the agreement. Streams of undulating wraithbone fell from ceiling to floor like frozen waterfalls, usually glimmering with the light of the dead, now muted and grey, the spirits banished by Iyanna for the duration of the meeting. As soft-footed as only the aeldari can be, subtle of gesture and voice, still it seemed that every step resounded like an iron-shod boot, each sigh of cloth or creak of leather echoed in the empty vastness.

It was a reminder of what had once been, now lost, and in mind of that the discussions had proceeded swiftly, all disagreement spoken in muted tones, emotions kept firmly under control. When last the Ynnari and Iyandeni had spoken together here, they had elected to raise a demigod from the past of mankind. The matter at hand seemed equally laden with history and portents, and Yvraine noted a particular absence.

‘Should not Prince Yriel know of this quest?’

‘Be thankful he is not here,’ said Dhentiln. ‘His spirit is restless as ever, and he has no love for your cause. Though your power – Ynnead’s power – brought him back through death’s gate, he remembers that it was the fault of the Ynnari that he passed through it.’

‘He bears a cronesword, and has done for some time,’ said Yvraine. ‘Whether he likes it or not, he is bound to Ynnead in spirit and body. He settled for a time in Iyanden, but his heart has always remained out in the cold void between stars. That is why he is not here.’

‘I’ll lose no more of my people to your cult,’ said Dhentiln as the conclave drew to its conclusion.

‘*Your* people?’ Iyanna’s glare would have made any lesser-ego flinch, but Dhentiln was unabashed.

‘I am of Iyanden, these are my people, but I do not claim ownership of them.’

Yvraine suppressed a snort of derision and hid her sneer behind her fan.

‘But you assert that they are no longer mine?’ continued the spiritseer. ‘Is that your meaning?’

In reply, the farseer looked at Yvraine and then back to Iyanna.

‘It has become clear where your loyalties lie, Iyanna. Save yourself much anguish by admitting as such. Since the terrible misfortunes of the Red Moon fell upon your House there has been nothing to bind you to Iyanden save for habit and history.’

The spiritseer opened her mouth to rebut the assertion but found that the right words fled her. She satisfied honour and ego with a curt shake of the head before she turned sharply away, the butt of her spear rapping deafeningly on the floor as she strode towards the dome’s exit.

Yvraine stepped closer to the farseer as Alorynis wove in and out of Dhentiln’s legs. The Iyandeni seer directed an irritated glance at the creature, a psychic static causing the runes upon his bracelets and at his belt to fidget and buzz.

‘Confounded gyrix,’ he muttered.

‘I live to confound the expectations of my seniors,’ Yvraine said quietly, resting a hand lightly on the sleeve of the seer. She fixed him with an icy stare. ‘Your people and mine shall walk side by side, but I will accept no distraction from my goal. I serve all aeldari through Ynnead, not one kabal or craftworld, masque or maiden world. Remember that all of our souls belong to the Whispering God, unless you would prefer to spend your eternal afterlife in the grasp of the Great Enemy.’

Dhentiln shuddered and recoiled, snatching his arm away. He tried to muster anger, but fear washed from him in cold waves. Though his runes guarded his spirit against the predators and perils of the warp, his soul was laid bare before the sight of the Opener of the Seventh Way. She continued before he could speak.

‘I have but one use for Zaisuthra, the gate that will take us to the Well of the Dead. All other concerns are yours alone, and Iyanden is welcome to them.’

Dhentiln considered this piece of information for a moment, brow furrowed.

‘You think you will find the Tomb of Eldanesh?’ His laugh was short and bitter, almost a yap. ‘You crave death more than I realised, if you think to venture into that cursed place.’

‘What do you know?’ demanded Yvraine. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The touch of Khaine lies upon that realm, Daughter of Ynnead. The god of the dead cannot protect you there, for it is steeped in the treachery of Kaela Mensha Khaine. Only strife and bloodshed waits for those that seek the Well of the Dead. Thus it is written in our legends.’ His expression softened, anger curbed by concern. ‘If you are right, and Zaisuthra is home to the Gate of Malice, do not

pass through it. There is nothing on the other side but ruin. Khaine was the doom of our people once before, do not give him a second chance.'

Shaken by the farseer's sincerity, Yvraine said nothing more. She quickly followed after Iyanna, Alorynis trotting at her heel.



CHAPTER 8

THE GHOST HALLS

The two sisters-of-the-dead approached the Gate of Souls, a metaphorical as well as physical departure point from the craftworld of the living to the abandoned lands of the dead. For Iyanna the Ghost Halls of Iyanden were a second home – or a first home in the case of the ancestral lands of the House of Arial. To Yvraine they were a sacred realm, the resting place of Ynnead’s wards.

The physical Gate of Souls appeared as a broad, closed archway ten times the height of an aeldari, vast enough for even the great wraithknights to pass back and forth. Two pillars of silver and white stone held up the immense lintel, the runes of four dozen Houses inscribed upon its surface.

The lands of the dome that covered the approaches to the crossing point had once been verdant meadows and forests, through which had wound sparkling streams and golden stoned pathways. Memorial monoliths and statues had been erected in hundreds of secluded grottoes and groves, shrines to the fallen hidden in caverns and behind the cascade of rainbow-girded waterfalls.

Now there was nothing left but grey sand, sharp grit and shattered monuments. Columned mausoleums stood broken on hilltops, bare to the sky and the uncaring universe, roofs toppled. The streams were dry beds, littered with the bones of fish and water mammals, their tiny skull eyes staring up from the hardened silt. Coins and trinkets and lovers’ tryst-gifts tossed into the pools for the blessings of the ancestors were held fast in the dirt, their gold and silver bright against the dark mud. The white-timbered bridges that had spanned the waterways were nothing but rotted piles, jag-topped fangs in the dark chasms and shadowed canyons that had once glittered with ten thousand lanterns, between cairn-littered mounds that had resounded to beautiful songs of lament

beneath a constant starlit night generated by the craftworld. All of that midnight beauty had been replaced by a harsh, bland glare of artificial light, leaving little shadow and even less sense of awe.

Memories crowded Iyanna's thoughts, images of the place as it had been. Her vision misted as she followed a path towards the gate beside Yvraine.

'We came here when I was young. Many times, on the festivals of remembrance, for the banquets of joyous memorial. The happiness of lives spent well, and the sadness of their loss. Always the balance, the living and the dead in harmony.'

She made a pretence of clearing her throat, though it was no physical blockage that stifled her words. Yvraine said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

'I can see them now, the banners of red and yellow, the streamers tied to the legs of flitting tomb swallows. I hear laughter, the lilt of my mother's mirth as she remembered the jests of her mother. My father, smiling, silent but happy. Starlight of silver, lanterns of yellow and azure. And the smell of incense! Aromatic, uplifting vapours carried on the breeze from the wardens' shrine braziers. I had nearly forgotten that.'

'I remember celebrations on Biel-tan,' said Yvraine. A pause, just a breath, but a heartbeat of reflection before she continued. 'Mostly such events were to laud those that had given their lives while in service to Khaine. Heroes, we thought them. The exarchs, they would be reborn. But the aspect warriors? The pilots? The guardians and the jetbike riders, the gunners and the ships' crews? Their lives had been given up to the glory of the Biel-tani, laid upon the altar of Khaine for the restoration of our people and our empire.'

'The Rebirth of Ancient Days?' said Iyanna, referring to the meaning of the craftworld's name.

'I believed it then, that we might be restored,' confessed Yvraine with an embarrassed flush to her cheeks. 'The folly! That we could ever drag ourselves back from the abyss into which we had plunged. To think that war and death would save us, that Khaine would be our salvation.'

'Now you know that there is another way.'

'The Seventh Way,' said Yvraine, her smile wry.

They continued in silence as they walked the long paths towards the distant gate, contemplating the passing of even the dead. Not a buzz of insect or bird call or scurry of small animal broke the still, only the light tread of their boots on the gravelled paths.

They came before the Gate of Souls and stopped. Though all about was

physically dead, even in that dismal place the ever-present aura of the infinity circuit laid upon everything. Attuned to the energy of the dead, both Yvraine and Iyanna accepted its presence as others accept the air in their lungs or the ground beneath their feet.

To the Opener of the Seventh Way it was the constant whisper of her god. On a craftworld she heard the souls of the dead speaking to her constantly, though their words were only half-formed, their intent clouded by their incorporeal nature.

For Iyanna, who had moved about every fibre of the infinity circuit at one time or another, the soul of Iyanden felt like a static upon her mind, rising to an invigorating crackle or snap when she neared one of the nodes through which its power might be accessed.

Beyond the gate lay nothing. At the boundary the infinity circuit had been deliberately curtailed, to preserve and power a functioning matrix for the living inhabitants of Iyanden. Crystal lattices and psychically inductive roots and branches existed past the gate, but they were fractured, disincorporated from the whole.

The sundering had happened after the incursion of the tyranids, when swathes of the network had been tainted by the hive mind, rendered corrupt by the phenomenon known as the Shadow in the Warp. Rather than some amorphous blanketing nightmare that quelled the realm of the other, it had formed tendrils of predatory darkness, infiltrating and devouring the conduits even as bio-constructs had assimilated the physical, living parts of the craftworld.

Upon this calamity had been poured further catastrophe, when both mortal followers of the Dark Gods and the daemonic minions of the Lord of Decay had followed in the wake of the Great Devourer. Already cut off from the hub, huge tracts of the Ghost Halls had been lost to the taint of Nurgle, purged after the invasion only by great effort of the seers and bonesingers.

If the dome of the Gate of Souls was a topographically barren waste, the Ghost Halls beyond were the psychic equivalent.

‘Ynnead has need,’ Yvraine reminded her companion. ‘While Dhentiln can reasonably lay claim that Iyanden requires all that remains of its infinity circuit, he could not say the same for the dispossessed dead.’

Iyanna nodded and raised the Spear of Teuthlas. A halo gleamed from its bladed tip, reflected from the dark, solid metal of the gate doors. The light flowed like quicksilver along slender channels, creating a glittering pattern upon the massive portal. On the left, entwined through the branches of a tree in full bloom, the

rune of Isha, mother of the aeldari. On the other, set upon a pyramid that was in turn emblazoned upon a sun, the sigil of the Lord of Heavens, Asuryan.

‘The living seek the audience of the dead,’ Iyanna intoned, the words swallowed by the enormous weight of the portal in front of her.

A noise like the flutter of a breeze through dead leaves coalesced into a whispered reply.

Who speaks for the living?

‘Iyanna, of the House of Arienal, spiritseer. You know me well, ancestors of Iyanden.’

‘Yvraine, Emissary of Ynnead, daughter of shadows. My lord is your lord.’

Silence.

Iyanna’s heart thudded a score of times as she waited, and beside her Yvraine regarded the closed portal with icy eyes, her gyrix companion on her shoulder stock still, fur and whiskers prickling.

Soundless, a dark line appeared between the doors and widened as the portal opened away from them. A wind blew out, chill and dry, and beyond the opening Gate of Souls lay nothing but pitch blackness.

Iyanna and Yvraine spared one look for each other, sisters in the family of Ynnead, and stepped into the embrace of the dead’s midnight.

The light from the dome outside the Gate of Souls faded as they walked on, the floor of the hall hard and cold underfoot. There was nothing of the infinity circuit here, not the slightest buzz or blur of psychic life. The Ghost Halls of Iyanden had changed little from when Yvraine had last visited, though also there had passed many cycles of subtle progression. In the past these domes had been disturbing analogues of the quarters of the living, where the dead had continued by rote that which they had done as mortals. Ancient courts of princes and seers had sat in death, a mockery of the intrigues and fashions that had once held sway upon the lost Houses. Clad in shells of wraithbone the spirits of the dead wandered their chambers and passages, and stood endless vigil at tombstones and parapets, gazing out to broken towers and fallen mansions.

The mindless parody continued still, but in far less grandeur. Severed from the infinity circuit the Ghost Halls had dwindled, becoming twilight places of shadows and formless wraiths. The carcasses of broken wraithguard and wraithblades lay where they had fallen in tiled hallways and on winding stone stairs, the ghostlight of their former occupants skittering to and fro in confusion and desperation, locked to their last mortal incarnation but unable to manifest

anything but the most rudimentary awareness.

They proceeded along carpeted hallways between tapestries as old as the craftworld depicting cities and mountaintop fastnesses destroyed in the Fall five generations before. Ornate chandeliers and lamps glowed fitfully, enough only to throw dancing shadows about the intruders, casting patches of darkness across their path. The spear of Teuthlas gleamed in Iyanna's hand, a pool of golden light around her, while Yvraine glowed with a moonlight of her own, reflecting the tomb-energy that seeped through every timber, beam, stone and thread of the forgotten palaces.

At the approach of the spiritseer the aeldari will o' the wisps became agitated, gaining a semblance of their lost awareness, base sentience returning with the focus her presence brought. They flocked to her, streaming through archways and down stairs, until Iyanna was at the centre of a growing constellation of souls that bobbed about her like fireflies.

She raised her empty hand and allowed a soul to settle there, feeling for an instant the spark of his life, sharing fleeting memories of love and loss, poetry and destruction. With a flick of the wrist the spiritseer sent the soul back to the others.

'Send word,' she whispered, her breath a vapour lit by the swarming spirits. 'Send word that a conclave is to be held. The House of Arienal calls.'

With a psychic impulse she sent the formless ghosts in all directions, scattering them on the immaterial breezes. Her imperative was the last thing in their thoughts, such as they were, to carry her message out to the other Ghost Halls.

'Will they come?' asked Yvraine.

'We shall see,' said Iyanna.



CHAPTER 9

THE BEACON OF ARIEACH

It took a greater part of the remaining cycle to exit the grand house of the Gate of Souls and cross the Barrenlands that encircled it. Without energy from the network of Iyanden it was a desolate, lonely place, lit only by soul-light and the glimmer of stars through the azure skyscreens above. The skeletal remains of forests and the broken cliffs of long, dry shorelines guided them along the trackless route, though Iyanna knew the way by instinct. Not a soul stirred here save in the stones of the spiritseer and the coiling deathly energies of Ynnead that danced among the folds of Yvraine's courtly garb.

A distant crash of waves sounded against a grey shore, and to this abandoned beach came the pair, to stand on the colourless dunes to look out upon a sluggish sea, its tides and swells created by extension from the still-living Dome of Skies that bounded the far side of the sea. On a crumbling cliff top to their right, overlooking the dismal bay, the Watchtower of Arieach stood proud, a yellow thrust of ghost-stone amid a complex of low buildings and walls.

They made their way along the beach, leaving shallow footprints in sands that had not seen mortal tread for more than three million cycles. A winding path through spurs of gorse and sea rushes led them up the cliffside, a strata of red, grey, black and white stone on one side, a precipitous drop to jagged rocks on the other with no rail. Yet aeldari are a dexterous people and the ascent carried no more risk for the pair than walking over open ground.

When they achieved the summit the path dissipated again, swallowed by dead grass and age-worn triangular flagstones that demarked the boundary of the watchtower's realm, lined by a series of standing stones marked by moonlit glyphs in the most ancient aeldari language.

‘Are you sure you wish to do this?’ asked Yvraine when Iyanna moved to step across the boundary line. She laid a hand on the sleeve of the spiritseer’s robe.

‘Too long I have avoided this moment,’ Iyanna replied. ‘I am the last of the House of Arienal, and it is my right.’

There was a moment of resistance when they met the invisible border of the watchtower. Though the Ghost Halls were separated from the main infinity circuit, here and there pocket networks continued to work, as was the case at Arieach. A spirit engine hidden in the foundations of the tower, linked to the lodestones set about the circumference, recognised Iyanna’s approach and stuttered into a semblance of activity.

Silver illumination gleamed from high windows that had been dark a heartbeat earlier. Rune-carvings on the monoliths responded, shining red and green upon the parched grassland and abandoned buildings.

Yvraine moved to follow but Iyanna halted her with a raised hand.

‘I will return soon,’ the spiritseer assured her sister-of-the-dead.

Using the Spear of Teuthlas as a walking staff, Iyanna picked her way through tumbled boulders and uneven slabs, heading towards the central tower. She was still a dozen steps from the dark red wood when the doors opened. The great portal swung outwards to reveal a dimly lit interior. It was far from welcoming, the shadows seemed deepened rather than allayed by the gleam of her speartip.

Just a few strides inside she came to a halt, facing a semicircular alcove large enough for three to stand abreast, directly facing the door. The floor was tiled with black marble, a golden sigil of the House of Arienal set upon the curved wall.

Iyanna stepped within and looked up to see a tracery of crystal set into the white ceiling, much like an asymmetric spider’s web of diamond. Returning her gaze to the symbol, she reached out a hand, hesitating for just a moment before making contact.

Her ascent was both swift and without motion. A rush through her soul disconnected mind from body. She was remotely aware of her body disassembling even as her spirit was conducted intact along the psychic pathways, to be reunited with the reassembled molecules of her physical form in the time it took an electron to orbit its nucleus. One instant she had been standing at the foot of the tower, the next she stood upon the exposed summit, the wind dragging at her robe, the floor beneath her feet crackling with sparks of transporter energy.

The vertigo hit her when she took a step, threatening to topple her to the pale yellow slabs. Closing her eyes did not help, serving only to increase the dizzying spin that made it feel that her brain was rotating wildly within her head. She instead fixed her gaze on a point of silvery light far below – the ghost-haze of Yvraine.

When the near-seizure had passed, Iyanna straightened, using the spear for balance. The rooftop was roughly forty paces across, quite devoid of architecture or decoration, save for another sigil of Arienal carved into a hexagonal flagstone at the centre. Iyanna stepped quickly towards it, but still at a pace's distance met a soft but unyielding force that would not allow her to step upon the stone. She tried from different directions, but on each occasion was met by the same subtle but impenetrable barrier.

On attempting once more to push through the force, Iyanna led with her free hand, summoning her spirit energy into a nimbus of white flame about her fist. Though she was no more successful than earlier, she realised that the resistance had hardened as she had tried to bring her other hand closer – the hand holding the Spear of Teuthlas.

‘Jealous ghosts,’ she muttered, setting aside the weapon, heirloom of a rival House.

When she tried again the resistance was gone and she stepped upon the sigil without effort. For several heartbeats, Iyanna waited, unsure what to do next. The House of Arienal had been the traditional watchkeepers, since the founding of Iyanden, but the role had swiftly become ceremonial as other developments had overtaken the ancient security system – not least the advent of the Path and the emergence of the farseers. Other than certain items of regalia, nothing remained of that duty. Iyanna noted sourly a particular absence of instructions or even family legend concerning the activation of Arieach.

‘I am Iyanna, of the House of Arienal, last of the watchkeepers,’ she whispered. Nothing happened.

She repeated the words, louder, twice more until she was shouting into the gentle wind, but without effect.

‘Think about it,’ she told herself, turning on her heel, seeking inspiration. ‘You are an alarm system. The watchkeeper would come here and... what? Ask for help?’

It made no sense and Iyanna felt foolish. The thought of returning to Yvraine in failure set shame burning through her.

Beneath her feet, the sigil glimmered in response, flecking with gold and red

for a few heartbeats. Iyanna felt a moment of triumph and the dancing specks faded almost immediately.

‘Of course, you fool!’

She let her thoughts peel away from the folds of her mind, sending tendrils of enquiry into the psychic circuit beneath her feet. The network was very simple, attuned to a singular emotion.

Fear.

In times of ancient danger, the watchkeeper would indeed be steeped in fear. He or she would not even need to broadcast such a thing, the detector was actively seeking the palpitations and psychic dissonance of dread.

So how would one activate the system, coming in the cold light?

Fear was the key, and just the thought of what she had to do made Iyanna’s heart tremble, her trepidation eliciting another response from the sigil key, this reinforcing her belief of what was needed.

Iyanna set her shoulders, braced her legs, closed her eyes and delved into her memories. She slipped past recent recollection, seeking those moments, one particular instance, buried far from casual gaze. Her battles with the Ynnari, her tribulations with the council fluttered past, inconsequential.

And in the dark of her innermost thoughts lay a locked casket of memories, bound by threads of silver denial, chained with loathing.

Had Yvraine known this was what would be needed? Had that been the cause of her warning?

Iyanna knew she was procrastinating.

With a sudden surge of feeling, she tore open the box and for the first time since it had happened she looked again at the moment her family had perished.

Not filtered through the haze of the Streets of the Dead, nor distended by spoken words. The memory itself the tight cluster of dark strands she had buried the instant it had happened, piling grief and terror upon the recollection to bury it deeper than she would ever chance upon.

Not names, not thoughts, not any reasoned or logical response. No faces, no screams, nothing physical. They were simply symptomatic of the dark fire that lay in the abyss of her dread.

The feeling. The stark and unsullied memory of knowing – knowing in every fibre of body and soul – that she was the last of the House of Arienal. The oblivion that had opened beneath her, the void that had swallowed her insides, the darkness that had fallen onto her spirit.

Utter loneliness.

Iyanna screamed, letting free the pain and suffering she had locked away, had never allowed to exist for fear that it would consume her.

Unseen in her moment of psychic agony, the sigil of Arienal burned bright. Brighter than ever before, fuelled by the existential horror tapped into by Iyanna. White flames consumed her, burning from the flagstone to sear skywards into the dead air.

The spiritseer staggered back, sobbing and heaving, every limb trembling. The beacon fire raged still, a pillar of pure white that pierced the artificial sky, brighter than the stars.

Coughing and choking on her grief, the spiritseer stumbled to the wall that bounded the roof of the tower, to look across the Barrenlands.

All was darkness and death still.

But only for a heartbeat more.

In the far distance an answering light shone, a gleam of gold from another tower, as of the sun shining on a gilded mirror. She knew instantly from whom the signal came, the recognition leaping into her thoughts from the watchtower itself: The House of Varinash.

An instinct drew her eye to the left, to an island on the far side of the bay. More golden light, gleaming from a circle of standing stones: House of Valor.

And others still, creeping and gleaming and blazing in response to the fire of Arieach, until near and far, from bay to horizon, the landscape was lit with a dozen pillars of gold, their fires splashed across the heavens. In their light the grasslands seemed alive, the seas tossed and vibrant, the air stirred to a gale in the force of converging energy.

Across the Ghost Halls, the dead awoke.



CHAPTER 10

THE DEAD HOUSES GATHER

Beneath the twilight of the cosmos beyond the enclosing domeshield, the great halls and towers of Iyanna's home were dappled grey and green, shimmering as though in shallow waters. Not a living nor dead thing stirred, for of all the Ghost Halls, the realm of Arienath was bereft of all energy.

The hillsides and pale mausoleums that had once held the ancestors of the House of Arienal were broken rubble, strewn across dark terrain scarred by the detonations of the torpedoes that had destroyed so much of the infinity circuit and left Iyanna as sole survivor of her kin.

Hasty repairs by the bonesingers had left welts and mounds of raw crystal and ugly spurs of wraithbone jutting from a landscape that had once been as carefully composed and sculpted as any artist's statue. Now weathered by the gentle but constant breeze, half hidden by the progress of lichens and small-leaved creepers, these gross reminders of the past's destruction loomed as vague shapes in the distant darkness, numb to the thoughts of the two aeldari that entered, dead nerve endings, the absence of feedback distracting and discomfoting.

'How can you live here?' asked Yvraine.

They came upon a high gate, thrice as tall as them between slender black pillars. Long banners hung down the gateposts, red pennants embroidered in white with runes of the House's past and present leaders. A silver light spread from Iyanna as she stepped closer, snaking along buried conduits within the ground, energising the runemetal of the gate itself so that it shone with pale splendour. It parted, admitting them silently, revealing a long winding road up to the central cluster of towers and long halls.

The tracery of psychic power preceded them, igniting lamps set along the approach so that a pool of light followed their progress, darkening again when they had passed. Yvraine felt the tug of empty spirit circuits, nagging at her soul, but also trying to draw forth the dead bound within her by the power of Ynnead. The leeching was constant but not overpowering, a nag on the edge of sensation.

A false dawn broke across the abandoned palaces and keeps, brought forth by the manipulation of intricate energy fields set in motion when the dome had first been erected. In the growing light of an artificial morning the unkempt, deserted grounds of Arienath seemed even more depressing. The twilight had hidden the disrepair, inhabiting homes and crofts with shadows, the gloom departing to leave only the stark reality of utter emptiness.

Their route eventually took them to a broad-gated hall, roofed by four blue domes painted to resemble a summer's day, holographic clouds drifting lazily across their surfaces. Yvraine saw wing flutters and heard the chirrup of small birds, a moment of delight springing forth from the simple sign of life.

'Alas, it is not as it seems,' sighed Iyanna. She raised a hand and the stream of psychic power that went before her receded slightly, slipping back through the psy-veins of the hall at her command. The domes dimmed and the speakers from which the artificial birdsong had sprung forth fell silent.

'Oh.'

Yvraine felt like weeping. She had known for a long time the facts of Iyanna's circumstance, and had spent much time with her since their paths had first crossed. But there was nothing that could prepare the Opener of the Seventh Way for the utter absence of companionship and hope that seeped from the cold stones of dead Arienath.

'This is how it shall be, before we are Reborn,' Iyanna told her. The hall doors opened at a gesture, thousands of spirit candles fluttered into life along the vast chamber within as the spiritseer extended the power of the souls bound to her stones and runes. 'This is why I live here, as a reminder of the cost of salvation. This is but a single House on a single craftworld, a tiny echo of what befell the dominions during the Fall. When Ynnead rises, when only the dead remain, think of this place for it shall be everywhere.'

Iyanna cast her gaze over their surroundings, face impassive.

'Each craftworld and colony, every Exodite planet, each webway realm, and even mighty Commorragh shall not be stirred by the slightest drift of our existence. In our dying, the Great Enemy dies too. We have been dying for an age, Yvraine, but are too scared to step over the threshold into the light beyond,

the sanctuary that comes when She Who Thirsts is consumed by her own hunger. With you, to open the Seventh Way, we usher our people towards a fate ordained five lifetimes ago, and then we shall know this peace.'

It was humbling, put in such words, and Yvraine remained silent as they entered the hall. Banners of family members and household loyalties hung along the hall, above windows that brightened with the burgeoning light of the artificial day. Dust motes danced in the draught of their entry, and through tall pillars and ornately carved benches the wind whistled and keened like a child allowed to unexpectedly run free in a place so solemn.

'They are coming,' Iyanna announced, leading Yvraine towards a stage set at the far end of the chamber, between two grand staircases that disappeared into the upper levels of the hall-house. She directed the Opener of the Seventh Way to a throne on one of the lower steps while ascending to the most ornate chair. Yvraine bridled for a moment.

'Is the Emissary of Ynnead to sit demurely like some lady-in-waiting?'

Iyanna's reply was firm, bordering on harsh.

'This is the great hall of the House of Arienal. It is an honour to sit upon any step herein.'

Cowed, Yvraine acquiesced and seated herself, spreading out the vastness of her courtly gown to either side, settling into the high chair. A moment later a small silhouette appeared at the sunlit doorway, paused sniffing the air and then scampered within. The gyrix lay down beside Yvraine, bringing with it a coldness of the approaching dead that Iyanna had sensed earlier.

The first to heed the call was the House of Delgari, their delegation led by Faenorith Spear-born. The wraithnoble was as tall as Althenian though crafted with more flared protrusions, flamboyant compared to the lean design of the warrior-constructs of Iyanden. Her psychoplastic was a startling yellow but for a few narrow tiger-stripes of deep blue and the glitter of psyconductive stones. With Faenorith, her husband-in-life, Daethos Darkwinter, former autarch and hero of many a defence of the craftworld.

A dozen retainers carried the banners of their House, six wraithguard half as tall again as an aeldari warrior, in the same colours as their lady and lord, wraithcannons and distort-scythes held one-handed at a salute. They were followed by six wraithblades, of similar build yet bearing paired swords, their standard poles affixed to their spines. Others carried long halberd blades or pistol and shield, according to the predilections in life and duties in death. They

marched in step, peeling away to one side of the hall at a thought from their lady-in-death.

‘Welcome, House of Delgari,’ said Iyanna, rising a little with a tilt of the head.

‘As tradition dictates, we have answered the summons,’ said Daethos, speaking for his wife who stood silent to one side, face turned away with aloofness. ‘Impertinence to make such demands of those that have earned eternal rest.’

‘What was earned might yet need be spent,’ said Iyanna, sitting again. ‘The House of Delgari wanes with each pass, as I see from the dwindling of your entourage. If you would seek to avoid the fate that befell the House of Arienal, you would do well to listen to my request.’

‘Few enough remain to do so,’ Lady Faenorith said sharply, her voice echoing down the hall though she still did not turn to face Iyanna. ‘But if you speak, we shall listen.’

It was not long before two others arrived, the contingents from the Houses of Haladesh and Valor, arriving together not out of alliance but rivalry, neither family wishing to concede their place to the other. Fortunately, the great hall was able to accommodate both, a trio of wraithnobles from each, with attendants arraigned in the colours of their Houses and bearing the gonfalons that customarily flew from the top of their towers. The crash of their footfalls rang along the hall and back, the two companies not quite in step with each other so that the reverberations clashed and crossed with their progress. It was a relief when both parties stopped before the stage, immobile as only the dead can be.

‘The House of Arienal extends its protection to its renowned visitors,’ Iyanna announced before the respective representatives engaged in any kind of petty rivalry concerning who would be addressed first. She was careful to raise her hands in welcome to both, before turning her attention to Agariam of the House of Valor. His wraithform was slight, barely taller than the artifices of his retainers, a midnight blue that flared with ornate yellow starbursts. ‘Long has been the alliance between Arienath and the Lands of the Grey River,’ she turned swiftly to Sophiorith of Haladesh, ‘and pleasing it is to see the regent of the Clearheavens attend with equal vigour.’

‘As in times past, so now,’ said Agariam, bending a knee slightly in supplication, his long ghostsilk tabard touching the floor for a fleeting moment before he rose. ‘There are those in the Ghost Halls that are not simply content to brood over past glories nor mourn the deprivations of the past. You are the last of your line, Valor laments that none carry the mortal burden for us, but we will not abandon the living.’

The words were well-meant but stung Iyanna. The House of Valor had no living members, but the ranks of its dead were plentiful. She would have gladly swapped her own mortal existence if it would return the lost spirits of her kin and ancestors. But they were gone forever, the dead and the living annihilated alike by the single chance stroke of fate and spite.

‘New glories await the brave-hearted,’ declared Sophiorith, her voice edged with the notes of a clarion, distinct and uplifting. She turned slightly, directing everyone’s attention to the tall figure that had slipped unannounced to the wide doors. Smaller shapes – rune symbols – orbited the figure with an erratic life of their own. ‘Though he has abandoned any rank of command to be included in this call-to-arms, there is another of House Haladesh that would hear your entreaty and offer counsel.’

‘Kelmon Firesight is always assured of an ear to listen to his advice,’ said Iyanna, formally inviting him across the threshold with a raised hand. ‘Had I more time I would have sent word direct to the famed wraithseer.’

Kelmon entered with long strides, ribbons of brightly embroidered dark cloth trailing from his golden wraithbone shell, his rune-shapes following a heartbeat later like inattentive underlings.

‘Not for five generations has the beacon of Arieach been lit,’ said the wraithseer as he advanced, his rune-tethers and floating talismans casting their own light and shadows in the rising dawnlight. ‘Though the galaxy is a place of many woes, I have foreseen no specific threat to Iyanden that would warrant such a remarkable – and singular – event.’

‘The threat is ever-present, honoured one,’ said Yvraine.

Nothing was said but her intervention was met with a wave of hostility; a stiffening of limbs and necks if such a thing was possible with the mainly immobile wraith-beings. A torrent of distaste, irritation and outright antipathy washed through the hall, accompanied by the whispered moans of agitated spirits.

‘This is a conclave of the Great Houses,’ Lady Faenorith said archly. ‘It is crass to bring outsiders, never mind for one to expect to offer opinion.’

‘I make no apology,’ said Iyanna, before Yvraine could retort and worsen the situation. ‘Though in tradition we have assembled there is nothing traditional about this assemblage. As Kelmon has alluded, only once shall I make this summons, for I am the last of my House, and you are the dead of yours. When all have come, I shall share my purpose, but not before. Until then, you extend to Yvraine every courtesy you extend to me, or consider yourselves unwelcome at

these proceedings.’

The words seemed mild but the effect was profound. It was unthinkable for a House to be turned away in such an extraordinary circumstance. Though the dead, for the most part, cared very little about anything, those that still retained some semblance of their former identities – the revered such as Lady Faenorith and Sophiorith and Agariam and the others that would come – were still aeldari and put great store by reputation, both personal and familial. With little else to distract them from the eon of their existence, save retreat into sullen somnolence, politicking and gossip were as rife among the scions of the Ghost Halls as anywhere else within the aeldari kindreds. Scandal was a constant threat, though the participants were now far removed from day-to-day concern. When one might meet one’s ancestors abroad on the spirit conduits, or conjured into an animated wraithbone body, it behoves one to keep the House name unblemished or suffer a mortifying degree of shame.

Chastened by such thoughts, the wraithnobles said and did nothing, allowing Iyanna to continue.

‘The threat is existential, unyielding if not immediate. Opportunity has arisen, which I shall discuss when all are present, for our people to take a step forwards. Long we have resisted in retreat to the constant assaults of the aliens and daemons, to survive and elude, and elude to survive again.’ She gestured towards Yvraine. ‘One does not need to live to become Reborn. Through Ynnead any can join the cause that will see our peoples finally set free of the eternal curse.’

‘You offer life to the dead?’ Kelmon took a stride, one giant foot almost upon the lowest step, his rune-orbited frame casting a shadow over Yvraine. ‘Be careful of what you desire, for not all things offered are gifts.’

Iyanna was not sure if these last words were directed to her or the wraithnobles, but decided to answer regardless.

‘Death is a surety, that all here have touched and known.’ She stood and raised her hands, commanding psychic wave flowing from her, bidding the dead to remain silent. ‘When all have come that will come, then such matters will be discussed.’



CHAPTER 11

WRAITHCOUNCIL

And discussed such matters were, in much detail and great length. When the advocates for the Houses of Divinesh and the lesser estates arrived, the wraithcouncil began in earnest. Much was said of Iyanna's right, or lack, to have convened the gathering at all, and though no agreement was reached on that account, with Kelmon's guidance it was accepted that since they had all been disturbed and gathered, they might as well use the opportunity.

Yvraine fretted for some time, impatient but silent, occasionally calmed by a pulse of reassurance from Iyanna, who seemed content to allow the dead lords and ladies of Iyanden to waylay proceedings to bring up ancient rivalries and slights, unfulfilled oaths and promises only half kept. The aeldari excel at such moral record-keeping, even as they are poor at maintaining their own honour and virtue, and their long memories only deepen such divides on occasion. For the dead, who recalled not only the deficiencies of others for a lifetime but also those of their ancestors and descendants for five generations, some of whom were present if not with the capacity to vocalise their own defence, any large gathering of the Houses was an opportunity to air grievances at wrongs that should have laid to rest with the spirits that had committed them.

Yvraine eventually recognised what was at play, and why Iyanna allowed such circular and pointless discussions to continue. Until the councillors had gone through motions of defending and restoring their honour, of dragging out the details of past misdemeanours, any new business would inevitably get sidetracked.

The Opener of the Seventh Way remembered that even spirits as animated as Kelmon, Sophiorith and Daethos were bound to the rituals established in their

lives. Lesser souls stood guard for cycle after cycle, never once straying from their post, or performed attendant duties in the empty halls and chambers, preparing for guests that never arrived or tending to the needs of masters and mistresses that had died three lifetimes previously.

The council was nothing more than a ceremony, to exercise the spirits and exorcise their differences. Stuck within a wraith-locked stasis, the ambassadors of the Ghost Halls could neither deviate nor evolve from their timeworn positions.

Because nothing changed here.

Many times when Yvraine had been upon the Path, following the creed of the craftworlds as first taught by Asurmen and his disciples, she had chafed at the discipline and confines necessitated by strict adherence to the protocols of the system. She had moved from path to path, as a performer and warrior, warlock and pleasure-seeker, but had never felt comfortable. Her time among the corsairs of the *Lanathiralle*, when she had broken free of Biel-tan under the guise of Amharoc, had shown her a galaxy beyond the boundaries, and that had not been enough.

Only in Commorragh, in the deathduels of the Crucibael and the even more deadly politics of the kabals had Yvraine known, perversely, a sense of peace. In the anarchy and constant motion of shifting alliances, pacts and contracts, there was a centre, an eye of the storm she had come to occupy so that all moved about her while she remained. Her fellow Commorraghans had always laughed at the craftworlders, accusing them of being locked in a prison, unable to affect the universe around them. They were not free, said the folk of the Dark City, and in the thoughtless posturing and argument of the wraithkind, Yvraine saw what the Commorraghans had long suspected.

Even so, she had looked upon the kabalites and wyches and seen them as equally trapped in the race to keep ahead of their own doom. There was no less a self-destructive cycle in the ploys and machinations of the dark lords and ladies as there was the rote and tradition of the craftworlds. Neither saw the cage they had fashioned around themselves, one forced to survive only a step away from She Who Thirsts, the other to remain out of Her sight.

Ynnead would change everything. Had already changed everything.

An age had come and gone between the rise of the Great Enemy and the advent of Ynnead, and the Whispering God could wait a little longer, his emissary told herself. But it was not easy.

‘The wheel of the cosmos has turned,’ Iyanna began, when the sum of the old arguments had settled and the council was ready to proceed onto fresh ground. The fake star of Arienath had passed its zenith, its golden light now spread from the windows on the opposite side of the hall. Long experience had taught the spiritseer that the dead would never be swift, in thought or act, but she had an inkling that once raised her matter would be resolved without delay.

‘An ancient companion, long taken from us, has returned,’ she continued when she felt the psychic buzz of their attention upon her. Even the retainers were able to focus, latching onto the thoughts of the living far more than the ephemeral presence of their fellow dead, no matter how lordly and strong in life they had been. ‘Craftworld Zaisuthra, which once passed beyond the veil of the rim, has returned to the known systems. We, that is the followers of Ynnead, believe that Zaisuthra is home to the Gate of Malice, one of the first webway portals ever created.’

‘I know of this portal,’ said Agariam. ‘Or of its legend, which is older still than any craftworld. It leads to a place of strife, Iyanna. You and your cohorts may cleave to death, but to pass the Gate of Malice is a doom that even Ynnead cannot save you from.’

‘Agariam speaks the truth,’ said Kelmon. Articulated fingers flexed in strange ways, summoning a cluster of runes to circle about the hand. Iyanna recognised several, the most potent and bright of which was the Rune of Khaine, which flickered with orange fire. The seer pointed to Yvraine. ‘You think to open the Well of the Dead.’

‘It is our hope that the Tomb of Eldanesh holds the last of the Fingers of Morai-Heg,’ admitted the Opener of the Seventh Way. ‘Or can lead us to the place where it is found.’

‘We do not know what to expect there, nor if Zaisuthra is willing to allow us entry,’ said Iyanna. ‘The numbers of the Ynnari grow and fade like the seasons, as more come to our cause and some are slain in its pursuit. Even now, in waxing strength, we do not have the power to confront a whole craftworld. We cannot look to the living for aid, for they are blind to the truth that Ynnead will free us all.’

‘So you think to persuade the dead?’ asked Daethos.

‘I persuade nothing,’ Iyanna said quietly but firmly. ‘I demand. The Beacon of Arieach is lit, the call has been put forth. Ancient oaths were sworn on those stones, long overdue.’

‘Oaths given to the House of Arienal,’ contested Sophiorith. ‘Not you. Oaths

now of the dead.’

‘I *am* the House of Arienal,’ Iyanna told them, standing up. A lambent flame played about her body, a ghostfire of pale blue and purple. ‘I lit the beacon, I demand the answer. More than that, I grant the eternal dead this opportunity to stand alongside the Ynnari and receive the rewards of the Whispering God.’

‘Which one of you would not choose to again walk clad in the flesh of a mortal?’ said Yvraine. She stood also and stepped down onto the floor, her gown and cloak flowing behind in undulating waves as she paced between the towering constructs, undaunted by their age and size. ‘What soul desires this neverlife existence forever? Not you, the proud dead of Iyanden. The living cling to the broken promises of the past, that the craftworlds will save them. They will not. The galaxy shudders beneath the torment of the Great Rift, torn asunder by the Dark Gods. No craftworld alone can stand against the storm that has broken. Iyanden...’ She stopped, catching her breath, calming her rhetoric lest she cause insult. ‘Iyanden has already suffered much, and can suffer no more. You can condemn your home to a withering, slow demise, when the dead that guard its halls already outnumber the living. Or you can strike forth. You can raise up your Houses, put forth the call to arms as in the times of the dominions’ height, when even those forgotten within these walls froze stars with a command and lit the void with their thoughts. That power can rise again, the Reborn can claim back what belongs to the aeldari. If we do not, then we surrender, meek and cowardly, and nothing more.’

‘The House of Valor would answer yes,’ said Agariam, taking up a golden spear that was held by one of his retainers. ‘We have died once for Iyanden, we would die a thousand times more if needed.’

‘You misunderstand, you dead fool,’ said Sophiorith. ‘We would be abandoning Iyanden to join these vagrants. She is asking us to lead our Houses from the Ghost Halls, not in defence of some attack against our homes. She would have us choose the Whispering God over our people.’

‘Each House is a power unto itself,’ said Lady Faenorith. ‘The House of Delgari would follow none but me, and I bow to no living liege. There is not a noble here that would say otherwise. One of us may make alliance, but not all. Too many are the slights of the past to put aside, even for you, Iyanna.’

‘Kelmon, I would ask you, battleseer of the highest renown, to lead this host,’ said Iyanna. ‘None is held in higher respect among the Ghost Halls, and alongside Meliniel, the great strategist of Biel-tan, there is no tapestry of victory you cannot weave from the threads of fate. The Houses would not fight for me,

nor Yvraine, but for the Whispering God Himself, as guided by the runes of their own.'

'Your words are flattering, Iyanna, but you ask much,' said the wraithseer. He turned to the others of the ghost council. 'I will not speak for all, and to each Ghost Hall is left the choice. To each within the Houses, I say further, for this is not a call of allegiance or test of loyalty. Those that depart with Yvraine cross a threshold. I see a hundred fates severed from Iyanden, a hundred fates tied to the rune of the Whispering God. One is an anchor, the other a current. One will hold you firm, but always within the same place. One will take you into the open waters, to freedom or a treacherous end.'

'There is another House that has not spoken,' said Daethos Darkwinter. 'Eldest of all, most regarded of all. I shall make no decision ere we learn of their mood.'

'An opinion that we shall learn soon,' said Iyanna, sensing the approach of another contingent, one that had not been counted among the original House-elect of Arieach.

A shadow fell over the group. The spirit host turned as one, the air thick with sudden energy. Iyanna felt the sensation as a prickling of the skin, a heat from runes, stones and spear. Yvraine shuddered as the cold touch of Ynnead passed through her.

Something eclipsed the light beyond the high windows, moving steadily from the head of the hall towards the doors. The stretch of shade slid across the council first and then danced along the ranks of unmoving attendants, bending across wraithbone limbs, stilled banners and blank domes of their heads.

An aeldari appeared, framed by the light of the doorway, a staff in one hand tipped by the Rune of Ulthanesh. She held up the rod of office, the head of the staff glowing even against the light of the artificial sun. In the illumination she was revealed, clad in many layers of silk that covered her legs and torso, though her arms were bare. The skin there was marked in scarlet and black, with designs of the world serpent wound about the fabled spear of her House's founder.

'I am Aadressa, voice-warden of the House of Ulthanesh,' she called, voice clear and loud, amplified by a system set within her garb. 'Even in the Halls of the Starlit Citadel the light of the fires of Arieach reach. Though the House of Ulthanesh is not bound by the treaties of Arieach, my Lord Aethon would address the assembled council.'

'And gladly we will meet with him,' said Iyanna, though perhaps she did not rightly have the authority to speak for all. None countered her, all the same. She

strode down from the raised platform, Yvraine joining her at the lowest step, and down the hall. The wraithnoblity followed, their long strides keeping pace without effort. The heads of the wraith-ranks turned and followed as they departed into the square outside.

Stooping through a gateway as tall as a tower, a wraithknight stepped out onto the concourse, its tread no louder than that of the council members.

Lord Aethon was to the wraithlords as they were to the aeldari, full thrice their height, slender limbs fashioned from a wraithbone skeleton beneath bright yellow and deep blue psychoplastic plates, its energy matrix buzzing with the power of a dead soul. A sword twice as tall as one of the wraithblade guards of honour hung at the waist, a scalloped-edge shield upon the left arm. Unlike the revenant lords and ladies of the Ghost Halls, the wraithknight was not simply some ghost warrior, driven only by the will of the passed. Within the curve of the large head was a cockpit with a living pilot, twin brother to the departed soul that traversed the crystal circuits of the massive war engine.

Or so was usually the case, but not with Lord Aethon. Unique among its kind, changed by the blessing of Ynnead bestowed upon it by Yvraine, the Soulseeker's crew were two spirits in the one mortal shell, the dead twin Ashodh reborn into his brother, Aethon.

'Soulseeker,' said Yvraine, breaking ahead of the others with an outstretched hand, a flash of gladness at the arrival of the wraithknight. 'It is good to see you.'

'And you also, Opener of the Seventh Way.' The immense war machine knelt as gracefully as a living aeldari, holding out a palm towards Yvraine. She laid both of her hands upon a huge fingertip. The head, painted with faint swirls in a darker shade against the yellow, turned to Iyanna. 'Our Lady of Arienath. When I heard that you had lit the fire of Arieach, we had to come.'

'And we are glad of it,' said Lady Faenorith. 'The council was just agreed that the opinion of the heirs of Ulthanesh should be heard before we make a decision.'

'And to what purpose are the council's thoughts turned?' asked the Soulseeker. He withdrew his hand and straightened, plunging them into fresh shadow. 'Not lightly is the beacon lit, but no alarm has come to us from the seers or autarchs.'

'A quest,' said Iyanna.

'The Ynnari desire us to quit Iyanden and hunt the Gate of Malice on some new-returned craftworld,' said Agariam.

A shudder of displeased energy pulsed from the wraithknight. Yvraine took a

step back, repulsed by the wave, and Iyanna felt it as a hot wind beneath her skin.

‘You seek the Well of the Dead.’ Aethon’s proclamation was laden with sinister undertone, his artificially modulated voice accompanied by a fresh psychic distortion. ‘The tomb of Eldanesh.’

‘That is true,’ said Yvraine. ‘We hope that it might bring us closer to the last cronesword of the Five Fates.’

‘A raiser of the dead desires to enter the tomb of Eldanesh and you expect us to believe you are only looking for a sword?’ The wraithknight pivoted slightly, the next word addressed to the council members. ‘Are not these the very same that plucked from the jaws of death the human primarch? Did they not set him upon a pedestal to rule over a new empire of humans?’

‘That was not—’ began Yvraine, but Aethon continued without any concession to her reasoning.

‘Our own Prince Yriel, high noble of the House of Ulthanesh, knows well the cost that comes with the favours of Yvraine of the Ynnari. He too now has his soul sworn to the Whispering God, though he never asked for such a fate. We would not see Eldanesh returned and set upon a throne above my House, and would urge all others to resist likewise.’

‘The rivalry between your founders is ancient history,’ snapped Yvraine. ‘A legend before even the time of the Fall, predating the dominions and all else of import. Even in myth Ulthanesh and Eldanesh made good their division and their Houses reunited. Pledge to this cause, Aethon, so that the gladness I brought to you with the return of your brother might be given to others.’

‘We did not understand that the boon you gave us was a debt to be repaid.’

‘It was not,’ said Yvraine, losing her patience. ‘But short is the memory of the House of Ulthanesh if it forgets those that so aided it in the past.’

‘Long is the memory of the House of Ulthanesh, that it knows still that Eldanesh turned from their father-lord when he greatest needed a brother-in-spirit. Khaine struck down Eldanesh and sealed the fate of us all. You would unbind that seal and unleash terror and horror unimaginable. The Well of the Dead must remain shut!’

This stirred quite a reaction from the council, who at once began talking at cross purposes, the argument swiftly dividing them into two camps. Iyanna tried her best to keep the discussion calm, but Yvraine was a firebrand, arguing for her cause, her ire stoked by what she saw as betrayal by Lord Aethon.

The Soulseeker announced his intention to leave, through his voice-warden,

making it a formal declaration of his opposition. Yet before he departed, the wraithknight knelt to speak alone to Yvraine. She could feel the twin souls of the brothers nestled behind the opaque canopy, the two as one, yet individual also.

‘I do not wish us to be enemies,’ she said, her anger cooling at the thought of losing the friendship of the Soulseeker. ‘I thought you true to the rise of Ynnead.’

‘To Ynnead, yes, we are,’ replied the twins. ‘But this is not the right cause or course. We are still allies, Yvraine, and our blade is still sworn to the service of the Whispering God. But in this, as a Lord of the House of Ulthanesh also, we cannot aid you, and if that means the oath between us is forfeit, that will have to be so.’

‘The pact is not broken,’ Yvraine said, heart heavy. ‘Not by my wish, at least. I cannot say that I agree, but I do understand.’

‘And that is all that we can have at this moment.’ The wraithknight stood up and drew his immense sword in salute, its blade liquid gold in the dying sunlight. With Aedressa at his side, Aethon turned and left, followed by several contingents from the wraith-houses.

Yvraine and Iyanna eyed those that remained, who would be counted among their expedition to Zaisuthra.

‘Less than I had hoped,’ admitted Iyanna.

‘All that we need,’ countered Yvraine.



CHAPTER 12

THE DEAD MARCH FORTH

Slow they marched, slow but implacable.

For the better part of a cycle the parade of the wraiths continued, from the Gate of Souls to the harbour spires known as the Crucible of Beginnings and Endings.

The chill of the grave surrounded the column of yellow, scarlet and black that advanced through the halls and streets of Iyanden. The air misted, the ground rimed by the ghost-frost of their passing. Among the swirls of vapour loomed indistinct faces, silent spectres writ upon the cold air. No sound accompanied the solemn procession of scarlet wraithguard, wraithblades and wraithlords, the rune of Ynnead in black upon the domes of their heads.

At their fore came Yvraine, flanked by Althenian, with other Houseless wraithlords such as Torestor the Shadowhammer, Wintersword of the White Shores and Faristar Danceblade, and behind followed the nobles of three major Ghost Halls, the pennants of their dead Houses hanging from weapons and curving vanes. And the leaders of seven lesser allied to them. Arranged in companies like the households of long dead knights, the wraithblades and wraithguard came forth bearing standards of their liche-lieges, the runes of Divinesh and Valor and Haladesh flying above in the psychic wash of their passing.

Among the striding giants were splashes of yellow – the spiritseers of Iyanden, a shadow council gathered by Iyanna to help guide the waking dead from the Ghost Halls to the ships of the Ynnari. She herself was the last in the advancing spirit host, her thoughts anchoring the disparate senses of the deceased, a conduit for the focusing power of the infinity circuit.

News spread quickly of the rousing of the Ghost Halls' retinues. Not since the

Great Devourer and the attacks of the Rotted Ones had the dead been roused in such numbers. The news was greeted with panic at first, for paranoia of further assault had been foremost in the minds of the Iyandeni for thirty thousand cycles since. Yet the Avatar of Khaine had not stirred, the infinity circuit did not thrum to the martial beat of the Bloody-Handed one's iron heart.

Curiosity replaced dread and thousands turned out to watch the dead march, and as word spread further, more travelled from the distant parts of the craftworld until the crowds swelled to the tens of thousands.

There were murmurs of unease from some, speaking their fear that Yvraine robbed Iyanden of its defenders. Some, those with the dubious honour of connections to the seer council, even shouted their protest and accusations of theft, the usual decorum of craftworld debate forgotten in the flush of emotion. Then came other Iyandeni to call out encouragement and blessings upon the expedition. Some wore armbands or head scarves of scarlet to show their favour for the Opener of the Seventh Way, or bore amulets and other devices set with the rune of Ynnead in precious gems and sparkling metals.

Heated exchanges and shouting matches broke out in places, though these altercations were quickly quelled by neutral bystanders. The observers ranged from the casually idle to the affected disdainful, youngsters who had never seen a spirit host on the move, and the elders who had seen it too often and muttered darkly of portents and dire omens.

Along crowd-lined avenues and across raised galleries to the docks the army proceeded. Their passing calmed all agitation, the reminder of the fate of all mortals stifling even the most livid opponent and ardent support. To look upon the waking dead was to see both the past and the future in one; the wicked and noble of generations past and the fate that doubtless now waited for all Iyandeni.

The living members of those Houses that passed marked themselves with runes of remembrance and held up tokens and heirlooms, hoping to catch some hint of recognition from the spirit warriors. Sobs and joyful gasps greeted the occasional turn of a head or psychic caress from wraithkin sharing a momentary clarity.

They arrived at a broad sweep of a gallery that looked out upon the star quays, lit by the faint light of distant galaxies and the navigational pulses of Ynnari transports docked at the boarding pilasters. The transport fleet of Ynnead's chosen was as eclectic as those that crewed them. Craftworld merchantmen and ranger dhows slipped past armed pleasure yachts and former drukhari blockade-runners.

In the space beyond waited the rest of the Ynnari flotilla. Here were two

battleships, hulls brightly patterned beneath the flicker of idling holofields. Smaller cruisers with solar sails furled along their dorsal decks, the hint of golden photonic receptors glinting against the black of open space. Further out, tacking back and forth among the traffic of Iyanden's space lanes waited a handful of destroyers and frigates, lightly armed but swift – webway smugglers from Commorrhagh and elegant corsair sloops.

At the gates of the docks a contingent sent from the seer council met them, headed by Iyasta and Telathaus. They came accompanied by several squads of yellow-clad guardians, a handful of wave serpent transports at their back. Not so far away Meliniel and an assortment of Ynnari aspect warriors and Harlequins watched the Iyandeni carefully, but knew better than to interfere directly. Before heading for the Ghost Halls, Yvraine had expressly instructed her followers to avoid antagonising the Iyandeni, regardless of provocation.

‘So many...’ Iyasta's hushed words betrayed awe but they were followed by a more acidic tone from Telathaus.

‘You would bleed our craftworld dry of its last soul if you had the chance.’

‘None came except of their own choice,’ Yvraine replied. The steady column of animated constructs continued past, heads turning towards the warlocks as the spirits within detected their psychic aura. ‘Ynnead is no master of coercion, he is a uniter.’

‘Not all of us wish a speedy journey to the lifeless embrace of our ancestors,’ said Iyasta. A black-gloved hand motioned for the guardians to board their wave serpents. ‘We will accompany you to Zaisuthra, as agreed, and speak on behalf of the Iyandeni.’

Iyanna joined them and Telathaus continued, words directed towards the spiritseer. ‘Dhentiln wishes you to know that if you hinder our mission in any way, or move or speak against the best fate of Iyanden, his cordiality will be extended no further. We will cooperate with the Ynnari insofar as it does not run contrary to our needs, but consider our alliance to be one of convenience and nothing further.’

‘He could not deliver this message himself?’ asked Iyanna.

‘Not all that turns in the universe—’ began Telathaus.

‘—is centred upon your actions,’ Iyasta finished testily, helm lenses flaring red in anger. ‘In the absence of so many, the seer council must work all the harder to ensure that no threat emerges against our home.’

‘But you have shown that such matters are no longer a concern of yours,’ added

Telathaus.

‘I have seen beyond the veil of death, into the afterlife of the aeldari,’ said Yvraine, her smile conveying anything but good humour. ‘One cannot escape the inevitable. One must first die before one can become the Reborn. As it is for the individual, so too for all of our people.’

‘While there is life, there is hope,’ countered the warlocks in unison.

‘Hope, but not victory,’ said Iyanna. ‘Too long we have fought the gallant losing battle.’

‘If you have your way, victory will also mean the death of all,’ snapped Iyasta.

‘Posthumous victory is simply defeat by another name,’ insisted Telathaus.

‘Generations ago, our predecessors doomed us all,’ Iyanna replied as she turned and stepped away. The last of the wraithkind passed the arches and ascended towards the waiting ships. ‘In accepting that, we find freedom. That is Ynnead’s gift.’

Yvraine joined her and the two of them followed in the wake of the warrior-dead.



CHAPTER 13

LOYALTIES TESTED

It was a sad truth of Iyanna's life that although she was far-travelled compared to many Iyandeni, she had seen enough conflict and strife upon her home craftworld to equal that of some of the widest-ranging outcasts and most daring kabalite pirates. Despite the accusations of Telathaus and Iyasta, and her stern defence of her convictions they elicited, she looked upon Iyanden with a heavy heart as the renamed battleship *Ynnead's Dream* turned towards the immense webway gate that followed behind the slowly drifting craftworld.

Responding to her unspoken desire, the shimmering projection disc that hung in the air of her chamber kept a view of the craftworld until the moment *Ynnead's Dream* slipped into the webway gate. For the final moment the domed forests and mountains, the plateaus and hills, bridges and towers bled into each other, so that all Iyanna saw was a cluster of silver tears on a golden plate.

Then it was gone and the projector disc shrank into itself, becoming a thin, leaf-shaped sliver of film that drifted down into her open palm.

A suite of rooms had been assigned to her as an honoured leader of the Ynnari but her possessions, nothing more than a travel chest of clothes, books and runework, fitted into the smallest chamber. The other half a dozen rooms were bare save for the sparse furnishings that had awaited her.

A plain bench with a gently concave seat extruded from the wall at her approach. She turned and sat, hands in her lap. From the adjoining chamber she felt a pulse from the Spear of Teuthlas, but she ignored its luring call. There was only one kind of companionship she needed.

Iyanna closed her eyes and shifted her mind. No matter how far away from Iyanden she was taken, she would never be more than a thought's breadth from

her family.

‘Hello, Little Me,’ she whispered. ‘Show me your new dance.’

When standing upon the cliff’s edge, the only proper thing to do is step forwards and hope for the best. So Cegorach’s followers would have you believe. Faced with overwhelming odds, you must hope for the monstrously implausible to save you. With such philosophies the Harlequins of the Laughing God have navigated the worst parts of the webway, dared the lairs of demigods and daemons, and skipped merrily along the strands of fate with a song in their hearts and somewhat impish smile upon their lips.

One can therefore imagine the consternation of Yvraine, Meliniel, Iyanna and the Visarch when they were asked to attend to Idraesci Dreamspear, Great Harlequin of the Midnight Sorrow and he said to them, ‘We should turn back.’

They met upon *Ynnead’s Dream*, among tall fern fronds and shallow pools in one of the battleship’s forest halls. The air was thick with mist, moisture dappled the gaily patterned suit of the masque’s leader as he sat cross-legged upon a pale boulder beside a small mere. The plip of bubbles breaking on the pool’s surface and the distant trill of small birds marred the silence that greeted this announcement.

As if in explanation, a darker-garbed figure appeared along the path, clad in deep blues and purples, a long belt of crimson trailing from the waist. Her mask was a blank silver, reflecting the green of the ferns and the dark red of pebbles that softly crunched underfoot, beneath a hooded cowl of violet and black diamonds.

The other Ynnari knew the shadowseer by reputation more than acquaintance, on account of most of their previous dealings with the Midnight Sorrow having proceeded through Dreamspear or one of his troupe masters. If Dreamspear was the physical representative of Cegorach the Laughing God, Laedellin Starshone was the voice.

On her back the shadowseer wore a *credainn*, its slender funnels emitting perception-altering vapours and vibrations. To onlookers there seemed nothing amiss, but unknown the emanations of the shadowseer created a heightened sense of awareness invoked by the hallucinogenic properties of the dream-conjurer. Such displays were usually to induce a sense of greater involvement in the masque’s performances, or to invoke dread or paranoia in the enemy, but on this occasion the reason was simply to impress and mesmerise.

In one hand, Starshone held a baton, which she twirled between her fingers, its

crystal head flashing a circular rainbow about her wrist. Coruscating colours reflected across her mirrormask, creating rippled impressions of grotesque faces.

‘The roads end,’ announced the Harlequin mind-gifted. She paused for a heartbeat, bowed slowly with rod swept across her chest in theatrical style, and pivoted on a heel to walk away, message delivered.

‘Is that supposed to be an explanation?’ said Meliniel. He scowled at Dreamspear. ‘You want us to cancel the whole expedition on the basis of three words?’

The Great Harlequin remained silent and immobile. Starshone stopped, heel of one foot and toe of the other upon the path, frozen in mid-stride. She twisted at the waist and turned her head, the pose unnatural but still an image of perfect balance even among the dexterous aeldari. Her face was positioned in such a way that each of the others saw in her blank visage the distorted, swollen reflection of a companion.

‘The roads end,’ she said again, the rest of her body slowly swivelling to catch up with head and shoulders. ‘All roads. The webway. Life. Hope. There is nothing beyond. We cannot reach Zaisuthra.’

‘Nothing is impossible to the Harlequins,’ said Yvraine. ‘You will find a way.’

‘I do not wish to,’ said Starshone. ‘The death of mirth is all that awaits those that continue on this journey.’

‘The Harlequins of the Laughing God fear nothing,’ said Meliniel. ‘Or is that just mockery as well?’

‘Do not goad us,’ said Dreamspear. ‘It is not fear that stalls our willingness. It is inevitability. Cegorach ventures where he will, as he will, without restraint. But he keeps an eye upon the way out, all the same. If we continue, there is no way back.’

Any response was curtailed by the approach of Iyasta and Telathaus. The two warlocks of Iyanden arrived behind Starshone, and stopped when the shadowseer spun towards them.

‘What is the meaning of this council without us?’ demanded Iyasta.

‘We are to be party to all discussion,’ said the other warlock.

‘I did not invite you because you will be even more tiresome than my current companions,’ said Dreamspear. ‘But for your benefit, I have declared that we shall guide you no further through the webway. We do not desire to set foot upon Zaisuthra.’

‘We *shall* not,’ insisted Starshone.

‘A little late to make such a decision,’ growled the Visarch.

Dreamspear and Starshone shrugged in unison, the movement both impudent and all the explanation the others would receive. At the best of times the wanderers on the forgotten path are above explaining their motives to others, and when pressed, take pleasure in being obtuse. The Shadowseer and Great Harlequin were no exception.

‘What can I offer that will make it worthwhile?’ said Yvraine.

‘Do not bargain with them,’ said Meliniel. ‘Their words are as empty as they are pretty. Never trust a Harlequin.’

‘I would be offended,’ said Dreamspear. He clutched a hand to his chest as though struck through the heart, and slipped gracefully from the boulder to stagger a few exaggerated steps across the path in comical death throes that brought him face-to-face with the autarch. The Great Harlequin straightened and stared at Meliniel, crossing his arms defiantly. ‘If not for the utter truth of what you speak. I care even less for your trust than I do your good intentions.’

‘We must continue—’

‘—to forge an alliance with Zaisuthra.’

‘And we must seek the Gate of Malice,’ added Yvraine. Her gyrix leapt, bouncing from the ground to the arm of Meliniel and up to Yvraine’s shoulder. It stared at Idraesci and Laedellin, long tail protectively coiled around Yvraine’s neck to the other shoulder, amber eyes glinting with motes of psychic gold.

‘A test,’ Starshone said suddenly, bounding forwards to stand alongside her Great Harlequin. She laid her gloved hand upon her companion’s arm, caressing the smooth cloth with lilac-clad fingertips.

‘When all else fails, when your dreams are nought and only the call of Ynnead remains, what will you do?’ said Dreamspear, turning his attention to Yvraine and then Iyanna. ‘Why should we, who dance with death beside you, risk life and freedom for this folly? Let dead heroes lie undisturbed.’

‘If it is my conviction you doubt, I will take any test,’ said Yvraine. ‘I am the emissary of the Whispering God and I fear nothing.’

‘I also,’ said Iyanna.

Meliniel moved, about to respond in kind, but Dreamspear silenced him with a raised hand and a slight shake of the head.

‘You are wrong,’ said Starshone.

Coils of darkness wreathed about the shadowseer; tendrils of utter night from her credainn. To Yvraine she became a thing of shadow, not aeldari or even mortal, just emptiness in reality possessed of glittering ruby eyes that burned with inner flame.

A tenebrous limb rose towards the Opener of the Seventh Way. Fingers formed, expanding as they neared, to smother her face, stealing all light and breath.

Yvraine fell into the shadows.

All recognition of the garden hall, the other Ynnari, the Harlequins... Everything disappeared, except for the blackness of the void, the nothingness of inexistence.

You have not been, boomed a voice, callous and loud.

‘Been where?’ Yvraine replied.

The lack of anything did not disturb her until she realised that Alorynis was missing. Suddenly she felt as though she had lost a limb, left naked and bare before the cruel intentions of the universe.

You never were, the voice clarified. *All that was is not. All that came before has passed. This is oblivion.*

Yvraine did not understand at first, but refused to engage with the voice. Part of her remembered something about a test. This was supposed to show up her inner fears, her weakness.

Rather than argue, she said to the blackness, ‘It is the end of torment.’

The end of joy.

‘No more suffering.’

No more pleasure.

‘It is peace.’

It is death.

The more the voice spoke, the more Yvraine heard herself in its tones, angrily shouting back her deepest fear. She decided to remain silent for a while, to see what other dread might manifest itself.

Nothing happened. Time passed, or did not, it was impossible to know. She thought, and from this Yvraine deduced that she was still herself. But it did not take long for this surety to erode. Had only a moment passed, or longer? Without life, without time, how would one move, or grow, or achieve? What was left to fight for if all progress was halted?

‘Rebirth.’

She said the word and made it so. Light burned in the firmament, a star that was her, and from her came warmth and life and being.

‘We are the Reborn,’ she said, with increasing conviction. ‘The souls of the aeldari do not perish with the body, they return unto each generation. We grow, we learn, we aspire to greatness. In Ynnead we are delivered from the curse of

She Who Thirsts. We shall live again.'

Yvraine luxuriated in the gleam of her star, proud of her answer, assured again of her faith in the Seventh Way.

When her happiness reached its zenith, when contentment streamed from her burning body, the darkness returned with crushing coldness, extinguishing her, blotting out all that she had wrought to plunge her into midnight once again. She fell into the freezing void, voiceless and alone.

NO! boomed her terror.

The echo of its voice carried the death screams of millions, the agonised last cries of Biel-tani and Iyandeni, the gasps of Alaitocii and Commorraghans, Exodites and outcasts. Just as the birthcry of She Who Thirsts had destroyed the aeldari, so the death rattle of Ynnead would consume the remains.

Yvraine spun head over heel, her skin frosting, blood freezing in her veins, heart slowing, limbs numb. Over and over, around and around she toppled into the abyss, beyond light and sound and even beyond memory. She became nothing again.

It all ends, the darkness told her. You are not Isha, the womb of new life. You are Ynnead, the Whispering God, usher of the dead, hoarder of souls. You have but one purpose to serve, one perfect moment of existence between birth and death. You are the slayer and the saviour, the one that will prise the dead from the grip of She Who Thirsts. With that power you shall strike, giving up yourself and all else in that mighty blow that shall sever realms and shatter dominions.

Shuddering, choking on nothing, dying of exposure and suffocation, Yvraine embraced that which she had to be. That which she had not to be. She was not hope. She was not despair.

Yvraine was simply dead.

And that was peace.

Yvraine came to her senses looking at the curved reflection of herself in the mirrormask of Starshone. The whispers and murmurs of her companions betrayed similar experiences.

'One will break,' exclaimed the shadowseer, stepping back.

The Ynnari and Iyandeni glanced at each other, doubt rearing its head at this proclamation. Unconsciously their circle parted a little, each of them isolating themselves from their companions. Suspicion edged every look and gesture. Yvraine noted that none of the present company was quick to rebut Starshone's pronouncement.

‘But we relent our conviction,’ said Idraesci Dreamsphear. ‘We will bring brightness to the dark of Zaisuthra.’

The two Harlequins joined hands and walked away with light steps, a parting shimmer of colour from their holosuits before they disappeared into the forest of ferns.

A confused silence reigned. It fell to the Visarch, one who usually preferred to say nothing, to break the still.

‘Harlequins,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Always creating a drama.’

‘She tested me,’ said Iyanna. ‘I am the one that will break.’

‘No,’ said Iyasta, voice a shamed whisper. ‘It was I—’

‘—that was found wanting,’ finished the other warlock. The twins looked at each other, taken aback by the uncharacteristic loss of harmony.

‘She tested us all,’ announced Meliniel. ‘Awakened the fear in each of us.’

This assessment was greeted by a further uncomfortable silence as the strength of the shadowseer’s power sank in.

‘Then which of us failed?’ said Iyanna.

‘I saw Biel-tan fall to ruin,’ admitted Meliniel. ‘Assailed by all foes, I had to act, I could not simply watch it die.’

‘I put my own glory above that of Ynnead,’ Yvraine quietly confessed.

‘And I the memory of my family,’ added Iyanna.

‘So each of us has a weakness, it does not matter,’ snapped the Visarch, shoulders hunched, fingers opening and closing upon the hilt of the Sword of Silent Screams. ‘A typical Harlequin trick.’

‘What did you see?’ asked Telathaus.

‘What was your fear incarnate?’ said Iyasta.

‘I saw a bloody hand...’ The Visarch grunted wordlessly and stalked away, unwilling to share the vision that had beset him.

The others watched him go, wrapped in their own thoughts. None said it aloud, but all shared the same conclusion, the warning that Starshone had sent them.

The Visarch would betray them.



CHAPTER 14

ZAISUTHRA FOUND

To look upon Zaisuthra was to look back upon an age long forgotten. The craftworld had left the sphere of mortal knowledge in the direct aftermath of the Fall, one of the first to have fled the core worlds of the aeldari dominions. It was in form far more akin to the giant trade-ship that all craftworlds had been, no more than a tenth the size of Iyanden or Ulthwé or Biel-tan. Where those living worlds sported domes of continent-sized forests and grand mountain ranges, Zaisuthra's glimmering forcefields contained landscapes more alike the garden halls of *Ynnead's Dream*, filled with mist and foliage that turned all to a green haze as seen from the void. Here and there among the jade glow could be seen colder blue hemispheres and ruddy glows, the landscapes within obscured by their protective shields.

All attempt to contact the craftworld through the aetheric link of the webway had failed; nothing but the original message returned to the minds of the warlocks and seers.

Those that had gone, have now returned.

The phrasing was strange, archaic. Yvraine had pondered the variations of meaning as the fleet had wound its way through the passages of the webway, wrought like tight knots by the sudden re-emergence of Zaisuthra. Though the Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow had travelled the length and breadth of the galaxy in the world between worlds, from Ulthwé to Commorragh, Biel-tan to the Black Library, they had never encountered the like of the maze that surrounded Zaisuthra. Gates that had been closed for five lifetimes were now open, and tunnels and webruns that had been dormant reawakened, pulling and pushing at the fabric of the ghost realm, contorting its artificial reality with their

presence.

And, as Laedellin Starshone had told them, the webway had ended.

For Iyanna and Yvraine, for the warlocks and shadowseer and the others of the psychic sight, it had seemed as though the broad tunnels and curving arteries of the ancient network were swallowed by a dark maelstrom. It put them in mind of the broken gates of Shaa-dom and the Crone Worlds in the Eye of Terror – storm-wracked funnels of pure warp that would crush any ship and break the mind of mortals that attempted to pass. But even this comparison fell short of the sheer bleakness, the utter cessation of existence that cloaked Zaisuthra.

Remembering their promises to the Harlequins in return, the Ynnari leaders had taken the fleet to the unknown, hurling their ships into the nothingness to see what waited beyond.

Now they looked upon the birth of the craftworlds writ real upon the stars before them, as they viewed Zaisuthra on one of the broad galleries of *Ynnead's Dream*. Yvraine had called for their conclave to assemble, to discuss how they would broach the difficult proposition of opening contact.

‘We must remember above everything else that they are not as us,’ said Meliniel.

‘And what exactly are we?’ asked Azkahr, his pointed look taking in the Ynnari flotsam of disparate craftworlds, heirs of the Laughing God, Commorraghan fugitives and a prowling gyrix.

‘When they left, spirit stone and infinity circuit engineering was in its infancy,’ continued Meliniel, ignoring his subordinate. ‘I do not think that the Asurya had visited them, they were never introduced to the concepts of the Path. Who can say what moods and manners and politics hold sway?’

‘Who indeed?’ said the Visarch, scorn in his voice. ‘Not one among us has any inkling of what it might be like to live a life free from the constraints of Asurmen’s teachings...’

‘Meliniel has a point,’ said Iyanna. ‘They will know nothing of aspect warriors and wraithkin, kabalites and wyches, or Harlequins.’

‘So we are the perfect introduction to the world that has passed them by,’ said Yvraine. ‘They bear none of the prejudices of long history.’

‘Nor have they learned—’

‘—from our many errors,’ said the Iyandeni warlocks.

While they spoke, Dreamspear was fixated upon the display, examining the craftworld laid out upon its holographic image as an assayer might have regarded an exquisitely cut gemstone.

‘We shall tread where even the Laughing God has not danced,’ he said, reverent and excited. ‘What delights and dangers await!’

‘One question we need not ponder any longer,’ said Azkahr, pointing to the glowing image. From the clustering orbit of ships around the craftworld three brighter points emerged – the glint of the nearby star upon solar sails turning towards them. ‘They come to us.’

The trio of vessels that closed with the Ynnari flotilla was almost identical, one being a little larger than its companions. Their slender hulls put the Ynnari in mind of wasps, with a tight waist between thorax and abdomen where four equidistant solar sails shaped like long moth wings were located. These sails shimmered between gold and silver as they adjusted to the stream of the solar winds, tacking towards the gathering Ynnari fleet.

In colour they were light blue, stippled in places with a dark green, giving them something of an aquatic appearance. The patterns rippled outwards, interweaving, like rain falling on a deep puddle, mesmerising in its complexity.

‘We should have our weapon batteries readied,’ said Iyasta.

‘Until we know more of their intent,’ continued Telathaus.

‘Yes, what better way to welcome them back to the galaxy than with blades bared,’ said Meliniel. ‘Besides, who brings three ships to attack thrice their number? If they had ill intent, they would bring the rest of the fleet orbiting their craftworld.’

The ships turned sharply again, taking up formation abreast of each other. Through the magnifying effect of the sensory banks of *Ynnead’s Dream* they all watched as the prows of the crafts blistered, domes forming under the azure hull skin. Simultaneously, the systems of the Ynnari battleship moaned a warning, its alarm coursing through the psychic circuitry.

Like an animal confronted by a rival with teeth bared, *Ynnead’s Dream* responded with hostility, flooding its psychic network with aggressive thoughts. Across its many decks the Ynnari felt the surge of protective anger – even the drukhari, who were poorly attuned to the psychic systems, sensed something amiss.

‘Prudence is sometimes the better of two evils,’ said the Visarch. ‘At the least we should activate the holofields.’

‘No, we shall do nothing of the sort,’ declared Yvraine. ‘We come as emissaries of the Reborn aeldari—’

‘And Iyanden,’ Telathaus interjected.

‘—we must sow trust to reap it in return.’

‘They have not answered any attempt to convey our peaceful intent,’ said Azkahr.

‘How can we assure them we mean no harm?’ Meliniel gestured towards the display screen. ‘They are powering up their weapons, and are approaching on an attack vector.’

‘A display,’ said Yvraine, dismissing the autarch’s change of heart. ‘They want us to know they are willing to fight to protect the craftworld.’

‘As well they might,’ said Dreamspear. He folded his arms, body weighted as though he lounged a shoulder against an invisible wall, feigned indifference though his heart beat a little fast at the sight of the incoming Zaisuthran attack ships. ‘When last they travelled these stars, our people warred openly amongst themselves, even craftworld against craftworld. They have seen nothing of the likes of our ships.’

‘They may not even—’

‘—think we are aeldari. Not as they see themselves.’

‘After darkness, the dawn,’ said Iyanna suddenly, which struck the others as enigmatic, even for one more used to conversing with the dead. She smiled at their looks of confusion. ‘The salute of the House of Arienal. The motto of my ancestors. Broadcast that and they will know that we are family.’

It took only a few heartbeats for the Zaisuthrans to respond to the transmission. No sooner had Iyanna’s message been passed through the battleship’s broadcasting array, the incoming vessels both powered down their frontal weapon batteries and veered to a more sedate approach. The larger of the three broke away from its escorts and, in a show of solidarity, Yvraine commanded the Ynnari fleet to hold position while *Ynnead’s Dream* moved ahead to meet them.

‘While this is encouraging, I cannot allow you to board their ship,’ Meliniel told Yvraine. His body language spoke volumes to his determination that this would be the final word on the matter.

‘I concur,’ added the Visarch, earning himself scowls from both the autarch and the Opener of the Seventh Way.

‘I am the Emissary of Ynnead, I walk where I please,’ she declared archly.

Meliniel and the Visarch shared a look, seen by the others and intended as such, which made it plain that they were not above physically restraining their mistress in order to protect her from this course of action.

‘A thorny stem to grasp, indeed,’ declared Dreamspear. ‘It speaks nothing of

our trust if we are not willing to go to them, and in return why should they come to us?’

This prompted a quiet, polite but vehement debate between Meliniel, Yvraine, Azkahr and the Iyandeni twins. Each obstinately stated their view at least twice over before Iyanna interrupted them.

‘I am going,’ she said.

There were, perhaps tellingly, no objections raised to this. Even Iyasta and Telathaus did not protest at the first parley being held by one of the Ynnari, it being clear that they now considered Iyanna an outcast and therefore expendable.

‘It is my message,’ Iyanna continued, hiding any sign that she was affected by their lack of concern for her wellbeing. ‘I am the scion of the House of Arienal, it should be me who meets them.’

Such was made known across the aether as Iyanna made her way down to the launch bays where a shuttle craft was readied for her. She arrived to find Althenian waiting.

‘A moment. Unwise to go forth alone, defenceless,’ warned the wraithlord. Iyanna was briefly struck by the irony that of all her companions it was the one who had been a bloodthirsty slayer trapped on the Path of the Warrior – and who incidentally was also actually dead – that had been the only one to voice such an opinion. Even so, the tacit offer was not welcome.

‘They may know nothing of spirit-craft and wraithlords,’ said Iyanna, stepping around the tall construct. ‘That is an explanation best avoided at our first meeting.’

‘You are right, but you still need protection, just in case,’ insisted Althenian.

‘No.’ Iyanna stopped and turned to address the wraithlord. ‘I shall not even take my spear. I am simply Iyanna of the House of Arienal, nothing more.’

‘Perhaps so. What shall you tell them of us? Our purpose?’

This caused her pause, for she had not agreed with the others how much of their mission she should reveal. There was a lot to comprehend – the Great Rift, the rise of the Ynnari, the croneswords and the Gate of Malice. It seemed improbable that the Zaisuthrans would be amenable to an entire warhost being deposited upon their home on the basis of these distant, mythic concerns.

‘I shall play the tune as the situation befits,’ confessed the spiritseer. ‘If they seem conducive to our need, I will be open, but for the present I shall restrict myself to saying that we have come in response to their reappearance, to make

acquaintance and see if they need assistance.’

‘Are you sure? You would begin with a lie, Iyanna?’

‘A simplification.’ Althenian did not need ghostsight to see the hue of guilt colour her soul; it was plain that this justification did not sit well with Iyanna. She continued, ‘A necessary omission until we are more certain of our welcome.’

A call from one of the Ynnari attending to the activation of the launch drew her attention. Althenian bid her goodbye with a single wave of the hand. She accepted the sentiment with a smile and a nod and headed for the shuttle, which looked like a bird of prey with swept wings perching beside the open bay doors, its grey hull gleaming in the amber light of the field protecting the opening.

As she boarded she felt a contact from the surrounding psychic network, her thoughts growing chill at the intervention of Yvraine.

Assure them of our good intent, pulsed the Opener of the Seventh Way. Remember that the salvation of our people, of the aeldari race, might rest on these next moments.

No pressure, thought Iyanna and the psychic connection quivered with her apprehension. A soothing wave of assurance from Yvraine settled her nerves.

She said nothing, breaking the psychic link with the matrix as she settled on the launch couch and signalled to the pilot.

Without further ceremony the craft lifted on the anti-gravity catapult and then sped out of the bay on a rapid throb of power. There was a period of several heartbeats in which Iyanna could still sense the psychic embrace of *Ynnead’s Dream*, and then it was gone.

Exited from the ship, away from the webway, not even accompanied by a wraithblade or wraithguard, the only thing Iyanna could sense was the dark soul of the former kabalite at the helm and the yawning emptiness of the space around her.

‘They’re launching a shuttle too,’ announced the pilot, as surprised as Iyanna by this event. ‘Were we supposed to be met by another shuttle?’

‘We did not—’ Iyanna stopped. They had not... anything. Broadcast their intent. Sent an invite. Asked permission. ‘All of this would have happened with a thought between ordinary craftworlds. Interstitial psychic communion.’

‘In Commorragh we didn’t have that,’ the pilot replied. He pointed to the flicker of movement against the hull of the Zaisuthran ship that loomed large in the canopy. ‘This is the kabal way. Face-to-face.’

Iyanna did not find the thought encouraging, knowing that most kabalite customs owed their history to the warring street gangs and perverse sects of the pre-Fall aeldari dominions. Zaisuthra had not undergone five lifetimes of coexistence with other craftworlds. If considered in that vein, it was not so strange that Zaisuthra might share many undesirable traits with drukhari culture.

‘Just keep us steady and monitor for any communication.’

It took a little more time until the other craft was out of the shadow of its mother vessel and visible to Iyanna. She let herself out of her harness and joined the pilot in his suite. The Zaisuthran shuttle looked like a smaller version of the warship, though rather than four slender wings it possessed a parachute-like solar chute tethered to the nose that furlled and disappeared as it came nearer.

At the same time, Iyanna felt the first touch of a psychic presence. Her pilot seemed oblivious, his psychic sense atrophied by generations of Commorraghan inbreeding, but there came the unmistakable sensation of another mind enveloping the ship. It seemed like an open hand, closing gently around the craft, urging it to stop.

‘Halt us here,’ said Iyanna. The pilot complied without comment.

The sensation then became one of investigation – not a specific or direct inquiry that might be answered. Though she could only guess at such things, it put Iyanna in mind of a blinded individual using their fingers to detect the shape and texture of something. It was entirely on the surface, nor probing deeply, just getting some semblance of the shuttle’s presence and occupants.

Through the canopy she saw the Zaisuthran craft turn, puffs of ice crystals clouding around its mid-hull as tiny attitude thrusters altered its angle and direction to bring it around.

She tentatively sent out a psychic pulse of her own – no exertion of her abilities more than would have been required to interface with the Iyanden infinity circuit.

Immediately the psychic potential around the other shuttle hardened, forming a carapace about them, rebuffing her overture. For the tiniest instant she felt shock; not her own but of the mind that beheld her.

‘A docking cable,’ said the pilot, directing her attention to a slender filament that snaked from the bow of the other shuttle.

A gravitic clamp attached to the nose of Iyanna’s craft and the two slowly moved towards each other as the cable shortened. They swivelled until they approached nose to nose, where a circular docking port could be seen. Entry to the Ynnari craft was via a dorsal interface and Iyanna instructed the pilot to pivot

the ship to present this to the Zaisuthrans. The cable disconnected and retracted, leaving the two vessels to gently slide into contact with each other, inertial dampeners activating automatically to bring them alongside with just the barest shudder of contact.

The impact in Iyanna's mind was more severe – a sudden electric pulse that sent her staggering from the shuttle's cockpit, the pilot's call of concern only half heard. She put out a hand to steady herself as the sensation passed, leaving her with a short but intense bout of psychic nausea.

'Are you well, seer?' asked the pilot, his face moving in and out of focus before her. 'Have we been attacked?'

'No,' she croaked, dredging up enough presence of mind to form the word. Doing so, forcing her physical being to act, stabilised her whirling thoughts. 'No, not a deliberate attack. Something big, passing close at hand. A ship's wake leaving eddies that sinks the waterfowl. Does the thunderclap intend to deafen?'

'I'll assume that makes some sense to you,' said the kabalite. He helped her sit. A three-note chime sounded from the piloting chamber. 'We're docked.'

Iyanna nodded and said nothing, trying to settle her thoughts. The contact had definitely been unintentional. The edge of something big, almost as big as the collective conscious of an infinity circuit. Perhaps that was it, she decided, some extension of Zaisuthra's inhabitants through the craft and its crew.

The hull shivered, responding to a touch at the portal above them.

The Zaisuthrans were requesting entry.



CHAPTER 15

UNEXPECTED REUNION

The face that appeared at the opening, once the two intersecting artificial gravities had vehemently expressed their opinions and then compromised by settling on 'down' as a point some distance from the two craft, was like nothing Iyanna had been expecting.

The skin was almost black, the head shrunken to half the size of other aeldari. Its eyes were broad, yellow-irised, the pupil a pinprick in the ambient light of the Ynnari launch. Skeletal fingers grabbed the edge of the opening, each digit tipped with a pale, curved claw, three to each hand. It made a mewling noise and fell into the shuttle, revealing a stunted body, naked, vestigial wings below the shoulder blades.

Cursing followed, both from her pilot who retreated swiftly from the gargoyle cawing from a toothless mouth as it peered at the two aeldari, and from some unseen individual in the Zaisuthran craft. A moment later a far more familiar face appeared in the entry duct, unmistakably aeldari, of advanced age.

More than that, Iyanna was immediately struck by his similarity to the House of Arienal archives, generation after generation of her predecessors stored in the psychic memory of Iyanden. The shock deepened, the sense of kinship strangling the words in her throat as it felt like she could have been looking at the face of her father, just for a heartbeat.

'Profound apologies for the misbehaviour of my pet,' the aeldari said, reaching out a many-ringed hand to beckon the gargoyle creature to return. It looked up at him, made a snickering sound and scuttled towards the pilot, forcing him to jump aside as it ran for the cockpit.

'I...' Iyanna still did not know what to say.

‘This is perhaps utterly counter to how I had envisaged this occasion taking place,’ the other aeldari continued, lowering himself into the shuttle.

He was garbed in a light yellow knee-length coat with ornate ruffs on the open-fronted collar and heavy cuffs, and a tight-fitting purple undersuit that ran from the toes to neck. Jewellery clinked and clattered as he descended, every finger possessing at least two rings, a dozen and more amulets and talismans about his neck and chest. Iyanna saw sigils and symbols of a score of old gods, and others that were not known to her.

‘I should not have let the wretched creature accompany me, but Peasa pines so much in my absence. Quintrills are a temperamental species, but as demonstrably obvious now, exceptionally curious. She really wanted to meet you.’

‘Iyanna,’ she finally managed. ‘Iyanna, spiritseer of Iyanden, of the House of Arienal.’

‘Sydari,’ the other replied, raising an open hand to touch the tip of his middle finger to his forehead in what was clearly a gesture of greeting. ‘High Lord-Guardian of Zaisuthra.’ He smiled. ‘Also of the House of Arienal.’

Iyanna excused herself to the cockpit to gather her thoughts, under a garbled guise of contacting her fleet to assure them that all was well. Peasa the quintrill hung off the webbing of a piloting cradle, shedding dark fur and eyeing the gleaming rune panel with barely-suppressed desire. At Iyanna’s arrival the creature flopped to the floor and scampered back into the main compartment, causing the pilot to join her, a look of disdain on his face.

‘What a disgusting creature,’ he said.

‘I quite like it,’ confessed Iyanna. ‘I appreciate the honesty in its lack of charm.’

She interfaced with the shuttle’s communication system and packaged a thought-broadcast back to *Ynnead’s Dream* confirming that she had made contact and the Zaisuthrans were not hostile. Turning, she was surprised to find Sydari at the door, peering curiously around the cockpit. Peasa hung upside down on his arm, glaring at the pilot in mutual antagonism.

‘Have you signalled our friendly intent to your fleet?’ the High Lord-Guardian asked. ‘I have sent word to my peers that your ships do not appear to pose any threat.’

Do not appear...

It was a reminder that this personal contact was far from an alliance in the making. Iyanna could not let familial bonds overtake her broader mission, nor

blind her to potential obstacles.

‘High Lord-Guardian is a position of some rank in your hierarchy?’ she asked, stepping forwards, subtly ushering Sydari away from the control chamber. She was not sure why this should be prudent but in response to her earlier lack of caution, she overcompensated. ‘You are able to speak for the people of Zaisuthra?’

‘It is the highest.’ Again, the warm smile. Humble. An expression almost never seen on an aeldari face, which took some moments for Iyanna to decode. ‘The House of Arienal rules Zaisuthra, and I am the senior member of the House of Arienal.’

Again, the choice of words was particular. Not leads or commands, not guides or presides over. *Rules*.

Iyanna felt a surge of smugness emanating from her pilot companion – he had noted the same and took it as further evidence that the Zaisuthrans were more likely to be akin to Commorrhaghans than craftworlders in their attitudes.

‘You have absolute authority?’ she asked, unsure if there was a subtler way to make such an enquiry. ‘Hereditary monarchy?’

‘Yes and no.’ They stopped beside the opening between the two vessels. ‘The rule of Zaisuthra passes from House to House over fixed periods, so each serves in primacy only for a while.’

He stopped, on the brink of saying something else, and Iyanna sensed sadness from him. Sydari glanced back to his shuttle and then fixed his eye on her.

‘Please extend my invitation to your fleet, they are welcome to dock with Zaisuthra.’ Again he paused, about to say something before changing his mind. ‘We offer such that we have to share with you and are keen to learn of your people. On a personal note, I am also excited to hear of the fortunes of the House of Arienal on the craftworld of Iyanden. It is perhaps not chance that we have returned close to another branch of our people.’

This time it was Iyanna’s reluctance that stalled the conversation. She nodded and forced a smile.

‘There is much for us both to discuss and learn.’

Neither extended further invitation and so Sydari ascended to the docking aperture, his quintrill scampering ahead. He looked back with a final smile of parting and then the opening disappeared, the hulls of both craft sealed against each other.

Iyanna nearly fell, and found herself on one of the inertia couches without conscious thought. She took a shuddering breath and then exhaled, long and

slow, releasing the conflict of energies that swirled within her. She sat, numbed, staring at her gloved hands, noticing the tremble in her fingers.

‘That went well,’ said the pilot, whose name she had still not asked for. She ignored him and, silently dismissed, he slouched back to the piloting chamber. ‘I shall take us back to *Ynnead’s Dream*.’

She mumbled an affirmative and forced her gaze to a window opposite, where she saw the craft of Sydari moving away, heading back towards the glitter of Zaisuthra in the distance. Iyanna stood up as her launch turned, moving to hold a hand against the transparent material, eye close to keep the craftworld in view for as long as possible.

When it had gone she saw only her face reflected against the darkness. The features shifted, becoming those of Sydari – not a great change, it must be admitted. And from there it took only moments for Iyanna’s thoughts to slide to the avenue of the Dead, to converse with the remembered shade of her father.

While Iyanna conducted her morbid reminiscences, Sydari had his own issues to contend with. Waiting for him in the main compartment of the short-range scoutcraft was Atalesasa. The other Zaisuthran sat by one of the viewpoints, regarding the dwindling craft of Iyanna with sunken eyes. He was also garbed in a long coat, of heavy black fabric edged with loops and swirls of golden thread, the high collar hiding most of his pale face. His high forehead was decorated by a single gem set into the flesh, an emerald the size of a thumb tip fashioned into a tight spiral like a mystical third eye – the badge of the House’s Converser, their psychic representative in the groupmind.

He did not move at Sydari’s return, chin resting on the fingers of one hand, elbow on the sill of the viewing pane. When he spoke his voice was a measured whisper.

‘You trust them.’

‘I trust *her*,’ Sydari corrected, sitting beside his adviser.

‘She was strong, in groupthought. She tried to see into the groupmind.’

‘Indeed? And what did you get from her in return?’

‘Very little. She was cold. Almost dead.’

‘But you said she is puissant?’

‘Literally dead, Lord-Guardian. She walks upon the precipice between the living and the departed. Her power comes from the tomb. Be wary of them, Sydari. They do not have our best interests at heart.’

‘The family needs them,’ said the High Lord-Guardian. ‘We are all but spent. We need fresh blood if we are to grow. Our isolation must end or we shall wither

and die alone.'

'They are a threat.'

'There is risk, that is true, but also opportunity.' Sydari held Peasa in his lap and stroked a finger down the creature's back, eliciting a contented shudder from the quintrill. 'We cannot survive without them.'

'Do not confuse desperation with hope, Sydari. We have need of them, you are right. We do not have need of their cooperation.'

'No, but it will make this easier. That which is freely given is worth more than that which is taken by force. Better to sow on fertile soil than barren rock, and now I have planted the first seed.'



CHAPTER 16

THE WELCOME OF ZAISUTHRA

At the head of the fleet, *Ynnead's Dream* was larger than anything mustered by the Zaisuthrans to meet the arrivals. Tailed by cruisers and escorts, the battleship moved sedately along the length of the craftworld towards the docking tower to which they had been issued guidance. In the conference chamber the worthies of Ynnari were fixed upon the glowing image on the display screen, the rest of the hall in darkness, their faces lit by the flicker of green and blue. They scoured the magnified images for every clue to the culture and history of their hosts.

‘See here, that is battle scarring,’ said Meliniel, pointing to an area on the craftworld’s closest flank, where base material was exposed through several long gouges. The surface above was blank, no landscape or dome to be seen. ‘High energy attack of some kind.’

‘I see a city,’ remarked Yvraine, gesturing to move the focus of the image to highlight the object of her scrutiny.

The display expanded, revealing a mountain fastness like a castle from legend, its flanks and summit encrusted with towers and bridges, broad highways converging from the plains and surrounding dome arches. It sat close to the prow of Zaisuthra, the tallest edifice in sight, giving the craftworld a front-heavy appearance.

Further manipulation revealed several clusters of hexagonally domed structures at the base of the city-mount. These buildings were squat and functional, unlike any aeldari architecture past or present.

‘Perhaps they are stables or similar,’ suggested Azkahr.

‘Or some kind of penitent aesthetic?’ Iyasta leaned closer, a finger directed towards the square windows and doors. ‘Faux-barbarianism?’

‘I do not like this,’ announced Iyanna, turning away. ‘It feels as though we are looking for excuses to judge them.’

‘If you think they are not subjecting us to equal scrutiny, you are naive,’ said Yvraine. ‘We must learn all we can, the better to conduct negotiations.’

‘Negotiations?’ Iyanna shook her head. ‘This is not a trade embassy. These are our distant cousins, potential allies, not a resource to be exploited. Your time in Commorrhagh has robbed you of empathy.’

Nobody replied, though all shared the thought that for Iyanna to speak of empathy was rare, if not outright hypocrisy. She had previously espoused great sacrifice, even the ruin of her own craftworld, if it brought about the summoning of Ynnead. Azkahr was, predictably, the one who could not let this stand.

‘Let me say what everyone else is too polite to voice,’ said the kabalite. ‘Even your brief contact with members of your distant family have distracted you from our cause. Sydari is a stranger, even if he shares your name. Your bond of House is no basis for trust.’

‘Do not confuse the Houses of the aeldari for the squabbling kabals of your home city,’ snapped Iyanna. ‘Even across the generations there is loyalty and honour to be found there.’

‘There is no confusion,’ Azkahr replied with equal vehemence. ‘The kabals were born of those noble Houses. I fear you will find Zaisuthra closer to the internecine rivalries of the old dominions than you would like. Make no error, they see us as rivals at the moment.’

‘That does not mean we must reciprocate,’ said Meliniel.

‘Nor assume that the Zaisuthrans will aid us out of any sense of common purpose,’ said Yvraine, whose own experiences in Commorrhagh had taught her to be wary of any alliance not forged on mutual self-interest. ‘We may not have come for barter, but we must bear something to offer the Zaisuthrans in return for access to the Gate of Malice.’

‘We have warriors,’ said the Visarch. ‘And ships.’

Though his words were few, his meaning was clear. The craftworld could not match the might of those it had left behind, and its fleet was little stronger than a corsair flotilla in the eyes of the Ynnari. The fleet they had brought with them, itself not even half of their total void assets, was more than a match for the vessels that currently orbited Zaisuthra.

‘Threats?’ Iyanna shook her head, missing his intent. ‘Who are we to arrive with blade at their throat?’

‘Military assistance,’ the Visarch explained with a sigh. ‘They have been in

wars, that much is plain.’

‘A pact,’ said Meliniel. He looked towards Iyasta and Telathaus. ‘I am sure that would also work in the interests of Iyanden.’

The warlocks shared a thought and a look, and then signalled their assent.

‘Iyanden can offer little but the dead—’

‘—and we are in need of allies of late.’

‘Let us hope that Zaisuthra is in better shape than it appears from outside,’ said Yvraine, seeing more darkened domes and broken strata as their ship turned across the midsection of the craftworld. ‘Or it may not only be spirits that we need raise from the dead.’

It hopefully suffices to say that the arrival of the Ynnari – and the small contingent of Iyandeni – was met with suitable dignity and occasion, without delving into too much tedious detail of the greetings, introductions, rituals and ceremony that accompanied the meeting of the two peoples.

Three facts are of remark, thoughts that lodged in the mind of Yvraine as she bowed and nodded and committed a seemingly endless stream of names to memory.

The first was that the Zaisuthrans were religious. She was not one to cast aspersions on those who wished to dedicate their lives to a god or gods, after all, but it struck her as strange that the pantheon of old had been resurrected. Voices had not been raised in prayer to such as Asuryan and Isha, Vaul and Lileath since the War in Heaven, which predates the Fall by a score of lifetimes and much more.

Perhaps in their isolation, or in seeking for some cause or guide in the anarchy of the post-Fall dominions, the Zaisuthrans had sought answers from the old ways. The nobles they were introduced to all seemed to fulfil the dual role of family matriarchs and patriarchs, and a priesthood as well. Sydari was not alone in wearing the sigils of almost every god and goddess, every demigod and ascendant power in the ancient myths. One god was notably absent from their worship, one rune that they did not use – Ynnead.

Yvraine can be forgiven for calculating that this made them ideal candidates for conversion to the Ynnari. It is understandable that if one worships one god, they might worship any, and so it occurred to the Emissary of Ynnead that she should endeavour to spread the deeds and words of Ynnead and look to recruit some or all of the Zaisuthrans to the movement.

The second of her observations somewhat tempered her expectations in this

regard, for it quickly became plain to see that like their home, the Zaisuthrans had suffered much predation in their generations of removal from the rest of the aeldari. Several thousand turned out to commemorate the Ynnari, but they lined avenues and galleries that could have held ten times that number.

Though never one of the largest craftworlds, upon the eve of its departure Zaisuthra would have housed a million souls and more. Over time, that number had dwindled significantly if the size of the greeting crowds was any indication.

Even more striking was the ageing population. There seemed barely a handful of aeldari less than halfway to their old age, and of infants there was no sign at all.

‘Perhaps they are shy,’ answered the Visarch when she shared her thoughts.

‘Unlikely that they would be reluctant to see others after so long in the wilderness of the void. One would think they would raise the greatest clamour possible.’

Iyanna had clearly noticed this as well, but all attempts from her or Yvraine to draw Sydari or one of the other Zaisuthran nobles to share some measure of the sorrows that had beset them were met with polite dissembling.

Even for such a small attendance, the welcome was sombre rather than celebratory. No small proportion of the Zaisuthrans eyed the newcomers with suspicion; admittedly a goodly percentage of the Ynnari were no less blatant in their appraisal of their hosts, particularly those that heralded from Commorragh.

The entrance of the Harlequins should have brought some lightness and frivolity to the sincere proceedings. Dreamspear and his masque displayed their full motley, conversing with their audience in movement and verse, the embodiment of Cegorach the Trickster. Like Ynnead, the Laughing God was conspicuous in his absence from the temples and talismans of the craftworld and though a relative few of the crowd showed delight at the Harlequins’ performance, many had deeper scowls by the end of it.

Sydari and the other nobles clapped, their smiles a little too fixed for genuine amusement, though none displayed outright antipathy to the cavorting, singing warriors. They paid respect to Dreamspear and his cohort equally to the other Ynnari and listened with rapt attention to the Great Harlequin’s tales of the Laughing God’s escape from She Who Thirsts and his subsequent exploits stealing the souls of Harlequins from the clutches of the Great Enemy.

Again there was a notable silence around the matter of how the Zaisuthrans had coped with the peril of She Who Thirsts. They did not wear the soul-protecting waystones, but there was none of the vampiric aura of the Commorraghans

either. Such a sensitive matter was clearly not for public discussion, but Yvraine could not help but harbour suspicion regarding this facet of Zaisuthran culture.

Lastly was the matter of the infinity circuit itself, or the groupmind as the Zaisuthrans referred to their psychic network. It was like a prototype of the matrices that powered other craftworlds, based upon the same rudimentary psychic engineering but very different in execution.

For the most part, Zaisuthra was a blank shell. The craftworlders could feel the psychic presence around them, as with any of the aeldari world-ships, but those that had honed their talent such as Iyanna and the warlocks, or those whose minds had been opened by godly intervention in the case of Yvraine, could no more access the crystal pathways than they could pass their hands into the structure of the walls. It existed but could not be penetrated.

‘It reminds me of an Exodite world spirit,’ said the Visarch. ‘A shell, the energy passing only one way.’

‘When did you sojourn among the Exodites?’ asked Yvraine.

‘Between before and now,’ the Visarch replied with a shrug.

It was impossible to know if the resistance of the circuit was some innate function of its make-up, or if it had been deliberately shielded against their inspection. Neither was a damning fact in its own right and, as with the other observations, it was not cause alone to be wary of the Zaisuthrans.

‘Taken all together, though, it feels as though Zaisuthra is not quite alive,’ explained Yvraine after spending the better part of the cycle being repeatedly blessed, gently interrogated and given a quite precise and structured tour through parts of the craftworld.

‘You should find it—’

‘—most welcoming, in that regard,’ rasped the twins.

A whole dome was given over to house them – the Highlands of Distant Repose, Sydari had called it. Within was a beautifully rugged moorland for the most part, covered in purple-flowered low bushes, and copses of trees with intricately interwoven branches. The leaves were dry, turned to russet and ochre by the season, the first drops covering the ground with a carpet of reds and oranges. The sky of the dome presented as cloudy, the underside of the drifting masses dappled with golden light from a hidden source.

Several manses had been erected upon the rounded highlands, looking down into boulder-filled valleys, the escarpments and cliffs pitted with burrow holes, stippled with mosses and lichens. Marshlands and fens were home to long-

legged wading birds with hooting calls, which strode among the rushes and reeds, dipping for orange-flanked fish, and snapping the air at the finger-long wyvernflies.

The Ynnari were housed in one complex of sprawling buildings, known as Withershield, which delved as deeply into the foundations as it rose into the air. The upper storeys were many-roofed, flanked with turrets, the grey walls broken by broad transparent doors that opened onto dozens of balconies. The ancient palace was more reminiscent of a hunting estate than the city-bound expanses that had housed the majority of the aeldari before the Fall.

In one of the upper floors the leaders of the Ynnari made their lair, securing chambers with high, wide windows that looked out upon a shimmering lake. When all had performed their cleansing and rested for a while, they met again on one of the upper plazas, a wide deck furnished with enough low chairs and tables to host several dozen.

There were no slaves here, no aeldari on the Path of Service, and so the cup holders remained empty, the tables bereft of fayre. Dreamspear crunched on a piece of fruit he had mischievously obtained somehow. Others wandered to the rail and looked out upon the meticulously constructed melancholic landscape.

This was a craftworld, when all was said, and the seasons only turned by the will of its inhabitants. The entire dome was a purposeful study in transition and fading glory.

‘There is immense loss here,’ said Iyanna. ‘They are struggling, I can feel it. Regret permeates everything.’

‘Did Sydari give any indication of why they have returned now?’ asked Meliniel.

‘The galaxy is in turmoil, even the forgotten frontiers have felt the effects of the Great Rift,’ replied Yvraine.

‘They need our help,’ Iyanna said bluntly. ‘I cannot say exactly what, or why they have been dashed against the troubled shores of our lives now, but it is clear everywhere we look that they are foundering fast. Some cataclysm connected to the Great Rift might have befallen them, or simply the inexorable erosion of time has finally laid them low. It doesn’t matter! They are our people, they need our assistance.’

‘Then they need to ask for it,’ said Azkahr. ‘Do you think pride holds them back?’

‘Or fear,’ countered Iyanna. ‘Would you willingly admit to strangers that you are weak? Defenceless? We must earn their trust first.’

‘And they ours,’ Yvraine said sharply. She picked up a crystal goblet and held it to the light, casting rainbows against the palm of her other hand. ‘Blessings and banquets are flattery and bribery, nothing more.’

‘Those that had gone, have now returned,’ said Dreamspear, tossing the core of his snack over the edge of the balcony. ‘If they did not desire contact, their lips would have remained sealed and none would have witnessed their passing. The performance has much changed since they departed the stage. Perhaps they falter simply through ignorance of the revised script.’

‘I will speak again to Sydari,’ said Iyanna. ‘If we can find a meeting of minds, our factions will also find accord, I am sure of it.’

‘You seem... anxious to spearhead this engagement,’ said Meliniel. ‘You would not let personal desire cloud your judgement, I hope.’

‘I was not asking permission.’

The spiritseer stalked back into the chamber, shoulders hunched, the eyes of the other Ynnari upon her back. They watched her leave the manse, a brighter mote of gold and red among the autumnal shade that would soon be lost in the carefully generated mists.

Yvraine crouched and tickled Alorynis behind an ear, and with a thought bid him to depart. The gyrex purred once, rubbing a cheek against her calf, and then leapt to the balcony. Three more bounds followed – from rail to roof, roof to sill, sill to ground – and with tail high he followed after the departing spiritseer.



CHAPTER 17

THUS SPAKE ZAISUTHRANS

A picture is a poem of a thousand verses, claims the wisdom of the ancient philosophers. In that regard, the meeting between the delegations on the broad balcony of the manse spoke a long ode to discomfort, distrust and disdain, via lyric diversions to mutual antagonism, secret agendas and simple clash of personalities.

It was more than negotiation, it was war by body language. To the casual observer it appeared as a polite but heated discourse. To the informed observer it was a series of salients and thrusts, counter-offensives and hapless slaughter. The aeldari are a people ever given to the most subtle of non-verbal communications and the least subtle of interpretations. They offer little offence but take much.

A glance, a tilt of the head, a pause of a half-breath carried the same weight as a flat denial or soliloquy. Every measured sip of wine, each shift of posture, the merest change of intonation signalled a thunderous charge or terrified rout; a surprise flank attack could be initiated by a blink and an untimely cough might bring about utter capitulation.

Imagine the scene:

Two groups, seated for the most part though occasionally they stood, paced, or otherwise displayed patience, frustration and irritability in the cycle of never-ending debate.

On the one side, the Ynnari and Iyandeni. The tables before them held platters of barely touched food, their goblets of crystal clear water, fruit juices and aromatic spiced wine equally neglected.

Yvraine sat like a queen among a court, resplendent in full aristocratic attire, immaculately coiffured and arranged with her war fan held lightly in her lap. She

feigned the appearance of a doll, but none present were deluded enough to believe the facade. Her lips formed a tight line when not speaking, her eyes alert for the slightest gesture or expression that would expose the intent of those opposite before it was made plain in word or deed. Even if not for this telltale sharpness of demeanour, the psychic purring of the blade beside her chair betrayed that she was anything but an animated figurine.

The Visarch stood at her shoulder, a splash of blood against the grey and pastel blue of the surrounds, unmoving and silent. For the entirety of the conclave he had remained static and unspeaking, not the slightest tremor or reaction to anything that was said or done. Yet for all his immobility there was a latent energy in him, of a storm behind a door that could be opened on a whim. So utterly without involvement had he been that it was hard not to study him, waiting for the moment for his opinion to be unleashed with all the fury of an artillery bombardment and full aerial assault.

And yet even when Yvraine was hardest pressed he held his tongue, true to his promise made before the talks had begun that he would not act until called upon.

About them sat and stood several of the Ynnari, present to murmur appreciation or damnation as required, and to add an undeniable physical edge to Yvraine's petition. They loomed when needed, touched hands to sword hilts and pistol grips when occasion demanded, but were also ready to idle and relax to show goodwill and leeway.

To Yvraine's right were the twin warlocks from Iyanden. They had removed their helms to reveal identical, slender faces and arched brows. They tried their best to interject their desires and demands into the conversation, often at the most inopportune times, and the vigour with which they delivered these interruptions increased the longer they were ignored, much to the annoyance of everyone else present.

Outnumbered, the twins were utterly mercenary in their dialogue, leaning first to one side and then the other, and reversing their temporary allegiances in the breadth of a twin-finished sentence, and occasionally departing in a third direction that stalled both lines of argument in return for some minuscule concession.

They showed no favour for the Ynnari, treating Yvraine's discourse no better or worse than that of the Zaisuthrans, their loyalty not simply foremost to Iyanden but all-consuming.

Opposite, upon chairs angled with subtle meaning to deflect and distract, their tables placed to affect openness or barriers, the Zaisuthrans had adopted a

strategy of attrition. Feeling comfortable on home ground, in control of the environment, they held back any sign of their needs and offered only grudging accommodation. Agreement was rationed as sips of water in the desert, extracted only at great effort.

The secondary mediator, who had been introduced by the outlandish title of Scion-Elaborate Nasithas, handled the vast majority of the interaction. She wore the high-collared attire that seemed the fashion among the higher echelons of the Houses, her gown a silvery-red that reminded of a fish one moment and a laser blast the next. A carefully considered choice of attire that allowed a twist of the ankle, straightening of an arm or flick of a hand to send a shimmer of movement through her garb.

Nasithas was in constant motion, always adjusting her posture, leaning first on one elbow and then the next, a hive of agitated action that threatened to dazzle or mesmerise.

She frequently consulted with a choir of monosyllabic associates that had been swiftly introduced as chamberlains of the various Houses, whose outlook seemed that of mourners at the remembrances of the craftworld's greatest hero, or perhaps parents chaperoning their only and much beloved child on a tryst with a most precocious and rebellious adolescent suitor. Their stern looks and disapproving head shakes absorbed the vehemence of many of Yvraine's offensives, just as the flares and decoys of an aerial fighter lure the seeking projectile or confound the optical systems of a pursuing foe.

Occasionally the chief of the delegation, Monsattra, who had been announced with no rank, would deploy an intervention to shore up a failing or flailing defence. He was that rarity among the aeldari, capable of matching deed and word and thought simultaneously.

That is to say, he actually spoke his mind, an act considered the height of barbarity in many craftworlds, Iyanden included.

When such naked opinion was offered, there was little that Yvraine could do; either retreat before the open advance or respond in kind with a deeper truth to hold her ground. Monsattra also assisted his aides in an ongoing capacity, deploying various moods, demeanours and expressions to reinforce Nasithas' arguments or deflate Yvraine's assertions. On two perfectly timed occasions he deployed a brief smirk with all the precision and devastation of a sniper's shot.

In such circumstance one would think progress was slow, but remarkably much was achieved in the first quarter-cycle following the Zaisuthrans' arrival. Iyanden and Zaisuthra shared a common ancestral language, but both had

developed a vernacular since their cultures had separated. Much effort was expended establishing a common frame of reference for the discourse – the webway, the craftworlds and the passage of time – before anything of note could be agreed.

The next salvos focused upon the synchronicity of the delegation's appearance not long after Iyanna's departure, until Yvraine was assured that the spiritseer was in safe hands, on her way to meet the estranged members of the House of Arienal. Yvraine let free nothing of Iyanna's loss and history in that regard, despite several attempts to loosen her tongue.

Iyanna did not have to go far before she came upon a cavern in which she and others of the Ynnari had been deposited by low-sided skyskiffs. Several of the transports were still there, docked against the rough wall. One moved away at her approach, rotating to bring its boarding platform to bear against a step by the front of the cave. She climbed aboard and sat near the front, arm resting on the gunwale.

The craft hovered there, bobbing gently as though a ship beside a gently shoaling shore, awaiting her command. Unlike the groupmind, she could feel the psychic resonance of the machine, but had no point of reference from which to direct it.

A hiss and a metallic scrape drew her attention to a door that lifted away on the hillside, forming a ramp into a dimly lit tunnel. The fact that the aperture had made any noise at all stood testament to poor maintenance, but the thought was only fleeting as she recognised the figure that stepped from within.

Sydari.

She had become accustomed to his similarity to her father – almost. It still took a heartbeat before she remembered that it was not a spectre of Arctai that kept appearing before her.

Iyanna remembered the warnings of her companions, and though their doubts irked her, she possessed enough self-awareness to remain on her guard in the High Lord-Guardian's presence.

'An unexpected encounter,' she said, knowing full well that there had to be nothing unexpected about it from his perspective.

'Though the groupmind is closed to you, it is not blind to your movements and moods,' confessed Sydari. He inclined his head, requesting permission to board the skyskiff. She assented with a glance and blink. Sydari did not sit next to her, but took a place on the opposite side of the aisle down the centre of the skimmer,

almost mirroring her pose, though slightly more inclined and relaxed.

‘You have been spying on us.’

‘Yes. If you mean the groupmind of Zaisuthra has been monitoring you, to ensure that you are well and do not stray too far from where you should be.’

‘What does that mean? Are we forbidden to move freely?’

Sydari said nothing. He moved his palm to a gem set into the back of the couch in front of him. It gleamed in recognition and a heartbeat later the skiff rose up to shoulder height. With the faintest murmur of anti-grav engines it slipped out of the cave, accelerating quickly. The wind tousled Iyanna’s hair as she leaned towards Sydari, her voice raised against its increasing rush.

‘Where are you taking me?’ A frisson of excitement set her blood racing a little swifter, though she would be unable to say whether from curiosity or anxiety. Neither emotion was dissipated by Sydari’s reply.

‘To show you what you need to see.’

Unbeknownst to either, beneath the back seat, above the warmth radiated from the main propulsor unit, Alorynis curled up, contented but alert.

There was something not quite right about Monsattra, nor his fellow envoys, the Visarch decided. Their politeness was so sharp as to be weaponised, every gesture and word of gratitude a barb sunk into the flesh to extract recompense. Their manner was relaxed but attentive, a look the warrior had seen many times – the eyes of those awaiting battle. It was not fear or anticipation, not the poise of those expecting peril in an instant, but wariness, foreknowledge of an inevitable clash.

It might have simply been their mood, agitated by the vast changes about to befall them and their craftworld. Though they talked of their return as if it was not of significance, and nodded sagely to each nugget of information about the other craftworlds gleaned from Yvraine, it was clear that they had passed across the edge of a precipice and were wondering if they might fly or fall.

There was hidden desperation, he decided. Their forced smiles, their eagerness to please yet not give away anything of themselves was a mark of dire straits.

It was to be expected. The Great Rift had unleashed many terrible things upon the galaxy and Zaisuthra had clearly not been immune. Distance alone was no defence against the Great Powers. Alone in the darkness, what terrible events had overtaken them? What losses had they suffered?

More importantly, a small thought nagged at him: what pacts had they made?

His body did not move, as immobile as the moment he had taken up position

next to Yvraine, but inside his mask his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He felt the flutter of his previous lives, the other souls that had been Laarian the Exarch. Ghost voices, felt but not heard, edged into his consciousness, pricking his distrust. How exactly had such a small craftworld survived for so long, devoid of allies, shorn from the guiding principles of the Path or the spirit vampirism of the Commorraghans?

He thought about their lack of spirit stones. Nothing stood between their souls and She Who Thirsts, unless their groupmind was something akin to the Whisper of Ynnead that bound together the spirits of the Ynnari. Or the soul-leach of the kabalites and wyches... But the Visarch sensed nothing parasitic about the groupmind, though he could feel its looming presence everywhere, permeating the structures around them, seeped into the bedrock beneath the foundations of the manse.

And in this he found the true source of his unease.

The Whisper was all but silenced by its presence, the lack of an infinity circuit cut off anything but the most rudimentary empathic link between Yvraine's followers. Laarian sensed the brighter fire of Yvraine and the sparks of the two Iyandeni warlocks, souls touched by Khaine that he could feel across the breadth of a continent – but of the Zaisuthrans there was nothing.

His othersouls writhed, making his body feel like a cage for his spirit. Every instinct screamed that all was not well, but he could not act.

The Sword of Silent Screams twitched in its scabbard, or so it seemed. His fingers ached to fold around its grip, to draw it to freedom and unleash its deadly gift.

He longed, how he longed to strike the head from sincere, smiling Monsattra. He wanted to see the envoy's blood coursing from severed arteries, splashing crimson across the balcony.

Such was the call of Khaine, not the murmur of Ynnead. He quelled his urges. Laarian was gone, the Visarch served a different master.



CHAPTER 18

TRUTHS REVEALED

The skyskiff took them from the moorland dome and down a sweeping series of interconnecting tunnels, heading, as far as Iyanna was able to discern, towards the outer edge at the bow of Zaisuthra. They skimmed past featureless horizons of bare base material unadorned by soil or vegetation, the air thin and barely processed. Other times they zipped through darkness, only the halo of light from the skiff's navigational lamps breaking the utter blackness of the unlit domes. Iyanna could feel the empty expanse around her, reminded of the moment she had passed into the void on the shuttle.

‘Why can I not feel you?’ she asked. ‘Why have you closed your thoughts, your groupmind to us?’

‘To keep ourselves safe, of course,’ replied Sydari. His deeds ran counter to his words though, as Iyanna felt the faintest contact of his mind, the featherlight brush of his consciousness next to hers. ‘Do not tell me that you would strip away your defences if circumstance was reversed.’

‘Caution is justified,’ she admitted, pulsing a thought into his, reciprocating the psychic gesture. ‘One might feel this borders on paranoia.’

‘Oh, it surely does,’ said Sydari. ‘Although if one is under constant attack, is it really paranoia?’

Before Iyanna could ask what this meant, the skyskiff passed from a transitway into a lit dome. It was not large; the crackle of the field overhead was close enough that she could feel the slightest hint of static from its discharge. It had once been snow-covered forest. In patches icy remains still clung to the substrate, split and twisted trees jutting darkly from the pale drifts. Like swollen veins, the crystal matrix of the craftworld ran through stretches of bare

foundation, a bruise-like black and dark blue stained around it.

The outwash of tainted psychic energy nearly made Iyanna gag. She grabbed the side of the skiff to steady herself, her inner senses assailed by putrefaction. It was not just the wash of corrupted psychic power that swept through her, but the invoked memory of Iyanden despoiled, the present and specific recollection of the Lord of Decay's energy coursing cancerously through the infinity circuit of her home.

'Get. Me. Away.' She could barely form the words, her desperation hurled as a psychic imperative at her companion. Eyes screwed closed, she gritted her teeth, trying to steady her breathing, feeling that the cloying presence of decay constricted around her throat and forced itself down into her lungs. Her thoughts were full of vileness, a pounding in her temples, a weight dragging at her limbs.

Startled by her reaction, Sydari froze momentarily, swept up in the wash of her panic. He half rose from his seat, torn between comforting Iyanna and manipulating the controls. She shrank back from him, removing one option, so he placed a hand over the oval gem and willed the craft to take them back out of the dome.

Unseen, the gyrix slipped over the edge of the skiff as it slowed to turn, landing lightly on the ice-crusting grass below. Ears flat, eyes wide, it slinked away as the buzz of the skyskiff diminished into the distance.

It was, typically, Monsattra that moved the conclave onto its main purpose, with scandalous directness.

'What do you need of us?'

Yvraine spread the fingers of one hand, gently opening the fan in her lap a quarter-arc, the merest glimmer of the bladed edges a sign of discomfort. She could not allow the question to go unanswered but was loath to launch into a lengthy explanation regarding Ynnead, the croneswords, the Gate of Malice and the Well of the Dead.

'We, that is my people, are seekers of a greater truth.' Monsattra raised an eyebrow a fraction, derailing her attempt to obfuscate. 'Central to our beliefs are a number of artefacts, legendary pieces from the oldest times of the aeldari dominions. Zaisuthra has dwelt long in shadows that we have not yet explored.'

'And we are happy to share what we have learnt in that time,' replied Nasithas, taking up the cause of Zaisuthra again. Her hands folded in her lap, indicating the opposite of her words, a gate closed to all inquiry. 'Five lifetimes is a considerable period, it would help if you could be more specific in what you

seek.'

Yvraine leaned forwards and smiled, the expression a lance aimed at Nasithas' throat.

'Your welcome to strangers has been overwhelming, and your cooperation in this more than we could expect. If we could have access to your archives we could search for ourselves, for I would not like to drag your people away from their own concerns.'

'Such access would certainly speed up your investigations, but our recent experience has unfortunately shown the incompatibility of our systems. The groupmind of Zaisuthra does not function alongside... What was it you called your psychic network?'

'The infinity circuit.' The words were said easily, but offered with reluctance.

'Ah, yes, the infinity circuit.'

'May I refresh your drink?' Monsattra said suddenly, standing up. Before Yvraine could answer, he stepped forwards, breaching the neutral ground between the delegations, to take up a ewer set on the table before her.

A heartbeat later, the Visarch's hand was about his wrist, the other gripping the hilt of the Sword of Silent Screams.

'My apologies,' Yvraine said, quickly standing up also, a flick of the fan commanding her associate to release Monsattra. The Visarch hesitated for a moment, earning the admonition of a scowl for his tardiness before he relinquished his hold and retreated.

Yvraine picked up a goblet, red liquid just below the brim, and offered it to the Zaisuthran, who made great show of filling it with a few more drops. The metaphor was not lost on either of them and they shared a look.

'Did anyone speak to you about the Highlands of Distant Repose?' he asked, turning in such a way that his movement guided Yvraine a step towards the rail. She complied with the unspoken invitation, perplexed but also intrigued. Monsattra did not wait for a reply, but continued to speak as he conducted her to the edge of the balcony. 'It was the province of House Aedasa, whose fondness for the melancholic bordered on the melodramatic.'

He smiled at his own wordplay, giving Yvraine a moment in which to interject a question.

'It is no longer theirs?'

'Alas not, Yvraine.' The use of her name was overly familiar, eliciting gasps from both contingents, but the pair ignored the ongoing interplay behind them.

'They tired of their melancholy?'

‘No, such was their addiction to the morose, one might believe it was genetic. I am afraid that the line of Aedasa foundered and is now no more.’

‘A tragedy, for any craftworld.’ Yvraine still could not help but think this was some play to manipulate her and did not comment further, fearing a potential riposte.

‘But you are of no craftworld.’

‘I prefer to think that the Ynnari are of *every* craftworld, and all other aeldari kindreds too.’

‘Including Zaisuthra? We are divergent, and rather set in our ways.’

‘We are the bridge the aeldari will cross to salvation,’ said Yvraine, sensing honest invitation to espouse her greater mission. She looked at his sigils and amulets. ‘You cleave to the worship of dead gods, I to the awakening of a god of the dead.’

He showed no offence at her declaration, though a flutter of grimaces from the Zaisuthran contingent displayed sufficient scorn for this dismissal of their religion.

‘You think we have need of a god of the dead?’

‘All must become the Reborn, or suffer the death eternal.’ A wave of the fan encompassed the moorlands. ‘House Aedasa is not the only casualty of time, I wager. You are no more immune to the slow decline of our people than any other, though perhaps your isolation has shielded you from the worst of it.’

Monsattra smiled wryly.

Letting the integral animal senses of the skyskiff guide it towards an available berth further out in the arterial conduits, Sydari moved away from the controls and looked at Iyanna. Virtually catatonic, she sat with a blank expression staring unseeing into the tunnel ahead. Her arms clasped tight about her, protective, self-embracing. Her face, even in its slackness, unmistakably that of an Arienal, and to look upon it as the visage of a stranger was an odd sensation. The moment Sydari had opened the hatchway between their shuttles – in the heartbeats before when her questing thoughts had teased upon the shell of the groupmind that shielded his thoughts – he had known she was of the family.

It had been too much to hope for. Rumours, of course. Legends that some of the Zaisuthran Houses had members on other craftworlds after the Fall, either from disparate routs or subsequent intermingling in the short time before Zaisuthra had fled for the Dark Halo. But after all this time, to find one in whom the bloodline was still strong?

As he considered this, he lifted a finger to her cheek, where a single tear rolled down flawless skin. He caught the droplet on a knuckle and wiped it away, cautious lest she stir at the touch.

Iyanna did not move, still locked inside her own mind, in the place to which she had retreated when she had tried to make contact with the daemon-cursed psychic vessels of the lost dome.

Why did she do that? asked Atalesasa across the groupmind. The inquiry resonated, echoed and reinforced by others inside the shared psychic cloud-thought. Their presence was instantly heartening, soothing Sydari's nerves after the vexing episode with Iyanna's seizure.

She is an explorer, a seeker after truth, replied Sydari. He shared the swell of affection he felt, the thought amplified by some within the groupmind, rebuffed by others. Atalesasa was among the latter.

Do not forget that she is an outsider still.

She is of the family.

The old family, not the new. Not until she shares our blood again.

A clamour of sensations and voices reinforced this point, echoing the earlier demands for Sydari to bring Iyanna before the groupcouncil.

I have another way, as I have told you. We do not have to take what we need. Can you not feel her emptiness, the yearning that eats at her soul? We are the part that is missing from her, the bond that will bring her out of the clutches of despair and back to the warmth of a family.

And through her, the others will follow?

Iyanna stirred, a whisper escaping her lips, but nothing that could be understood. Sydari settled back as the skyskiff slewed sideways down a linking conduit, drawn by homing instinct. The Iyandeni seer settled again, no more alert than before, though her expression seemed more serene.

You tell me. Sydari answered Atalesasa. *How fares Monsattra?*

He is being typically stubborn. Have the two of you made some bargain or wager as to which will turn one of them to our cause first?

We are both passionate, that is all we share.

The Houses of Ashana and Daethrosa stand ready to take matters further. If the leaders do not acquiesce, there are ways in which the family can reach out to Iyanden.

Sydari considered this, uncomfortable at the notion.

We are not animals, Atalesasa. It is better this way.

Further communication was interrupted by a low moan issuing from Iyanna.

She retched as though violently ill, hands clutched to her gut and then rising to seize the sides of her head. But it was not pain – of the physical kind – that washed from her thoughts.

Sydari tapped into the groupmind to use its strength to siphon away a small part of the seer's emotions, as much as he could through the rigid discipline of unconscious defiance that kept her mind safe despite her discommoded situation. A memory both recent and old burned fear and disgust through Iyanna, turning everything within to ash.

'We both have need, or you would not have returned and we would not have come,' said Yvraine, looking Monsattra directly in the eye. If he wished for openness he would get it, but she would expect the same in return. 'I seek a portal, which legend holds to be on Zaisuthra, beyond which...'

'The truth?'

'A truth. Perhaps.'

'And we require allies. We tried to survive alone, but the doom of our people, as you say, has caught up with us. Our defences shudder beneath the renewed attacks.'

'Attacks?' The interruption came from Meliniel, who for the greater part of the deliberations had been relegated to the background chorus. Now the autarch stepped up, disrupting the balance between Yvraine and Monsattra.

The disturbance was exacerbated when Telathaus and Iyasta rose also.

'If it is perilous to remain--'

'--we should be told everything.'

'You are all quite safe,' declared Nasithas, dragged to her feet in order to remain relevant to the exchange. She rallied quickly, turning retreat to fresh offensive, her next words directed at Yvraine. 'What do the legends say of this portal you seek?'

'In legend it is called the Gate of Malice,' Yvraine answered, but offered no more.

'And you would use it to seek these artefacts of your faith?' The question was accompanied by disquiet murmuring from the Zaisuthrans. In a moment of insight, Yvraine realised that this auditory expression was simply a distraction, a feint to mask their communion across the groupmind. The looming presence of the craftworld's psychic network dulled everything else, so that it was an effort for Yvraine even to sense the minds of the others about her, and rendering any meaningful contact impossible. She railed against this skewed battlefield, but

before she could put her anger into words Monsattra read it in her expression.

‘I cannot in conscience allow you free rein with your thoughts,’ he said. ‘The groupmind protects us as best it can, but to allow another within would be a grave weakening of our defences.’

‘Defences that have already been breached,’ guessed Yvraine, her speculation confirmed by Monsattra’s pained expression. ‘Even the outer void did not put you beyond the reach of the Dark Powers.’

‘It was dealt with,’ Nasithas said quickly, ‘and it will not happen again.’

‘But you must understand our caution,’ said Monsattra.

The Zaisuthrans knew nothing of the travails of Biel-tan and Iyanden, and others, but by happenstance had come upon the perfect argument. Though the memory of the daemonic infiltrations and assaults on the craftworlds was not as fresh as it had been, it was still a stark event in the mind of Yvraine, a reminder of the foe she hoped to extinguish.

‘I understand,’ she admitted. She closed her fan and turned, her elaborate gown like a breeze given form around her. ‘We are not inexperienced in such tribulations and would lend whatever assistance is required.’

Nasithas was taken aback by this artful turn of her admission into a request for help, and this time the consultation over the groupmind was not hidden.

‘No,’ declared Monsattra. His companions flinched, blinked and shuddered at the rebuke, accompanied as it must have been by a similarly powerful chastisement across the groupmind. ‘We must find common ground here, not seek leverage and advantage. Yvraine, your offer is welcome, though we have no current need. As a sign of our goodwill, I can confirm that the Gate of Malice is indeed located on Zaisuthra.’

‘But our gateways have not seen use since our departure from the greater disk of the galaxy,’ Nasithas added quickly, seeking to hold a little ground despite Monsattra’s signalled withdrawal. ‘It may lead nowhere. Or worse. We cannot open that portal without proper ceremony and circumspect examination.’

‘But you can open it?’ asked Meliniel, driving a secondary attack into her line of argument, exploiting the gap she had unwittingly left. ‘It is possible?’

The scion-elaborate was forced to concede this with a simple nod.

‘Let us tarry no longer,’ said Monsattra, stepping away from the balcony rail. He inclined his head towards Yvraine. ‘If the lady of the Ynnari and her lieutenants are willing, let us seek out this object of debate and see it for ourselves.’

Much time in the courts of the archons had taught Yvraine to hold in even the

slightest reaction, but at the thought of coming before the Gate of Malice she could not suppress the tremble that set her gowns moving and momentarily fluttered the fan in her hand.

She thought of Iyanna, briefly, but decided that until the spiritseer had settled the ghosts raised by the reappearance of her family, she was better left to her own course.

‘Yes, gentle Monsattra,’ she said as evenly as she could muster, ‘let us do that.’



CHAPTER 19

THE HOUSE OF ARIENAL

The skiff raced from the dome, twisting at precipitous speed along the connection tunnel, driven by the naked impulse of Iyanna to flee.

She sat almost doubled over, heart thundering, gut devouring itself, mind raw.

Sydari slipped into the seat beside her and laid a hand on her arm, causing her to flinch. Iyanna shrank back from his presence, pushing herself against the side of the skyskiff.

He tried again, pulsing gentle, comforting thoughts that settled Iyanna's mood, bringing calm to the turbulent psychic aura that swathed her.

She tried to prise herself free of the horror that gripped her heart and mind, remembering mantras not used in a long time, giving focus that slowed the whirling abyss that swallowed all rational thought.

'...safe,' she heard Sydari say. '...this is a sanctuary...'

She looked up, forcing her eyes open, but still darkness remained. Iyanna realised her hands were clasped to her face and it was an effort of will to force them apart, revealing the concerned features of her distant relative.

Again the similarity to her father was stark, but in that moment it was also a salvation, a rock jutting up from the wash of psychic tide that threatened to drown her. She fixed on those features as though dragging herself from the battering surf, taking strength from the familiar.

Iyanna's breathing slowed, her heart settled and she was able to break from that dark gaze to look around them.

The skyskiff had brought them into a small chamber, barely twice the size of her quarters on Iyanden. The light was soft, as one might imagine the inside of a bird's egg beneath a full sun, the warmth on her face reassuring and welcoming.

There was little else, just a pair of arches to each side, leading to broader transitways. A cross-junction, she assumed, to traverse from one corridor to the next.

‘What was that?’ she asked, and even the question brought back a vivid memory that sent another shiver of apprehension coursing through the spiritseer.

‘Our woe,’ Sydari replied with a quiet sigh. ‘The reason that we have been forced to return.’

Iyanna could sense that even this confession was not complete, that Sydari was holding back something. In her distraught state she was willing to let it pass, for fear of opening up herself to counter-inquiry – questions she was not yet willing to answer.

They sat there in silence for some time, Iyanna taking simple comfort from the presence of Sydari, while he seemed content to allow her to gather her wits and recover her mood in her own time.

‘Zaisuthra is not safe,’ Sydari said eventually, moving away to sit straight-backed opposite Iyanna. ‘We thought we were... protected, but there is no sure defence against the Oldest Peril.’

‘Iyanden is no stranger to the assaults of Chaos. No craftworld is.’ Iyanna sensed unease from the Lord-Guardian and felt drawn to assuage the guilt that emanated from him. ‘Zaisuthra is not alone in knowing this woe, nor having suffered greatly the predations of the Dark Gods’ servants. Our own House...’

She could not continue, throat dry even as the words formed.

‘The taint is upon us.’ Sydari shook his head sadly, gaze cast over the side of the skiff. ‘You felt it. Felt it more than any I have seen. Perhaps its stain runs deeper even than we feared and we shall never be rid of it.’

Iyanna wanted to offer words of comfort, to assure Sydari that the effects could be expunged, that Zaisuthra could recover. She could not. The lie would be too much.

‘We are a people wreathed in woe,’ she said instead, struck by a rare sympathy for her companion, moved by a certain naivety he displayed at his people’s plight. ‘The servants of the Lord of Decay brought ruin to Iyanden, from which we have yet to recover.’

‘Is that why...?’

Iyanna nodded. A deep breath loosened the tightness in her chest and allowed the words to finally soar free.

‘Because of them, I am the last member of the House of Arienal on Iyanden.’

It was such a release, to share this revelation. Iyanna wondered why she

thought it had been necessary at all to keep it hidden.

‘That is a tragedy,’ said Sydari. He looked away, lost in thought for several heartbeats, perhaps trying to contemplate the importance of this announcement. It was only later, on reflection of these events, that Iyanna would realise that he had been communicating this information to the groupmind.

‘There is somewhere I must show you, a place that might bring some succour to your pain.’

She said nothing but signalled her assent with a single nod. At Sydari’s touch the skiff turned and glided back into the transitway. It swiftly came to an ascending spiral that took them into the higher level of domes, beneath the starlit galaxy. Continuing to gain speed, the craft extruded a new skin, sheathing them in a protective, streamlined bubble. The wind whistled past and the ground sped below. Casting her gaze into the distance, Iyanna thought she saw in a neighbouring dome the manse where the Ynnari had been quartered, and realised they were heading even further away.

There was no overt cause for concern, but Iyanna felt trepidation at this thought.

‘Where are you taking me?’ She asked the question lightly, or attempted to, but Sydari’s smile of reassurance confirmed that her anxiety was plain to see.

The Lord-Guardian manipulated a control nodule and a projection screen sprang into life on the canopy above them, magnifying a dome directly ahead. It was dominated by high towers of silver, white, blue and grey, surrounded by majestic peaks, foaming rapids and cascades of waterfalls, criss-crossed with scores of bridges further encrusted with turrets and balconies. It was impossible to tell where tower, mountain and water met, the entire edifice seemed to float on a swathe of mist.

‘It is beautiful,’ whispered Iyanna. ‘We have nothing like this on Iyanden.’

‘The House of Arienal’s capital, the Skytowers of the Sundervale.’ Sydari gazed with affection at the image. ‘My home.’

It would be fair to say that, among such a disparate and passionate company as made up the Ynnari close to Yvraine, Meliniel could be considered the most level-headed. Bearing in mind that his associates ranged from bloodthirsty arena fighters to incarnations of demigodly power, warp-touched seers, estranged rogues and enigmatic followers of the Laughing God, this was not a difficult achievement.

It was also true that his eternal fair-mindedness, calm demeanour and

dispassionate assessment were often as welcome as a gyrex hair in one's cup, but it was a reputation he was prepared to endure. When he had finally sworn himself to the Ynnari cause it had been in the full knowledge that he was attempting to tame a wild wave, and would frequently be bruised and exhausted by the effort. For him the reward was in the undertaking as much as the goal – the unifying act of Ynnead's awakening that crossed all divides that had sundered the aeldari for several generations.

He had trodden the Path his entire life. He had embraced the teachings of Asurmen completely, turning his focus and steely will upon each part of his troubled psyche in turn. Numerous times he had returned to the Path of the Warrior, to exorcise some fresh angst or brooding battle-fever, and each time he had torn himself free of Khaine's grip. It was this iron hard discipline that had brought him to the Path of Command and ultimately the rank of autarch. Which was, as his companion Azkahr frequently pointed out, as much of a trap as being a farseer or exarch.

'One never escapes the Path,' the former dracon often quipped, 'one is simply carried away from it in a casket.'

A depressing thought that had, in other forms, occurred to Meliniel more and more before he had met Yvraine. One simply stayed upon the Path until one died. It was a control, not an escape. Asurmen had always asserted as such, that the Path was a journey towards enlightenment, not a destination to be achieved.

And then Yvraine had happened and suddenly Meliniel had been assailed by all kinds of possibilities; the very notion of Rebirth had at first seemed grotesque, something akin to the soulthirst of the Commorraghans.

But it was an end.

And he craved an end more than anything else, because if he could not have victory, he would rather die fighting than retreat one more step. He would be trapped no more.

Which was foremost in his mind when Yvraine told the autarch he was to remain at the manse with the greater part of the Ynnari contingent.

'It is a ploy to divide us, to split our numbers,' he said when the Opener of the Seventh Way informed him of her plan in one of the reception chambers of the great spread of halls and rooms. 'The Zaisuthrans are far weaker than we expected and they want us to believe. What better way to gain advantage than to isolate our leaders from their warriors?'

'Prudence all too often gives way to a paranoia,' said Yvraine.

'First, Iyanna, and now you,' replied Meliniel. He stood between her and the

main doors, shut behind him, his intention made clear though both he and Yvraine knew he would never physically stop her from leaving.

‘The Visarch goes with me, and the soulbound.’

‘Depleting the strength left here,’ the autarch pointed out. ‘At least let us bring down the Ghost Warriors from the ships. Kelmon...’

‘The Zaisuthrans will not allow it,’ Yvraine said sharply. ‘Such was made clear on their first meeting. They find our use of the dead disconcerting, and any increase in our numbers would be seen as intimidation. Why do you wish to prepare for a battle that is not yet to be fought? In doing so you may precipitate the conflict we seek to avoid.’

Meliniel stepped closer and dropped his voice, aware that it was possible the Zaisuthrans were attempting to monitor the exchange in some fashion. Their talk of groupmind unsettled him in much the same manner that the Ynnari’s interactions with the departed was difficult for the Zaisuthrans.

‘If it goes ill, what do you intend, mistress? We have not felt a thought from Iyanna since she departed. Without an infinity circuit, how are we to remain in contact? Should the Zaisuthrans attempt something... amiss, the other would have no warning.’

Yvraine walked around him, each pace measured and slow. Her fan flicked open, obscuring her face but for the cold eyes that glittered beneath her ornate headdress.

‘We are here at the sufferance of the Zaisuthrans, Meliniel. Should they desire us harm, it will happen regardless of what we do. If you wish for safety and surety I suggest you return to the halls of Biel-tan. If you desire to make progress, then you must learn to gamble occasionally.’

He watched her leave and moved to the window. It was not long before Yvraine, the Visarch and their entourage of the soulbound set off from the manse, along with the Iyandeni. They were escorted by Monsattra, the other envoys and several squads of silver-and-purple clad warriors.

‘Azkahr!’ The autarch took up Ahz-ashir from where he had leaned the spear against a wall, and strode to the door to the adjoining bedchamber, where his second-in-command was asleep in an armchair. The Commorraghan was on his feet in a moment, blade in hand, pistol in the other. He narrowed his eyes in annoyance.

‘One should step carefully about a sleeping viper, for they are known to strike on waking.’

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ Meliniel said dismissively, in no mood for his lieutenant’s self-

aggrandisement. 'Post guards at the perimeter and draw up patrol plans. The viper sleeps no more while on Zaisuthra.'

Their craft swooped over roaring cataracts and wove down intricate valleys wrought from multicoloured crystals, expertly accentuated by cliff-top trees and curling falls of foliage and creeper. Birds darted in and out of the rainbow mists around the water, beaks snapping at iridescent invertebrates that buzzed fitfully through the spray.

They hummed past isolated mountain peak retreats – walled courtyards holding painstakingly maintained fruit trees and ornately arranged stone gardens, linked by winding pathways to secluded grey stoned cloisters beside shrine-like hermitages. Scattered aeldari looked up from contemplation or study, on benches or strolling the spume-flecked paths, briefly following the passage of the skiff before returning to their scrolls and books, or turned to distant, unknowable sights of mental fabrication.

'You have not spoken of the gods,' said Iyanna, noting a temple dome topped by an emerald incarnation of Asuryan's rune. There were other sacred buildings crafted from the bedrock or built upon the steep inclines and terraces that surrounded the Skytowers. 'It is unusual for us to see active worship of those that abandoned us during the War in Heaven and the Fall.'

'Abandoned?' Sydari looked angered by this assertion and the skiff shuddered briefly, diving through the thermals rising from a plateau of geysers and hot springs. 'Shunned, you mean. It was our ancestors that turned from the gods, not they that turned from us.'

'I believe differently, as most craftworlders, but the reality is that the gods disappeared. You worship only memories and legends.'

'A strange assertion coming from one sworn to a cause such as yours,' the Lord-Guardian said.

'What do you mean?' Iyanna's grip on the seat tightened in reaction to tension in Sydari's mood.

'While I have hosted your enquiries, others of the Guardian Council have been speaking with your companions. Yvraine has been forthcoming about the reason for your arrival and her role as emissary of this new god, Ynnead. I do not understand why you would seek to keep this from me.'

The skiff slowed, peeling back its canopy as it spiralled towards a white and grey mosaic landing pad situated close to one of the main towers, dropping smoothly between the slender edifices. The windows were tall and narrow, an

aesthetic that had ruled the styles of the aeldari since time immemorial, the panes reflective, allowing no view of within, only clouds and rainbows mirrored upon their surface.

‘No deception was intended,’ said Iyanna, but her words lacked conviction. Perhaps not deception, but the omission was deliberate. She sought to explain, and in doing so gave voice to doubts she had harboured since the arrival of Yvraine. ‘The rise of the Ynnari has not been welcome elsewhere, so it is natural that we expected resistance here also. We did not... Zaisuthra is very different from what we thought we would find here. We have so many questions, perhaps uncertainty and fear were allowed to rule our thoughts too strongly.’

The sound of bells gently tolling greeted the arrival of Sydari and Iyanna. Just two at first, but rising in volume, from surrounding pinnacles and temple halls, until a rolling melody ushered them to a gentle landing, the bells joined by gongs and chimes. A whisper of a chorus floated among the clear notes, a quiet hymn that echoed down from the peaks and towers.

‘I hope that in openness we can proceed,’ said Sydari. He stood and gestured for Iyanna to disembark from the skyskiff. ‘From secrecy comes misunderstanding, and from misunderstanding is sown the seed of discord. I would learn more of Ynnead and the Ynnari, and in return I shall share with you the truth of the House of Arienal. In such exchange may we find greater strength.’

Iyanna nodded, grateful for the sincere offer, and stepped down from the skiff. She looked about, finding herself in a courtyard surrounded by a low circular wall, past which could be seen the slopes and structures of Sundervale. The chimes and bells had ceased but she had barely noticed, their ring replaced with the hiss and distant thunder of water that echoed from cunningly shaped chasms and drops to swirl in volume from one direction and then another.

‘If you would?’ Sydari offered a hand, palm down like a courtier of the ancient days. Iyanna laid hers upon it and together they strode towards a nearby gate.



CHAPTER 20

FORESHADOWING

The hall was dim, lit by twilight globes that hovered just below the high vaulted ceiling, casting an ochre and orange suffusion over the interior. Dark timbers lined the floor, each etched with linear patterns incorporating old runes, whose meaning Iyanna could guess at – names of the members of the House of Arienal. On the walls hung holo-tapestries that changed view depending on one's perspective, so that mountainsides and valleys became columned bridges and slender towers, rolling meadows transformed into seas of domes and steeples.

Other furnishings were laid in clusters about the hall, giving a sense of space despite the gloom – a few benches alongside each other along one wall, low chairs and couches around trios of tables. At the far end a light projection of the House rune slowly revolved above a ramp leading down into the floor, rendered as a mandala, repeating itself within again and again until too small to discern. Great doors, open to reveal the corridors and chambers beyond, spread patches of paler light at the periphery.

It was welcoming but sombre, and noticeably devoid of occupants.

‘Have you not signalled ahead?’ asked Iyanna. ‘I thought you would bring more of our family to meet me.’

‘In time, Iyanna, but we must talk a little more first,’ replied Sydari. ‘Through me, and thence the groupmind, there are others listening, learning, so that we can avoid repetition. And I would not like to overwhelm you.’

He seemed content to allow Iyanna to wander the hall for a short time, moving from one display to the next. Sydari murmured names such as the Vale of Wintering Sorrows, the Whitepeak and the Seven Daughters of Isha, and she presumed he referred to the scenes depicted.

Guided by nothing more than whim, so Iyanna thought, she sat in a high-backed chair, carved from pale wood, beside one of the tables. She looked up and regarded the holo-tapestry of a bare rocky slope upon which had been raised five silver domes, the portico to the half-dug temple visible in a cleft in the bare ground. Monoliths marked a path down to the entrance, somewhat sinister and unwelcoming.

She looked away quickly, unsettled, and noticed a half smile upon Sydari's lips as he sat opposite, hands clasped in his lap, gaze drawn to the depiction.

‘Something is humorous?’

‘A quirk, I am sure,’ he replied, ‘that you chose to seat us beneath the Shrine of the Severed Hand. One of our temples to Morai-Heg, the shaper of fates.’

‘Her myths we know well, and no doubt from the discussions with Yvraine you also are aware of our quest for the last cronesword.’

‘I am, and hence perhaps it is more than chance that brought you to sit here, under the gaze of she whose digits you seek.’

They spoke more of Ynnead and how Iyanna came to be one of the Ynnari. She was cautious not to speak too much on account of the others, preferring that they explain their own motives and beliefs, for she was well aware that the followers of the Whispering God came to the cause for many different reasons.

In return, Sydari spoke of the House of Arienal, of what was remembered from the time before the Fall and the earliest cycles of Zaisuthra. He shared the tales of common ancestors, remembered only in name on Iyanden, founders that had embarked upon the tradeship's first desperate flight from the aeldari dominions.

‘I am sure I need not spell out how fraught those times were,’ said the Lord-Guardian. ‘Disaster loomed everywhere and even though our ancestors did all they could to remove themselves from the degradation that had beset our people, the claws of the Ravenous One reached far.’

He fell silent, gaze fixed upon the carved table between them, eyes moving along the lines of the organic, curving design that followed its rim.

‘We know what happened next,’ said Iyanna. ‘Our people were all but destroyed. Less than one in a thousand, one in ten thousand survived.’

‘But they survived, and Zaisuthra forged on, into the unknown beyond the borders of the dominions.’

‘Your founders did not think to return to see if anything remained worth salvaging?’

‘Why should they? They had escaped once, what price a return to that benighted realm? They could see well enough, feel in their souls the creature that

had been birthed from the evil of those that had remained. They continued on, seeking somewhere new, something purer from which to build a future.'

'A noble thought, but as you are now here, and beset by the same malaise that has engulfed so many of our people, a mission that was to fail.'

Sydari sighed and met her gaze.

'We thought we had escaped, in the voids where the light of stars grows dim, away from the harsh blare of the other races' thoughts. But it was not to be, and so we have returned.'

Meliniel stood at the balustrade of a high platform, which was part bridge and part terrace, stretching from one of the steeply pitched roofs of the manse to a leaf-wreathed hillside, shaped stone giving way seamlessly to bare rock and then earth. It afforded a broad view around three-quarters of the splay of ranged storeys and wings that made up the main building, and far across the moorlands beyond.

There was no reason to suspect attack, nothing in the behaviour of the Zaisuthrans to make him think there was any danger. Even so, he scanned the gloomy skies constantly, his gaze roamed across the far heathland looking for the slightest sign of something – anything – amiss.

Behind him, Azkahr paced relentlessly. The former dracon was not one to demonstrate nervousness and had complied with the autarch's preparations with the bare minimum of effort, making clear his belief that it was a waste of their time and energy. His pacing was intended simply to annoy Meliniel, who could not ignore the footsteps approaching and receding across the grey stone, nor the movement in the corner of his eye when Azkahr reached the limit of his self-defined patrol and turned with a deliberate scrape of a heel.

The autarch fought the urge to speak out, preferring to suffer in silence than give his second-in-command any satisfaction from his antisocial behaviour.

Instead, Meliniel turned his attention to the dispositions of his people. Splashes of colour among the browns and greys of the manse's environs betrayed the presence of the eclectic squads under his leadership. All were where he expected to find them – aspect warriors and kabalites, former craftworld guardians, arena fighters of Commorragh and disparate rogues and pirates from no acknowledged kindred.

There were even a few Exodites numbered among them, drawn to the Ynnari when Yvraine had come to the defence of their world, Solomonesh-Asah. They patrolled in small parties, leading pairs of raptorhounds on golden leashes, their

reptilian charges attuned to scent and thought beyond the senses of an aeldari.

It was the most remarkable host ever assembled, he realised. Meliniel had taken the bizarre alliance for granted, but seeing them working together beneath his command, on a lost craftworld separated by another gulf of time and culture, brought home the challenges he had overcome. The force was in constant flux with new recruits arriving whether direct from contact with Yvraine, or through the continual spread of the Whispering God's cult to the corners of the galaxy. Add to that the losses to wanderlust and battle and barely fifty cycles passed when there was not some gap to be filled or new addition to be incorporated.

It was unlike the Swordwind of Biel-tan in every way imaginable. The battlehost of his home had been a thing forged of precision, a weapon of carefully arranged elements guided by the prophecies of the seers and the time-honoured strategies of the autarchs. Between such rune-castings and ancient wisdom there was not a threat the *bahzhakhain* could not be turned against with predictable, lethal result.

The warhost of the Ynnari was more akin to a loose, ever-changing confederation of powers, an elemental force that could be swayed and directed but not truly controlled. Every moment in battle was a test of his abilities, each encounter enriching what he knew of his own mind and the abilities of those beneath his command. It was often frustrating – dealing with the likes of Azkahr was the least of it – but also far more rewarding than any campaign he had waged as a wielder of the Swordwind.

He was almost lost in this musing when his eye caught a dark shape against the horizon, moving swiftly beneath the scudding clouds. The messenger-waves buzzed with alerts from his sentries and patrols.

The distant shape resolved into an elegant ornithopter, slow flaps of its wings propelling the sleek craft towards the manse with an easy motion. His gaze drawn to this craft, he almost missed several other vehicles emerging from the dome gateway to his left – a handful of anti-grav transports that looked more like primordial sea creatures with segmented slats for shells than the flowing curves of the craftworlds and baroque styles of Commorragh. Fish-like, armoured tails swaying, they slithered through the air more than glided, the blister of weapon pods like crustacean antennae.

The sound of footfalls behind turned Meliniel, to find Azkahr had gathered the squad of kabalites that had been stationed by the steps to the terrace.

‘Welcoming committee for our visitors,’ said the former dracon, baring gilded teeth in a cruel smile.

‘Have the raptorhound patrols brought in,’ said Meliniel. ‘Let’s keep everyone inside the walls for the moment.’

Azkahr hesitated, a questioning look on his face.

‘You disagree?’ asked the autarch.

‘On the raptorhounds? No. But let us not keep all of our eggs in this pretty nest, eh? Always wise to have a knife out of the sheath and in the sleeve.’

‘I take your meaning,’ said Meliniel. ‘In fact, you will arrange my hidden blade, Azkahr. Swiftly, before our hosts arrive, send two raiders and as many of our warriors as they can carry.’

‘I would ask the Harlequins but Dreamspear has not returned from wherever he disappeared to, and the Midnight Sorrow refuse to commit to anything without him. I’ll send Sairua’s waches from the outermost tower and Lasaikka and her howling banshees from the reserves. A slender but deadly weapon, you’ll agree.’

‘Very well,’ said Meliniel, adjusting the image in his head of the warriors arrayed about the manse. ‘We dare not communicate over conventional means, we have no way to tell if the Zaisuthrans have ways to trace it, or intercept what passes between.’

‘The leash is off, but they’ll not stray far, my master.’ Azkahr’s sarcasm was reinforced with an overly obsequious bow, his nose almost touching the floor.

Meliniel ignored him and turned back to the incoming ornithopter. The hawkship was still heading directly for them, angled to alight upon one of the landing aprons close to the main gatehouse. Meliniel signalled for the kabalites to accompany him and set off towards the steps, determined to be present when the craft landed.

Sydari and Iyanna talked a little more, but it seemed they both skirted around revealing too much of their current beliefs and thoughts. Iyanna knew nothing of what transpired with the other Ynnari, nor what Sydari learned of them from the groupmind. She started to feel alone again, disconnected from her companions. The isolation fuelled her suspicion that she was being kept apart for a reason; that Sydari used the connection of the groupmind to lever some kind of advantage from her for other discussions of which she was being deliberately kept ignorant.

As she distanced herself from the conversation, the spiritseer became more aware of her surroundings. Iyanna realised that the hall was not quite built as she had first assumed. There were hardened plates on the walls, like ridges of protective bone, coloured slightly darker than the rest. Ribbing held up the

ceiling, not shaped vaults of wood or stone, mostly concealed within the substance of the walls but the shadow just visible to show the presence of the skeleton beneath the surface.

She turned her attention to the table and chair itself, which she had ignored on sitting but now realised was subtly different from furniture on Iyanden. Organic shapes had always been a part of the aeldari aesthetic, but both the hall and its contents took this a stage further with knuckle-like nodules, and skin-like textures taut between fused skeletal infrastructure.

‘You seem perplexed,’ said Sydari, breaking her contemplation. ‘Perturbed, I might say, and not by your recent experience.’

‘I was examining your materials and designs,’ she replied, indicating with a wave of her hand. ‘Our bonesingers grow the foundations and spars that underpin all of Iyanden, but Zaisuthra seems even more a living thing.’

‘It is,’ replied Sydari. He stroked a hand along the edge of the table and at his touch tiny hairs quivered into view. ‘When our ancestors fled the dominions’ worlds they had little to work with – few bonesingers, as you call them. They did have, however, an abundance of fleshcrafters, those that used to provide the sects and cultists with extreme physical modifications.’

‘I have met similar, from the kabals of Commorragh. Haemonculi they are called, demented experimenters for the most part.’

‘I am glad to say no such dementia beset our founders,’ the Lord-Guardian continued. ‘While we possess wraithbone and other psychoplastics, our ancestors supplemented the meagre supply with artificially induced living tissue.’

Iyanna could not help but recoil at the thought and her reaction drew a frown from Sydari, the only negative expression she had seen mar his features since their first encounter.

‘It is quite inert, I assure you. It is no more feeling or sentient than your robe or the gems you wear.’

Her reaction betrayed the falsity of this comparison, earning Iyanna a deeply scrutinising look from Sydari. The Lord-Guardian said nothing, but his silence was more excruciating than any spoken examination. Iyanna knew it was plain that she was concealing the truth and the desire to unburden herself of the secrecy was greater than her fears of Sydari’s reaction.

‘They are spiritstones,’ she told him, plucking one from a chain about her neck. It was a pale blue, lit by a glimmer of white from within. She held it out in the palm of her hand, its psychic aura as plain to her as the light it gave off, stronger

even. ‘This is Anasai Sorena, a poet, Striking Scorpion and navigator from Iyanden. He piloted a wraithblade for a short while in defence of our people before his shell was cracked by a tyrannid claw. I was able to save his essence at the last moment.’

‘These words...’ Sydari sat back, brow creased, though whether from confusion or consternation was not certain. ‘I do not understand all of what you tell me. But if you say what I think, then this stone, all of these stones, contain the spirit of an aeldari?’

‘Except this one,’ said Iyanna, tapping a finger to the oval jewel upon the breastplate of her runic armour. ‘This is my waystone. It is empty, but attuned to my spirit so that when my body dies my soul will be absorbed.’

‘And this is how you avoid the Ravenous One?’

‘That is a title I have not heard before, but an apt one. She Who Thirsts. The Great Enemy. The Maw Eternal. Five lifetimes have created many names for the Doom of the Aeldari.’

His keen look did not falter, silently repeating the question. Iyanna did not know why she felt so reluctant to share the truth, and told herself it was no great secret even though his eagerness for an answer seemed disproportionate.

‘Yes. The waystones are the Asuryani’s last guard against damnation.’

By biomechanical grav-barge, Yvraine and her companions were conveyed across Zaisuthra into the depths where the oldest parts of the craftworld were buried beneath accretions of later generations. As they travelled, Monsattra explained more of the craftworld’s unique nature. He told them of the proto-organic engineering they had turned to in the absence of wraithbone and bonesingers, showing them the cartilage and sinews beneath the glossy exterior of their transport. It was strange for many of them to understand how the technology of the aeldari – the ancient science of gravity and field manipulation that kept the barge afloat and directed it through the skies – could be combined with living flesh.

For Yvraine the leap in comprehension was not so great. Gifted her death-sight by Ynnead, she saw the psychic energy that lurked within even the smallest atom of living tissue. To the Opener of the Seventh Way the capillaries and tendons of the Zaisuthran constructs were little different to the crystal matrices and silicate faux musculature of other aeldari creations. It was the animus of the spirit, the spark of psychic life provided either by sentience of external source that gave them power and direction.

They passed into tunnels and halls that had been the original trade ship. Like all craftworlds, Zaisuthra had originally been a long-range merchant vessel, seeding distant worlds of the dominions, conveying goods across far-flung star systems. It had grown since its first crew had fled the Fall, though far less so than the likes of Ulthwé and Iyanden.

The decreasing size of the passages forced them to dismount and proceed on foot.

‘Your psychic matrix is very weak here,’ remarked Yvraine. ‘I can barely feel anything of the circuit that must have existed when Zaisuthra was first released into the stars. I expected a webway gate would burn like a beacon in this darkness, but I feel nothing.’

‘A necessary part of our self-exile was severing our ties to the webway,’ said Monsattra. He led them along a curving gallery, between towering rib-like spars that held apart a vast chamber below them, lit by the crystals at the heart of the craftworld, a dapple of subtle greens and blues against the flesh-tint red. ‘Beyond the fringe of the galaxy, even the webway falters. It took more power to sustain the links than was gained from the energy flowing through the webway network. My ancestors, who for a generation were the sole claimants to the title of Lords-Guardian, took the difficult decision to close all of the gates. Guarding them had become a burden too heavy.’

‘What of your recent attacks?’ said the Visarch. ‘If the gates are disconnected, from whence do the daemons come?’

‘We have seals upon them, the best wards we could create, but there is no sure defence against intrusion from the empyrean. Our groupmind serves as a shield to our thoughts, but alas it could not protect the entirety of Zaisuthra’s vast matrix. I do not know how the first hole appeared, unseen, but like the smallest tear it could be widened, and was.’

They fell silent at the thought, the cadre of soulbound and Iyandeni guardians following a short distance behind as Yvraine and the Visarch walked at Monsattra’s side, heading deeper into the catacombs.



CHAPTER 21

UNCOMFORTABLE REVELATIONS

The downdraught from one last beat of the ornithopter's red-and-gold wings caused Meliniel to retreat to the edge of the platform, to watch the hawkship land with all the delicacy and poise of a living thing. He could see something of a recognisable structure beneath the tens of thousands of coloured feathers, a skeleton of wraithbone and other psychoplastics joined by what seemed to be actual living tendons and muscle.

He caught a murmur of disquiet from some of his warriors and directed a sharp glance towards them to silence their chatter.

The chest of the ornithopter opened up, parting like a door to reveal a lit interior. Three Zaisuthrans stepped down from within, garbed in the heavy cloaks and coats common among the craftworld's inhabitants, cowls lifted to leave their faces in shadow.

It was a peculiar affectation, at odds with the usual overbearing vanity of the aeldari. Though many were the occasions the folk of the craftworlds and Commorragh donned masks, adopting various persona as celebration or lifestyle dictated, few ever hid their faces, real or artificial.

As the delegation approached closer, their pinched features could be seen, hands clasped together tight across their chest. Their body language radiated deference, but also defence, pricking the autarch's suspicions.

Meliniel recognised all three, introduced earlier as House Conversers, heralds of the Lords-Guardian. The first of their number was Atalesasa, aide to Sydari Arienal.

He took a step, anxious to hear what Atalesasa had to say. Something in the autarch's demeanour alerted his warriors, who brought up their weapons without

a command voiced.

The three House Conversers stopped immediately, the air bristling with their distrust.

‘We have enough grievances without our allies bearing arms against us,’ said Atalesasa, coming forwards again.

‘Apologies,’ said Meliniel, signalling to his warriors to stand down. ‘With both Yvraine and Iyanna removed from my sight, I am prey to my nervous disposition.’

‘Understandable,’ replied the House Converser. ‘On both accounts I can assure you that your companions are safe, but there has been an unfortunate development.’

‘How unfortunate?’

The three House Conversers formed a triangle, the two lesser envoys at the shoulders of Atalesasa as though aimed at Meliniel. He was conscious of the spear in his hand, and the body of troops at his back, where the emissaries bore no obvious armament and came with no escort.

‘You recall Monsattra told you of our recent difficulties with intrusions from the powers of the dark abyss?’

‘Daemons...’

‘A presence, nothing more,’ one of the other conversers said hurriedly – an aeldari the autarch remembered as Shasiayu from the House of Gatheal.

‘A resurgence,’ Atalesasa clarified. ‘The taint of their last attack was not quite expunged and now renewed activity seeks to exploit any weakness they can find. The groupmind is directing efforts to thwart this and eject any manifestations that might occur.’

‘Manifestations? You are speaking of corporeal daemons.’

‘Yes, that is a danger, though remote at the present.’

Azkahr watched with slitted eyes, his hand fidgeting close to the grip of his splinter pistol. In Commorragh one would have never allowed a stranger such access, welcomed into the heart of their, albeit temporary, citadel.

The drukhari had honed suspicion to a fine art, both of foe and friend. In fact, the drukhari word for alliance, *inhazkhain*, translated literally as not-currently-enemy. It was not only that any contract or bargain was only as good as the weapons that backed it, it was to be expected that one or both parties would renege on their obligations the moment a situation made it worthwhile doing so.

In Commorragh the fluid nature of such deadly politics was the bloody oil that

kept the entire despicable machine working. For those that had come to the Ynnari, it was a hard lesson to learn trust, to feel part of something beyond self-interest. A good many Commorraghans had not yet reached that point, serving Ynnead only in defence of their own souls.

Whether selfless or selfish, all Ynnari strived towards an ending, a place of final rest. Azkahr was no better or worse than most, though elevated by the favour of Yvraine to a position of some prominence.

At that time, watching the Zaisuthrans, he squarely placed them in inhazkhain territory. The only thing that remained to be seen was who would break the pact first.

He tried to read the envoys' pallid expressions but there was little enough to be seen within the darkness beneath their heavy hoods.

'We are sure that you are more than capable of protecting yourselves, but we would be remiss as your hosts not to safeguard your presence,' Atalesasa said as he gestured towards the transports that skimmed nearer over a ridge of dark moorland. 'We must also protect what is ours, we are sure you would agree.'

Azkahr coughed, a warning to his commander, wishing quite fervently that he possessed the telepathy of a seer.

Meliniel did not need the Commorraghan's reflexive distrust to alert him to the dangers of allowing armed Zaisuthrans within the boundary of the manse. Yet he had no reason to refuse...

'A temporary precaution,' the third of the group assured him – the envoy of the House of Zaitroka, Lisatja. She raised a hand, her skeletal fingers brushing back a wisp of white hair from her thin face. 'Without any of our people here, the groupmind cannot detect any potential insurgence by the corrupting power.'

'Iyanna and Yvraine will be returned to you shortly, as soon as it is safe,' added Atalesasa. 'Due to the integration of our groupmind with Zaisuthra's energy system, we must keep inter-dome travel to a minimum, lest we unconsciously open a pathway for this intrusive presence to exploit. For the time being only, I must reinforce our request that you do not stray beyond the limits of the Highlands of Distant Repose. And preferably, you remain on the grounds here at Withershield.'

Looking past the trio of heralds, Meliniel spied the transports undulating to a stop before the low outer wall. Their bulbous fronts opened to disgorge several dozen Zaisuthrans clad in long grey coats with high collars, worn over purple bodysuits that slid with morphic plates of armour. Their helmets were all-

enclosing and high, like those of craftworld guardians familiar to Meliniel and the others, but with serrated ridges upon the brows and pronounced muzzle grilles. The banners of their houses flew at the backs of the squad leaders and the bright badges of their allegiance to Zaisuthra was marked upon their long-barrelled lasweapons and the scabbards of the blades at their hips.

With them came an assortment of heavier weapons pulled on anti-grav sleds, which the officers started to direct to various points about the perimeter. Those that came with these support platforms seemed surgically or bionically adjusted. They held elegant pistols and swords, or gilded lasrifles, while from under their heavy cloaks additional limbs worked the controls of the weapon sleds.

‘Of course.’ Meliniel hated to say the words, but he could not allow himself to be swayed by baseless paranoia. ‘Let us hope that such precaution is not tested.’

‘A precaution, as you say. Nothing more than that.’

Iyanna hesitated to ask the obvious question, but her reluctance made it plain what she desired to know.

‘We have our own defences,’ Sydari confirmed. ‘The groupmind. It is in all of us and part of us is held within. Should one of us die the strength of the others is enough to keep the newly severed spirit from being devoured. In this, Zaisuthra, our fleshmelding, is a boon.’

‘I am a spiritseer, an expert in the transference of souls and psychic potential. I do not understand how you could simply protect each other falling into the abyss of the Great Enemy. Even our most gifted seers have not the psychic strength to resist that implacable pull.’

‘The groupmind is greater than its parts, Iyanna,’ Sydari explained, leaning closer, hand hesitantly seeking her arm once more. Now recovered from her ordeal, she allowed it to settle. ‘It is a thing of itself, the soul of Zaisuthra.’

The revelation stunned her for several heartbeats, though as her thoughts settled she realised it should not have. Was not Ynnead a god conjured from the mass of the eldar dead? Perhaps Zaisuthra held another key to understanding how the Whispering God might be ushered into wakefulness, beyond possessing the Gate of Malice.

‘That is remarkable,’ she said, careful to moderate her enthusiasm. ‘It also explains why none of us can connect with the groupmind, if this oversoul is keeping us out. A psychic entity powerful enough to resist the draw of She Who Thirsts would have no issue with fending off any lesser power.’

‘In truth, I am not sure if the groupmind could willingly allow one not of

Zaisuthra to meld with its presence.'

The unspoken thought hung between them, refusing to dissipate.

'If it were possible...' Iyanna began, but trepidation silenced her. She reminded herself that the Lord-Guardian was a stranger, even if he shared the name of the House of Arienal. The groupmind was an unknown, its powers and intent as invisible to her as the chamber beyond the wall.

But it was also a chance for connection. If it was possible, if she could attach to the groupmind of Zaisuthra there was potential for something far greater, far more important than the discovery of a mythical gate and the uncertain promises that lay beyond it.

Her heart ached to share its burden. It seemed an age since she had walked upon the Avenue of the Dead, though in reality it had been less than a cycle since she had set foot on Zaisuthra. It was churlish to think of such a thing when before her sat a living member of her family. More than that, here was opportunity to become part of something more intimate than the shared fate of the Ynnari. And what of their technology? What might be done with the wraith-knowledge of Iyanden and the Zaisuthran fleshmelders, in bringing back life to the unliving?

The spiritseer held up a hand and took off the glove, exposing slender white fingers.

Hesitantly, Sydari raised his own. The rings gleamed with an inner light, turning his digits to rainbows, their outline almost lost in the ambient power.

They looked at each other and Iyanna longed to touch his fingers more than she had desired for anything. She thought for a heartbeat that she saw something darker in his gaze, a look of cruel triumph, but a moment later his hand touched hers and they became one.

Alorynis stalked closer to the babble of minds near the outer edge of the dome. Like Iyanna, the gyrix could feel the permeating unpleasantness of Chaos corruption. The air was heavy with it, the ground underfoot slick with its taint; every particle around him noisome to his highly attuned alien senses. Unlike Iyanna, Alorynis was used to such disturbances, having travelled much at the side of Yvraine, of late into the Garden of Nurgle itself. The cloying energy that suffused the dome was no worse than the afterstench of that excursion on the body and mind of his mistress.

The bobbing, attractive thoughts of the Zaisuthrans drew the gyrix closer. He flattened his body close to the ground and reached the sanctuary of a twisted

bole. Scampering into the lower branches, blue-furred body hugging the rotted wood close, he nestled soundlessly in the shadows and watched.

There were three aeldari, their thoughts just the barest flicker of a corona around them. This was odd, very different to the companions Alorynis had accompanied of late. Yvraine shone with an icy cold, the Visarch steeped in the blood of his victims, Meliniel a beacon of blue fire and martial pride. Even though they each had great strength of will, some measure of psychic mastery over their thoughts, their energy leaked.

These aeldari... The gyrix could barely sense them, and flicked out a tongue to taste the air, trying to detect more of their thoughts. There was something else. Not the Chaos taint. That was everywhere, but no stronger here than in the rest of the dome.

Something alien.

The aeldari worked on an exposed stretch of crystal latticework. The underskin of the dome's floor had been peeled back in thick rolls, exposing pure crystal, a vein-like tracery of the network running black through it. They muttered incantations and moved the charms of Isha and Asuryan over the infected conduit. The tips of their fingers and the amulets around their necks gave off the dimmest gleam, little more than the background hiss of psychic power, but enough to seep into the crystal between them.

Creeping closer, Alorynis sensed the purging. The black faded, evaporating into the surrounding bedrock, forced from the conduit by the pressure of the Zaisuthrans' enchantment. Senses straining, the gyrix tried to taste the energy that powered their healing ritual, the essence the Zaisuthrans called the groupmind. It was in each of them, a hard, unyielding knot inside their thoughts that barred all deeper examination.

Whiskers trembling, Alorynis edged further along the branch, lured by the strangeness of the Zaisuthrans.

Their words verged on nonsense – even more than the garbled ramblings of his mistress and her not-mates – but their effect was clear. The blessings and intonations drew forth the power of the groupmind, giving it shape and purpose. But its energy did not stem from the crystal circuit, like the craftworlds the gyrix had frequented, and it did not tap into the yawning chasm of the sideways realm where its mother had spawned it. The psychic pulse came from the aeldari, and yet not. They were generating the gestalt field but not they alone. The hardness at the centre, the shadow on their spirits masked the deeper source.

Perplexed, focused, Alorynis was not paying heed to his surroundings.

Almost too late he sensed the change in the environment. Where he had watched, now he was *being* watched. Or sought. The presence that quickly suffused the dome had not located him yet. Like a roaming searchlight, the malign seeker roved back and forth over the artificial tundra, crackling along the pieces of untainted circuitry, disseminating itself into the minds of the clusters of aeldari psychic engineers.

The nearest group stopped as the amorphous energy touched them. The glow of their aura switched from a nascent, tame bronze to a harsh purple flecked with black and red.

Threat.

The gyrinx's response was instinctual and instant, sending it fleeing down the trunk of the tree and into the concealing grass. Behind it, the Zaisuthrans stood up from their work and cast their gazes across the wilderness, shielding their eyes against the white glare of reflective snow and crystal.

Alorynis knew better than to stop, or to check whether he was being followed. He was a predator that had become prey, and ran, darting through fallen hollow logs, bounding over piles of rocks and slaloming between the stems of thorny bushes.

His rapid progress was not enough. The searching psychic force was everywhere, bubbling along half-frozen brooks, pulsing through the ice-lined arteries of trees, staring from the reflective surfaces of icicles and frozen pools.

Retreat became rout. Hormones raced, turning Alorynis into a blue blur against the paleness.

Ahead, the transit tunnel that brought the skiff loomed dark and welcoming. In a barely self-aware part of the gyrinx's brain he knew he was a vast distance from his mistress. She was not even a flicker of spirit on the edge of his senses.

Fear propelled him faster than any plan, running for the sake of running. The darkness was sanctuary.

Like a wildfire scouring all in its path, the manifesting psychic entity flowed over the hillocks and valleys, unstoppable, gathering more and more power.

Alorynis was just a few bounds away from the safety of the tunnel, the disembodied gaze of his hunter some distance behind.

There was no relent.

Senses already taut, stretched to snapping, Alorynis' entire being was fixed on eluding the pursuer. It was for this reason that for the second time since entering the dome, the gyrinx failed to detect a closer threat.

Even as the felinid scampered into the darkness of the tunnel, something

screached and dropped onto him from above.



CHAPTER 22

THE SHADOWS DARKEN

There was resistance.

It took a moment before Iyanna realised she was wrong. It was not resistance, it was reluctance. Hers.

The groupmind was unlike anything she had experienced. The spiritseer had expected something like the gestalt of Iyanden's infinity circuit, perhaps less suffused but also far smaller in scope. What she encountered was far more aware, the pinpricks of tens of thousands of individual minds turned inwards, focused through the lens that was the centre of the groupmind, able to operate independently and interdependently at the same time.

Truly a force greater than the sum of its parts, the groupmind shifted, becoming aware of her through the touch of Sydari. Around them the hall fell to greys, barely seen, the sound of the waterfalls and trilling birds muted. Sydari's thoughts merged with the swell of potency, still close but no longer the doorway through which her mind entered the shared firmament. Iyanna barely felt the chair beneath her, the warmth of Sydari's fingertips, swept up in the embrace of Zaisuthra.

She did not become one with it at first. It surrounded her, elevating her through the psychic plane. Energy converged from along psychic neuralways, more vibration than the cold power of the crystal infinity circuit, more present and immediate than the distracted force of the dead.

Vitality. The groupmind was indeed alive. It existed outside, beyond the trappings of organic psychic circuitry, above even the nuclei of the minds of the Zaisuthrans.

The warp.

The groupmind existed in the raw warp.

The revelation sent a cold shudder through Iyanna.

She wanted to break free. The warp was a void sucking her in, a darkness that threatened to extinguish her light. It was impossible to exist here, laid bare before the full force of Chaos, exposed to the hunger of the Great Enemy without rune or ward.

Yet she lived, she continued. Buoyed up by the power of the groupmind, Iyanna was cocooned, held safe from the ravaging eye that sought her, eclipsed from view by the warm shadow.

And with this realisation, in accepting the protective power of Zaisuthra, she felt herself slip deeper within, like a slumbering infant drawn more fully into the covers, feeling not blanket and sheet but the half-dreamed clasp of a father and mother.

Acceptance.

Her mortal body shed a tear, but her mind flowed upon more elevated planes, far removed from recognition of her physical shell. She shared the love of the groupmind, and felt the kinship that knitted together all of Zaisuthra. Close at hand burned the heart of Sydari, and about him wove tendrils of familiarity that were the other members of the House of Arienal. But there was no edge, no break between one House and the next. In bloodline and thought, Arienal touched upon the other Zaisuthran families, subtly blending from one to the next, the whole continuous mass slowly becoming a singularity.

Iyanna could so easily be part of it.

In the centre of the groupmind an effulgence of love beckoned to her. It was the focus, the hub about which the groupmind spun, and it was from this being that sprang attention and life and physicality. It was the node and the source at one, immobile but everywhere. A guiding force but also a blankness onto which her fears could be projected.

Sydari was with her, and so were the other Zaisuthrans. They coaxed her, bidding her to open herself up to the groupmind as it had revealed itself to her.

She resisted, though it pained her to do so, like refusing the hug of a child. There was an undercurrent of something amiss, a non-specific but warning sensation that quivered beneath the surface.

Conflict.

Not within the groupmind. It was a pool of serenity, calm and welcoming. But eddies of counter-currents strained at the edges.

Come with me. Sydari's thoughts were suddenly sharp and close, a bright light

among the gestalt entity. Iyanna sensed his invitation even as she felt their fingers entwine and her body rise without volition from the chair.

This... She could not form the thought coherently. I was...

Do not be afraid. Come and see the heart of the groupmind and then you will understand, and you will know freedom from your fears.

The spiritseer struggled to access her mortal senses. As though rousing from a deep sleep she blinked and tried to focus, to bring clarity to the haze of colour beside her. The smudge resolved into the features of her father, solemn but not unkind.

Not her father. Sydari.

She fell into his gaze, feeling the full power of the groupmind behind it, the protective depths waiting to shelter her from the harshness of the universe. Within, voices called her name.

Iyanna Arienal. Distant sister. Your family awaits.

She let Sydari guide her by the hand, following mute and acquiescent a step behind as they passed down the ramp of the hall and into a gallery. They continued, through chambers and corridors, but she had little sense of where she was going, nor could she hold on to where they had been. Already the memory of the welcome hall faded, a shifting recollection of colour and little else.

The strength of the groupmind grew. It became more condensed, like pressure underwater, growing in thickness around her as she neared the focal point of its majestic broadcast. She dimly recognised where she was – not from any knowledge of Zaisuthra but remembered from a past life on Iyanden. Her time as an aspect warrior. Blood tainted the soul of the craftworld, iron ran through its veins.

The shrines of the Bloody-Handed God, chambers of the Avatar of Kaela Mensha Khaine, Lord of Murder.

A quiet, suppressed part of her started to nag at the docile majority. Its dread was only part-formed but urgent. Ghost flickers of mountaintops with domed temples and columned arcades leading to pantheon shrines rose up from recent recollection.

They worshipped the old gods.

Alorynis rolled, claws flashing to meet his attacker. In the gloom even the gyrex's excellent vision picked out only a vague shape, a little larger than him, with gangling arms.

Though sight was of little use, Alorynis' other senses identified his attacker just

as easily.

Scent: the wet-fur, dank smell that had accompanied his mistress after her meeting with the grey-minded aeldari that hosted them. A stench that clung to the robes and clogged the nostrils.

Mind: a whirling blue blur of activity, burning with alien intensity. The other creature was the opposite of the gyrinx, an agitator rather than a soother, dominating rather than empathic.

Touch: vice-strong fingers snatched at Alorynis' forepaws, trying to grab hold of the agile feline. He spasmed, using a twist of the back to regain his feet, hissing wildly.

As well as the physical assault, thrusts of psychic intent lashed against Alorynis' mind. Cruelty and malice slashed against the gyrinx's wards, batted away with a flare of animosity from Yvraine's mind-companion.

Claws found flesh, tearing a strip from the creature's leg, eliciting a yowl of pain accompanied by a surge of intense malignancy. Its psychic attack was like a smothering, suffocating hand trying to blot out all other thought even as nimble fingers tried to seize hold of the gyrinx's tail and ear. Its touch sent shudders of revulsion through the feline, energising him to flight.

Alorynis had taken only a few bounding steps when something curled about his left hind leg. Irresistibly strong, the tether wound up to the hip, while another looped itself around the gyrinx's throat, slowly but surely constricting.

Something like a wet chuckle resonated in the dark.

Spitting and clawing, Alorynis tried to rip free, but each movement brought less breath as the tendril about his throat wound tighter and tighter. More questing tentacles snaked about waist and forelimbs, dragging the feline down towards a quivering flesh-floor, slowly squeezing the life from his body.

Hot, rank breath misted over his face, the blur of psychovision revealing the blunt, apelike features of the gyrinx's assailant.

Lungs burned. Breath almost gone, windpipe tight. Phantasms of light and psychic power danced in the gyrinx's sight and thoughts, conjured by asphyxiation.

Desperation swelled but brought no release despite a brief resurgence of wriggling and hissing.

A dim glow silhouetted the leering creature and the swaying growths around it. Auditory hallucination followed, the illusion of a distant, echoing voice raised in song.



CHAPTER 23

INTO THE HEART

The smell of hot metal and blood lingered in Iyanna's memory even though she came to her senses in what appeared to be the gullet of some vast creature. The walls throbbed with blood vessels, or what might have been thought of as veins and arteries though the substance that flowed through them was as much psychic as physical.

The heart of the groupmind.

The chamber was large, as big as most halls on Iyanden, its cavernous space dominated by humid air and a ruddy aura. Immense spine-like protrusions held up the ceiling, columns of fused bone linked by quivering ligaments to threads of crystal and iron.

In the centre of the hall was a far smaller chamber, ringed with fronds of dark red flesh lined with consecutive rows of barbs, reminding her of a shark's mouth. Tendons extended from this mass, connected to a bronze and iron frame wrought about a cylindrical skeleton of wraithbone.

The throne room of Khaine's Avatar.

She felt as much as she saw, the buzz of the groupmind converging into the chamber's occupant, the thrum of power emanating in return. Shapes moved in the shadows of fleshy folds and cartilaginous buttresses. Now that she had seen inside the groupmind she detected the thoughts of the Zaisuthrans, though.

Clearest was Sydari just a couple of paces to her left, regarding her with the same paternal patience she had seen on their first meeting. She felt her own heart lift at the sight, sharing in his moment of pride. His smile, his gaze, made the bizarreness of the situation acceptable. Normal.

Other aeldari emerged from behind the vertebrae-like columns. They were

dressed much like Sydari, in long coats and tight undersuits, bedecked with Zaisuthran talismans and fetishes.

She knew even before she saw the runes upon their brows, wrought in their bracelets and tattooed on flesh, that these were the other members of the House of Arienal. She could not remember if they had accompanied her from Sundervale or had been waiting for her to join them.

They advanced, hands outstretched in greeting. In their faces she saw aunts and uncles, grandparents and siblings.

And children.

The youngest were tottering infants, and all through the ages up to adolescents as tall as their parents. They wore hooded cowls and long gloves, and hung back in the gloom, perhaps shy of the newcomer.

A future generation...

The thought was grander than anything else that Iyanna had contemplated since the disaster during the Battle of the Red Moon, a rising sun in a world that had been ruled by midnight for so long.

The House of Arienal could live again.

It was not alliance with Zaisuthra that was on offer, but the re-population of Iyanden!

‘I see that the light of wisdom has fallen upon you,’ said Sydari. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder in reassurance, fingers firm but not oppressive. ‘It is time to meet the one that shall herald this new dawn for both of our peoples.’

The wall of metal, skin and wraithbone shivered as psychic power and craftworld blood pulsed. The flesh-frill boundary of the inner sanctum quivered and then flattened. Flexing cartilage contracted to the floor.

A return throb of anticipation and adoration flowed back from the converging circle of Iyanna’s distant relations.

They held hands, forming a circle around the inner chamber, Sydari and the spiritseer. The collective sense of belonging was overpowering, revisiting sensations Iyanna had thought lost forever.

Here was joy and contentment. Not in the embrace of the dead, nor in the myths of their Whispering God. This was life, this was the future.

Here was hope given life, a true Rebirth.

A fleeting thought of entrapment skittered through her mind but all other consideration disappeared when the flesh-gate of the avatar’s throne chamber peeled back, interlocking teeth-like barbs separating to reveal the interior.

A breeze billowed from the opening maw, passing over them as hot breath. An

ecstatic sigh went up, from Iyanna's lungs also, caught in the uplifting draught of the groupmind's pleasure.

A nudge from Sydari and a slight inflection of psychic intent propelled her towards the open chamber, eager to see what lay within.

The cycle was almost spent, the umbra of false dusk long across the moorlands of the Highlands of Distant Repose. Around the manse voices quietly raised prayers to Lileath, the moon goddess, singing praises to the heavenly maiden for protection during the coming darkness. Meliniel watched with interest, and Azkahr with some callous amusement, when Atalesasa knelt down upon the stones of the broad balcony where the conclave had been gathered. His hands moved in precise, complex gyrations, as did those of many others.

'The phases of the moon,' said Meliniel to his second-in-command. 'His fingers and hands described the changing faces and phases of the white moon above Firstworld.'

'Conjecture,' sneered the former dracon. 'Not one of these Zaisuthrans would know how the daughter-moon looked to our ancestors. I find it all rather embarrassing. Say what you will about the Whispering God, he has never asked us to wave our hands about and shout like howl-apes in heat.'

Despite his mockery, there was no shouting, only a chorus of voices lifted together, a harmony rising from the throats of the Zaisuthrans stationed about the mansion buildings. Meliniel listened, taken by words that spoke of eternal beauty and peace.

'I think they would welcome Ynnead into their pantheon,' said the autarch. 'Their groupmind does not seem such a great distance from the Whisper that joins the souls of the Ynnari to—'

Three things occurred to interrupt him, seemingly at the same time, though when Meliniel thought back to that instant there was a tiny but perceptible sequence to what happened.

Firstly, looking at Atalesasa and the two other House Conversers knelt either side of him, the autarch saw their brows furrowing in consternation.

Secondly, the hymn to Lileath faltered. A shared intake of breath among the Zaisuthrans stopped the flow of harmony.

Thirdly, Azkahr drawing his splinter pistol to fire a storm of poisoned crystal shards into Atalesasa's face as the converser of the House of Arienal turned his gaze towards Meliniel, a betraying corona of golden psychic energy playing about his pupils.

Atalesasa fell sideways with a piercing shriek, his hands only halfway to his ruined face before the toxins flooded his brain and sent him spasming like a beached fish across the stones.

Lisatja reached into her coat for a heavy laser pistol as she rose to her feet, but was cut down by a second burst of fire from the former dracon.

The third converser opted for escape rather than counter-attack, hurling himself with startling agility towards the rail of the balcony. Remarkably, a third arm shot out from under the fold of his cloak, grabbing the rail in a claw to guide him over and into the air beyond. Slashing shards of crystal followed a moment behind from Azkahr's pistol, wide of their mark as Shasiayu of the House of Gatheal dropped out of sight.

'What are you doing?' bellowed Meliniel, sprinting after the departed converser.

The flare of laserlight lit the surrounding roofs and walls and in a heartbeat the messenger-frequencies were alive with alarm and shouts of anger. The buzz of shuriken weapons and thrum of powerblades echoed from floors and galleries below.

'The viper never sleeps,' Azkahr replied, joining him at the rail. 'You command armies as easily as you move your fingers. I spent a life in Commorrhagh and smell treachery on the slightest wind.'

They looked down to the stone flags far below, but astonishingly there was no sign of Shasiayu. In the gardens beyond, a corps of Zaisuthrans had cornered a dozen of Meliniel's warriors – guardians and dire avengers – and cut them down with ruthless volleys of laser fire that sparked red through the immaculately trimmed topiaries and hedges. From elsewhere the cries of waylaid and ambushed Ynnari told of further treachery by the purple-garbed aeldari.

Eventually they came upon the first of the portals, in a broad chamber with a floor of black tiles inset with red gemstones, the roof a dome of white and gold above them. A glimmer of runework betrayed the gate's presence in a wall of grey and red marble. Two pillars delineated its extent, the space within indistinguishable from the rest but for the fine tracery of warding sigils.

Monsattra looked surprised and held out a hand, the gleam of the active runes catching on his jewellery, bathing his palm with its light. He turned around and Yvraine followed his gaze, seeing other telltale sparks of psychic power. She counted fourteen more gates in this chamber alone, and from the background aura that lit three arches leading out from the hall, there were many more in the

adjoining spaces.

‘They seem eager to open,’ he murmured.

‘In returning to the lens of the galaxy, you have brought them closer to the webway that once powered them,’ said Yvraine. She smiled. ‘They still remember.’

‘Which is the Gate of Malice?’ asked the Visarch. The lens-eyed stare of his helm moved from one gate to the next and then back to Monsattra. He seemed agitated.

‘I cannot say, not yet,’ said the Zaisuthran. He tapped the side of his head. ‘But we are attempting to find out. I suggest we continue to the level below, where the oldest gates are found.’

Yvraine agreed and they accompanied Monsattra to a transit ramp between the domed halls. It did not take long to find themselves in a twilight hall four or five times the size of the one above, a single vast chamber where they found the outlines of six immense archways. Each was rendered differently, so that one appeared to be the boughs of two trees intertwined, another paired pillars of runes linked by an arch of golden chain. They stood away from the circular wall, equidistant from the centre and each other.

‘The hunt is over,’ said the Visarch as he pointed up. Above each gate was a silver rune set into the ceiling, instantly recognisable to all present. The Visarch named them as his finger traced the circle. ‘Asuryan, Isha, Kurnus, Morai-Heg, Vaul and... Khaine.’

Their eyes were drawn to the gate of the Bloody-Handed and there was no mistaking what they had discovered. Like two swords crossed, curved metal thrust from the ground, serrated and glinting with its own ruddy light. Though not active, the gate delineated by the two blades seemed to ripple, the air between seething as though in a forge heat.

‘It knows we are here,’ said the Visarch, taking a step forward.

‘Wait!’ Monsattra’s rebuke was sharp, the only time he had raised his voice since he had arrived at Withershield for the conclave. ‘It is not yet time to open it. We have much to study first, and pacts to agree.’

Yvraine could feel her former exarch’s impatience, and it was infectious, feeding her own desire to know what lay beyond the portal. She fought her curiosity, the burning need to act immediately.

‘Poor guests we would be, to leave so soon,’ she said with a forced smile.

She turned back to the Gate of Malice and felt a shudder pass through her. It was not of the gate, but something else far more familiar. Only a few heartbeats

later a low laugh caused all to turn sharply, to find in the doorway behind them a figure clad in the motley of a Harlequin: Idraesci Dreamspear.

In his arms he cradled a furry blue mass, matted in places with dried blood.

Alorynis leapt free and bounded across the hall, swerving through the legs of the Ynnari and Zaisuthrans. Claws skittering on the tiles, he came to a stop at Yvraine's side, face marked by fresh cuts across cheek and nose.

He paused a moment to hiss violently at Monsattra and then bounded up towards Yvraine, forcing her to catch him.

At the moment of contact, the gyrix's thoughts flashed into her mind.



CHAPTER 24

TREACHERY REVEALED

The memory was incoherent at first, a panicked melange of smell – the sweaty stench of the quilling smothering all else – and the dance of colours and meaningless voices. But Yvraine’s ear recognised the language, heard the rhythm in the words that Alorynis could not.

*Hey! Listen up, listen well, hark to my whisper,
Light comes the shatter-wind and her bladed sister.
Down our darkened tunnelway, shining in the domelight,
Waiting at the webway gate for the cold starlight,
There a handsome fellow is, Laughing God’s true heir,
Sharp as the cutting wit, lighter than the air.
Old Idraesci Dreamspear tales and death a-bringing
Always in the darkest time. Can you hear him singing?
Hey! Listen up, listen well, ‘til your heart is heaving!
Alorynis, Alorynis, your mistress is a-grieving!
Run little cruel-thing, do us no more harm!
Dreamspear’s in a hurry now. Battle will follow calm.
Dreamspear’s going home again, his friends’ souls a-bringing.
Always at the last cry! Can you hear me singing?*

Bounding and skipping along the tunnel came a figure clad in bright colours, a flashing sword in one hand, crystalline pistol in the other. With each twist and leap, the blade slashed out to sever a questing frond or thrusting barb, leaving droplets of gore splattered in his wake. He ducked beneath flailing tendrils grown

from the fabric of the tunnel itself, not missing a step as he twirled between sharp-thorned appendages.

The creature strangling Alorynis looked up, eyes saucer-wide at the stranger's approach. She bared her teeth in anger, fingers tightening through the ruff of fur about the gyrix's throat.

In alcoves hidden in the shadow of thick bone-limbs holding up the roof, strange shapes moved. Many-limbed, chitin-clad creatures flexed and stretched as layers of veined, semi-transparent tissue parted at the openings, slit by claws that could cut prey to the bone without effort. Bulbous heads turned, dark eyes glittered in the scant light, watching the oncoming figure with alien malignancy.

With a screech and a twist, Alorynis dragged on the last reserves of strength and sank his teeth into the arm of his assailant. Claws scrabbling bloody ribbons from her gut, the gyrix thrust free, bounding up the tunnel, yowling madly. Waves of warning thoughts flooded from the panicked empath, preceding it along the passage in a flickering wave of energy.

Like runners set free by the starter's command, the crouching aliens burst from their hiding places as Alorynis sprinted up the tunnel towards the advancing aeldari. His mistress' companion pulled free a crystalline weapon and the gyrix felt the backwash of psychic discharge as a beam of scintillating power flashed past, targeting the creatures just a step behind. Agonised, high pitched shrieks and the clatter of chitin against chitin followed the gyrix, but spurred by raw terror he sped straight on, not looking back.

Meliniel took stock of the situation in a few heartbeats. Remonstrating with Azkahr would both be a waste of time and, most likely, incorrect. His instincts were not to be second-guessed. The past could not be changed, only the future.

The autarch accessed the messenger-waves, calmly distributing his commands as he paced along the balcony, trying to see as much of the unfolding violence as possible. He called for reports as he did so, filtering out the pertinent information from an anarchic cacophony of responses. In his mind's eye the manse had gone from a secure, peaceful stronghold to a roiling battleground. He could feel the sudden flash of spirits on the Whisper, the soulstuff from the slain trembling through his body, coursing across his skin like static.

The gift of Ynnead.

'The skies,' warned Azkahr, drawing his attention to three shapes lifting into view in the distance. 'More ornithopters.'

They were not the only cause for concern. On the heathlands across from the

manse, four more of the segmented transports hovered over a ridge. Weapons blisters spat red bolts of energy, searing into the upper storeys above the autarch.

‘Secure the inner walls,’ he told his warriors. ‘Feel the soulburst and turn it to our cause. Purge your vicinity of the foe and then secure your ground and prepare for fresh assault.’

The updraught of spirit energy swirled and swayed as the Ynnari gathered in the escaping energy of their departing companions. The Whisper was more than just a bonding empathy, it was a shared experience, a conjoined source of vitality.

This was the greatest gift of Ynnead, to tap into the long-forgotten aeldari power to absorb each other’s spirits – and to a lesser extent those of other creatures. This was the power of shared-thought unrestrained by the psychic teachings and circuitry of the Asuryani, not weakened by the soulthirst of the drukhari.

The Whisper was the voice of the dead, and the Ynnari had learned to listen.

Though a score had fallen and more, their deaths were not in vain. Invigorated and empowered by the influx of the dead’s dissipating force, Meliniel’s squads struck back with a speed and ferocity the Zaisuthrans could not have expected. Every death made them stronger, faster and more accurate as they dared the fusillades of their treacherous hosts and spat their vengeance with splinter, shuriken and laser.

‘We need to contact Yvraine,’ said Meliniel. ‘The Zaisuthran groupmind will carry these events across the craftworld at the speed of thought.’

‘It was the groupmind that spurred our foes to act,’ said Azkahr, drawing his blade. His kabalites were at one of the stairs, firing down into the level below. ‘Yvraine is most likely already dead. Iyanna also. If you desire salvation, look to our ships.’

‘No, the sisters-in-death still live, doubting one,’ said Meliniel. ‘Their passing would be a fire across the Whisper, and you know it. As for our ships, unless you know of some way of broadcasting into the void without an infinity circuit, it is beyond us.’

‘I am sure that if enough of us die, our passing would be felt by our companions aboard the starships,’ the former dracon replied with a vicious grin.

‘Little comfort,’ said Meliniel. He turned his gaze to the enemy forces gathering around the manse and its outbuildings. ‘But perhaps we could send a signal with the souls of our enemies instead?’

Yvraine shrugged Alorynis to the floor, where the gyrix pushed close to her legs, seeking sanctuary in the folds of her gown. Cold fury rose like a tide, but before it took complete hold of her, she darted a look towards Dreamspear, who was standing at the threshold, dividing his attention between the occupants of the gate chamber and the tunnel by which he had entered – not the same passage that had brought the Zaisuthrans and their guests.

‘I know not how you come to be here, nor there, but my profound thanks,’ said Yvraine.

‘Alas that I deserved such gratitude. ’Twas curiosity, you see, that took me after your furry friend, nothing more wise.’ He motioned down the corridor with his sword. In the dim light, long shadows stuttered along the walls, of the creatures Yvraine had seen in the visions. ‘And I did not really *rescue* poor Alorynis, more that we eluded the inevitable for a short while...’

Monsattra retreated several steps when Yvraine’s gaze fell upon him, her eyes lit with a chill blue fire.

‘What have you done?’ he snapped, all pretence of diplomacy abandoned. He flinched as though in pain, eyes glazing for a moment before his focus returned, fixed upon the Opener of the Seventh Way. His companions drew about him, pulling free laspistols and sonic knives. ‘I advise that you do nothing rash, Yvraine. I am sure this is a misunderstanding.’

‘There is no mistake,’ Yvraine declared. She slid Kha-vir rasping from its sheath. The soul-hungering blade bathed the gate hall in a waxing illumination. Yvraine felt the distant pull of souls released from their mortal frames, though much obscured by the fog of the groupmind. She realised it was this, the gestalt psychic power of the Zaisuthrans, that had cloaked the energy of the gates, perhaps deliberately trying to hide them. ‘I know the manner of creature that has invaded your home. They are no daemons, they are aliens of flesh and blood.’

In this she was only partly correct, for Zaisuthra had suffered previously from the daemonic, the aftermath of the incursion witnessed by Iyanna. She was right, however, that Zaisuthra had been victim of a terrible incursion far, far earlier.

Dreamspear retreated into the hall, stepping past the gate marked for Asuryan. His voice rang back from the portals that ringed the chamber.

‘I saw hundreds of them, many dormant but waking...’

The first of the interlopers appeared at the arched mouth of the tunnel. Straightened, it would have stood half as tall again as Yvraine, but its hunched body made it look shorter. Four arms, two double-jointed legs, and a thick, ribbed tail. Its pale flesh body was sheathed in overlapping plates of dark chitin

that gleamed with expressed oils. The smell was pungent, almost intoxicating. The slightly flat, bulbous head that held a maw of razor fangs was unmistakable, but it was the eyes like polished orbs of coal that caught her.

She had shared memories with Iyanna and had recognised in an instant the creatures that had infiltrated Zaisuthra. It was impossible to know how it had happened, but given their dependence upon the natural life cycle of their host culture, and the slow reproductive rate of the aeldari, it had to have been several generations since their first arrival.

These interlopers had many names, in many places, for as long as they had been known to the aeldari. The Hider in Plain Sight. Hearth-lurkers. Blood-shadows. Kin-thieves.

But it was the human appellation that came to her in that moment. Yvraine knew better than to allow herself to be bewitched by that alien gaze, and brought up the Sword of Sorrows, its pale gleam breaking the mesmeric effect.

‘Genestealer,’ she hissed.

Many are the tales of the Bloody-Handed God. His murderous rage and jealous lust caused much strife amongst the pantheon of the aeldari, and his slaying of Eldanesh precipitated the disastrous War in Heaven. So legends claim. Perhaps the truth is something else, but antiquity is a fog not easily penetrated. Legend also claims that when the Great Enemy arose, born of the nightmarish perversions, desires and twisted ambitions of the aeldari Fall, Khaine was there to fight, the warrior-god of his people.

Here myth is conflicted, and the sagas of one craftworld differ from the epics of another, as much as they differ again from the folk tales of Commorragh and the dances of the disparate Harlequin masques. Some say that She Who Thirsts tried to consume Kaela Mensha Khaine, but in struggling from her grip the Bloody-Handed One shredded into many parts and the tatters of His existence fluttered down into the universe of mortals. Some say that Khaine was always the son of the Great Enemy and the Lord of Skulls, their twain desires of glory and bloodshed matched within His breast. The elevation of the Doom of the Aeldari was too much and broke apart his immortal frame, scattering bloody parts into the cosmos. And there are those that claim the Brass King and She Who Thirsts fought openly for possession of the Bloody-Handed, and in the struggle Khaine was split asunder and flaming fragments of his being were released into reality.

Stories, but with a kernel of truth in each. And that truth is that within the psychic heart of every craftworld that had fled the dominions, nestled inside the

raw infinity circuit, a piece of the war god settled and grew. The Avatars of Khaine they are called, each a terrifying incarnation of the god-that-was, roused only by the heat and blood of coming war.

Zaisuthra was no different in that respect, for in the core of the craftworld sat a creation not of mortal origins. The creature inside the inner sanctum sat upon the bronze throne of Kaela Mensha Khaine, brooding and majestic. Like the Avatars of Khaine across the galaxy, it was forged of immortal dark iron and bright flame, but in Zaisuthra its body was also grown from the unnatural flesh of the craftworld's body.

Its face was elongated, steel teeth like daggers beneath a brow ridged with nodules of iron-bone. Eyes of burning embers regarded Iyanna, like perfect black diamonds lit with a spark in their centre. Its smoke-wreathed body was heavily ribbed, a hard carapace of bronze that shimmered as though still molten, armoured over flesh that pulsed and fumed like boiling magma.

Two hands lay upon the black iron arms of the throne, ending in elongated, articulated tripartite claws rather than the slender digits of an aeldari. Two more limbs stretched to either side; in the right a long spear tipped with a blade near half its length, itself as tall as Iyanna; in the left a large goblet of gold studded with red gems. The spiritseer remembered both well enough from her earlier Paths, when she had trod as warrior and warlock. The weapon was the Wailing Doom, *Suin Dallae*, and the crucible the Cup of Criel in which the blood of Khaine's priests was sacrificed to the Bloody-Handed.

About its shoulders hung the ceremonial blood-red cloak, pinned into its chest by a sword of shining silver. Other amulets and sigils were inserted into its carapace, like offerings on an altar or temple wall.

It seemed immobile at first, but Iyanna knew from its scrutiny across the groupmind that the Avatar of Zaisuthra was aware of her. She could feel a delicate touch upon the borders of her thoughts, a massaging pulse of welcome quite at odds with the terrifying apparition before her.

A tendril of the creature's thoughts brushed against Sydari, who advanced at her shoulder, his presence urging her forwards without force.

'Witness the Patriarch of Khaine, our beloved protector,' said the Lord-Guardian. He knelt and Iyanna offered no resistance to the gentle pulse of supplication that sent her to one knee also. Another sigh sounded about the chamber from the other attendants, accompanied by the whisper of cloth and the creak of leather as they too paid respects to the Patriarch.

'For generations the Patriarch of Khaine has watched over the people of

Zaisuthra. When we thought the gods dead, when we had fled into the bitter darkness between the most distant stars, we thought we were alone. Like you, and the other misguided, we feared the gods had finally died or left us. Yet there was one that had not. She Who Thirsts you have named her. Her touch followed us still, her curse was in our bones and in our minds. Our society was on the verge of collapse, our culture almost as depraved as the one we had fled. Assailed by our own weaknesses and assaulted by the daemons of the Dark Powers, there was no hope of salvation.’

Iyanna could imagine it well – Iyanden stood upon a similar precipice, despite all that had come before. They had the benefit of the Path, of farseers and aspect warriors, bonesingers and spiritseers. Even so, the dead outnumbered the living and their society was a stale replica of the force it had once been. What chance had a small craftworld alone on the tides of fate?

‘What chance indeed?’ echoed Sydari, Iyanna’s thoughts now part of the groupmind. ‘One chance, a miracle of heavenly proportion. We came upon the messengers of Khaine, who sought us from the outer realms. We and they became one, and with their strength, with the power of the Patriarch and the groupmind we stalled the decay and found fresh purpose.’

The unparalleled majesty of the primogenitor flooded the chamber and Sydari basked in the light of his creator. His adulation fluttered back across the groupmind.

First of first, I have brought the potential. His thoughts were hurried, fuelled in equal part by excitement and apprehension. He could sense across the groupmind that the conflict with the Ynnari was far from conclusive. Thinking of the fighting swamped his mind with images of gunfire and vicious close quarters combat swirling through the burning manses and sullen gardens in which the Ynnari had been housed. He felt the pinpricks of loss as another group-son or group-daughter was cut down or shot. Through the miasma of their dying thoughts the bright flame-minds of the grouplords, the renewed incarnations of the primogenitor’s pureness. They waited still, almost ready to spring forth when the enemy were most beset.

A psychic impulse snatched his attention back to the creator.

Bring closer, prime of the first clasp of the fourth binding, his groupfather bid, addressing the Lord-Guardian as it did all of the Zaisuthra, not by name or rank, but lineage. *Mind-touch for harmonious congress.*

Sydari edged Iyanna forwards several more faltering steps. Her resistance was

instinctive, a simple reluctance to advance towards the unknown. Deep inside her thoughts the groupworms of his delving were still in place, settled about her consciousness to release their tiny but persuasive interventions. Not enough to control, not to dominate, though the creator and grouplords could do so if they wished. Just enough to lower her guard, to smooth away suspicion so that she would be more open to the truth.

The first, inserted when the shock of recognition had flowed from her to him in the shuttle, was almost withered and gone, but reinforcements in the form of his subsequent insertions were more than enough to guide her towards acquiescence.

Bind her to me.

It was a request made out of love, not lust. In Iyanna was all of their future. The Patriarch's thoughts reverberated across the groupmind, echoing the distant sighing call that had been a siren song to them for half a lifetime, bringing them back from the outer voids. The spoor of the Host of Lords was upon Iyanna's mindscape, as distinct as a scent or mark. Her memories betrayed her, flashes of the brood-creators from which all life was spawned. With her induction into the family the emptiness would be filled, her purpose restored.

Sydari swelled with the thought that he would be the one to bring Zaisuthra into a new era of growth. With Iyanna turned, the others would follow or be eliminated. Iyanden would come next.

Bind her!

Sydari snapped from his musings, responding to the plaintive desire of his primogenitor, father of all Houses. All would proceed as he had commanded.

The Zaisuthrans pushed into the teeth of the Ynnari firepower. The devotees of the Whispering God did not fear death, but their dedication was nothing compared to the unthinking sacrifice demanded by the groupmind. Almost heedless of their losses, the Zaisuthrans gained ground, determined to secure a foothold in Withershield. Warriors clad in armour, some of them heavily disfigured, hunched and facially horrific, pushed over the walls and into the lower chambers, sometimes over the bodies of their dead.

Meliniel did what he could to slow their advance but his troops were outmatched. Supported by heavier weaponry and scouring fire from circling anti-grav gunships, the tainted aeldari were able to seize the outer grounds swiftly even while the last of their number were purged within.

The battle entered a fresh phase, with the Ynnari trying to stem any incursion into the manse and its outer buildings, knowing that once the fighting broke out

in the sprawling halls and corridors it was only a matter of time before they would be cornered. Repulse and counter-attack worked for a time, but Meliniel was forced to withdraw deeper and deeper into the cloisters and courtyards with each new Zaisuthran offensive, his squads unable to remain long in the open before drawing attention from the aerial foes – enemy he was loath to dispatch his own flying troops against until some solid gain might be made from such counter-attack.

The conclusion was inevitable. They were still losing ground and, through that, losing the battle.



CHAPTER 25

THE YNNARI EMBATTLED

Sydari paused and the assembled family rose, impelled by an unspoken wish of the Patriarch. The others of the House of Arienal came closer, their faces still lit with smiles, their eyes fixed upon Iyanna and the Patriarch with unabashed adoration.

Iyanna saw the younger ones more clearly, the gloom of their hoods and the vapours of the throne chamber no longer such an impediment. And through the groupmind also, she realised, their immature minds like bubbles on the lake into which all of their thoughts pooled.

Those she had taken to be the youngest were not so, their height was simply masked by hunched posture. Their faces were more like those of the Patriarch, with sharp cheekbones and brows and jutting jawlines. Flecks of hardened chitin marked them, their skin cast with a reddish-purple sheen.

And she saw also other limbs hidden in the folds of cloaks or tucked carefully behind backs – third and even fourth arms, ending in long claws.

‘Yes, we are all children of the Patriarch, one way or the other,’ said Sydari, smiling warmly at the youths. They grinned back, showing razor-sharp teeth and slender tongues. His demeanour shifted, becoming sombre. ‘Of late the predations of the Corrupt Ones have become almost overwhelming. You have seen the damage that has been done. The Patriarch is strong, but he is not all-powerful. Alone we cannot aspire to overcome this renewed danger. The attacks are fierce and determined, full of guile and hate of what we have become.’

His hand was on her back, not forceful but encouraging. The two of them drifted towards the immense creature on the throne, moving without effort or volition, drawn by its charismatic gaze.

‘You can be part of this, Iyanna,’ said Sydari.

The Lord-Guardian broke away and stepped forward, taking up the Cup of Criel as it was proffered by the Patriarch. He held it towards Iyanna and within she could see blood, thick and sticking to the sides, its strange aroma like incense in her nostrils.

‘You are one of us, Iyanna,’ he continued. ‘In spirit, and in blood, the House of Arienal called to you across the void and you answered. And we have come to you, perhaps, to find the alliance, the fresh blood we need to survive. Come with us, unite the House of Arienal once more, bring together our craftworlds. We will save Zaisuthra. We will make Iyanden great again.’

Iyanna looked at the cup and it was clear what was intended. She need only drink and she would become one with the groupmind, reunited with her family.

The Hall of Gates resounded with ongoing battle. The dim runelight of the portals caught on hails of poisoned splinters, twilight lit by dazzling klaive-arcs and the luminescence of Idraesci Dreamspear’s holosuit. Flares of white-ice power scoured from Yvraine’s eyes, becoming freezing flame that engulfed the tumult of alien and hybrid that spread into the chamber.

The Iyandeni contingent fought together, a tight group of yellow-armoured warriors close to the Gate of Malice. The guardians formed a firing line with their shuriken catapults, cutting down anything that followed from the passageway by which Dreamspear had arrived.

Their backs were protected by the twin warlocks. Side by side, Iyasta and Telathaus left a tide of broken genestealer bodies heaped about them. They fought seamlessly together, the one projecting lightning and fire while the other slashed and thrust with witchblade, alternating and interweaving between the roles as the ebb and flow of battle dictated.

They spun about each other, directing their ire first one way and then another, stepping in time with twinchronicity so that as one ducked, the other’s blade passed to cut down a foe, as the first dodged, the second unleashed a torrent of psychic wrath.

Rune armour gleamed with psychic power, warding away errant lasbolts and the clawscrapes of the purestrain aliens, sleeve and hem of robe scorched and tattered but no grander wound inflicted upon them.

Iyanna’s fingers curled around the stem of the cup, her fingers touching Sydari’s. The shock of contact reminded her that she still wore no glove, her skin against his skin, the warmth of him next to the coldness in her flesh.

‘How long have you welcomed the presence of the dead more than the living?’ the Lord-Guardian asked.

She did not answer. Could not answer. Even before Ynnead, before Yvraine and the Ynnari, she had been a tombkeeper, a soul lost between the worlds of mortal and immortal, living and deceased. There was a place here where she would belong, not simply be accepted or tolerated, or used.

This last thought kindled bright, igniting a passion she had not experienced for the longest of times. Yvraine called her sister, but what really did she offer? Servitude and oblivion. There had to be more to Iyanna’s remaining existence than simply as herald to an uncaring god.

Thoughts of Yvraine rippled through the groupmind. Now that Iyanna was part of it, on the periphery at least, she gained some of its function and awareness. She could feel the tendrils of its power throughout Zaisuthra, just like the nodes and capillaries of an infinity circuit, but far closer and hotter.

The Patriarch’s presence was a sun at the centre, the others all planets caught within their orbits. The craftworld was more than an amplifier, more than a tool, it was an extension of the Patriarch, and in return it was more than simply an unyielding avatar of a war god, it was the father and preserver, the font of life.

She knew why Sydari and his companions were called Lords-Guardian, for all was bent towards the salvation and protection of the Zaisuthrans, from the House of Arienal to all others. There was no concern greater in the minds around her, and in the groupmind that bound them, than the preservation of their extended family. Zaisuthra was one and whole, a stark contrast to the divisions that wracked Iyanden.

Something threatened that harmony. Iyanna sensed it as a bruise of the groupmind, a creeping laceration that worked its way from the outer edges.

Iyanna flinched, feeling the loss of a mind.

She reeled back; a tiny part of the groupmind diminished, the particle gone forever. Loss. She was so inured to it now, yet the sense of it was like the deepest grief, sending waves of dismay through the groupmind. Sydari hissed in physical pain and a brief moan of lament rose from the folk of the House of Arienal about them.

‘Yvraine...’ She whispered the name. ‘There is fighting!’

‘She is killing your brothers and sisters, Iyanna.’

Where before he had been gentle, now Sydari was hard and forceful. He met her gaze with an insistent glare and pushed the cup forwards. ‘We need you. With your thoughts the groupmind will know all that you know. We shall see all

that you have seen, feel all that you have felt, share all that you have lost. And you need not be alone anymore.'

Iyanna let the cup touch her lip, the rim hard against the soft skin. She could not remember when she had taken off her helm.

This thought caused her to pause.

There was too much she could not remember, too much lost in the haze that had beset her thoughts since Sydari had first met her in the shuttle. Even now it was almost impossible to think of anything from before they had met, past that instant of connection when she had looked into his eyes; the eyes of her father.

The Patriarch shifted, raising a claw from the throne. Nothing was said, but its impatience was felt through the groupmind. Beyond, Iyanna was aware of more lights falling dim in the firmament of stars that was Zaisuthra, more family slain by her former companions.

Why had she taken off her helm?

'Drink and you shall be loved forever,' said Sydari. 'Your family is waiting.'

'My family is waiting.'

The warmth of the blood within the cup was on her breath, its scent in her nose. It was her sister's embrace and her mother's kiss and...

Meliniel bounded up the shallow winding stairway, taking the steps three at a time. The thud of armoured boots on bare stone echoed from wood-panelled walls, his guard of Striking Scorpions and former guardians just a few strides behind.

He reached the next landing just as a group of Zaisuthrans reached the top of the stair, as Meliniel had predicted he would, having seen them from across a courtyard heading in this direction. His spear found the throat of the first without hesitation, the pistol in his other hand shredding coat and padded jerkin of a second. Shouldering aside their falling corpses he ducked beneath a crackling maul to make room for his warriors, who met the half dozen foes with snarling chainblades and monomolecular-edged swords.

The haft of Ahz-ashir was more useful in the close confines of the landing; tripping, stunning, breaking bones. He felt the wisps of the Zaisuthrans' departing souls and reached out with his thoughts to drag them into the spring of his own psychic power. It was hard, the groupmind of the craftworld gripped fiercely at the energy of its departed minions, leaving only drifting tatters for the Ynnari to absorb.

A cry of pain and the sudden burst of soulstuff behind him warned of a fellow

Ynnari falling prey. He felt the wraithpower pass through him and from its touch recognised Thasasa, who had once been a Black Guardian of Ulthwé. In a fleeting moment he shared all that she had been, witnessed her triumphs and losses, from infancy to the dagger buried in her back.

And then she was gone, only to live on in the embrace of the Whispering God, her energy more motes of glittering power in the veins of the autarch.

The remaining warriors fell upon Thasasa's killer, who had been kicked down but not slain. One of the Striking Scorpions took off the Zaisuthran's head with a sweep of his chainsword, sending the skull bouncing down the stairs.

'We have lost the second wing,' Azkahr reported over the messenger-waves. 'We have the third tower and the main building left. I think we need to break for the transports and get out of here.'

'Await my instruction,' Meliniel signalled back, though he did not doubt his second-in-command's assessment.

Leaving the guardians to hold the stair, he led the Striking Scorpions along the heavily carpeted landing and into one of the vast bed chambers that flanked it. From there they broke out onto a veranda, coming to a place above where several Zaisuthrans were attempting to breach one of the upper storeys across a skybridge.

He needed to give no command, his intent clear. Weapons readied, the Striking Scorpions vaulted over the wall of the veranda onto the bridge beneath, the buzz of chainswords springing into life swiftly followed by the cries of the dead and dying.

Iyanna walked among the dead.

They were all there, lining the avenue, standing before their mausoleums where before the statues had been.

Hariya, her mother. Her father, Arctai. Grandfather Naisayras. Grandmother Sasiahka. Illiyan, her paternal grandfather, and her aunt, his eldest daughter, Lotasitha. On and on, down the avenue the two lines stretched, pale figures, insubstantial, dissipating like tatters of fog caught in a strong breeze.

She would be free of them, free of their haunting, free of their weight upon her shoulders.

A cold hand slipped into Iyanna's, its grip small but fierce.

She looked down.

'Hello, Little Me,' she said to Saisath. Her younger sister smiled. 'Always smiling.'

Saisath's features distorted, became hazy as though seen through tears, and in their shift Iyanna glimpsed for a moment another face.

Yvraine.

'Don't leave me,' said Yvraine. 'I need you, sister.'

'Why do you want to forget me, Iyanna?' Saisath asked, no longer smiling.



CHAPTER 26

A FAMILY LOST

It is true to say that the situation was dire for the Ynnari. Assailed from without and within, body and soul put to the test by the ambushes of the genestealer-tainted Zaisuthrans. But the Ynnari were no strangers to hardship, nor bloodshed. In battle and death they had been forged and in battle and death they were destined to end.

There was no thought of surrender, no doubt that they would fight to the death, for they knew the embrace of Ynnead awaited them. Though the gestalt of Zaisuthra smothered all distant thought and she could not feel Iyanna, Yvraine knew that many of her followers fought on across the craftworld – she would have sensed any great release of death even through the concealing psychic umbra. Yet she could not draw on it, and was left with the scattered soul-ashes of those close at hand, a fuel strong but in short supply.

Certainly not enough to conjure the Yncarne, which would have made a valuable reinforcement. Ynnead, like all gods, required sacrifice of sorts, and the Whispering God's avatar remained, for the time being, out of reach until sufficiently numerous departed spirits could be gathered to raise the incorporeal manifestation.

Dispatching another genestealer with a caress from the Sword of Sorrows, Yvraine gathered the escaping lifeforce of her Ynnari, a swirl of diaphanous spirits that wreathed about her outstretched arm and fan. With a flick of her wrist she sent the psychic miasma flaring into the enemy, the curtain of descending soulstuff becoming a cleansing white fire that ran across the aliens' chitin plates and burned through flesh like fire consuming paper.

The Whisper churned through the air, almost tangible, whipped into a storm by

the presence of Yvraine and the smothering cloud of the groupmind. Howling and crying, the spirits of departing aeldari – Zaisuthran and Ynnari alike – seethed around the gates.

The soulbound fought bravely, the taunts of the wyches a contrast to the silent determination of the Silvered Blade Dire Avengers, in turn so different from the expressive but wordless war-calls from former incubi. Feeding upon the escaping soulstuff of their falling companions they drove forward, taking the fight to the Zaisuthrans, cutting them down with shuriken and klaive, wyches leaping over a mound of the dead to despatch others with hydraknives and razorsnares.

It was not enough, and even as the last of the genestealers within the hall gave its death rattle, the corridors around the hall darkened with the approach of many more. The Ynnari coalesced like a cloud about the Visarch and Yvraine, grim-faced, determined to sell their lives at the greatest cost to the enemy.

‘Death is not the end,’ the Visarch told them. ‘Through Ynnead, we shall be Reborn.’

Iyanna opened her eyes and let the cup fall from her hands. Thick alien blood splashed the yellow of her robe and spattered across the crystal tendrils that spread like roots from the Patriarch’s throne.

She met the eyes of Sydari, and saw clear the whorls of psychic power that poured from them, powered by the groupmind, inveigling their way into her thoughts, twisting perception and agency, turning her into a puppet. Bile rose in her throat, a wave of disgust and hatred. Her cold stare caused the Lord-Guardian to straighten in shock. He reeled back as the spiritseer extended her thoughts, snatching up the tendrils that linked him to her, ripping them from his mind with claws of ice. Through gritted teeth, she announced her decision.

‘My family are dead.’

Unable to match the pure speed and ferocity of the genestealers, the Visarch met them with guile and finesse. Always in motion, tempting throat-lacerating strikes and heart-shredding lunges, he used his own body as a lure, triggering the aliens to attack, meeting them with the edge or tip of Asu-var. He stepped into their attacks, a flourish of cloak to distract, a sidestep and thrust to part flesh with the least effort. Lethal claws slashed the humid air just a hair’s breadth from his armour. Foetid breath from lethal jaws flowed hot in the ventilator of his helm.

Through it a single thought burned in his mind: protect Yvraine.

The Opener of the Seventh Way stood her ground, whipping the Sword of

Sorrows left and then right, catching limb and torso with the slightest touch to wrench forth such soulstuff as existed in the bio-engineered beasts that surrounded them. The Visarch could feel the slithering presence of the groupmind, a seething entity that tried to choke out all other thought, jealously holding onto the escaping psychic matter of its creatures.

Monsattra and the other emissaries had tried to flee when the purestrain genestealers had launched their attack, but Dreamspear intercepted them, somersaulting over their heads to cut off their escape. Turned to a dazzling blur by his *dathedi* suit, the Great Harlequin moved among them, a rainbow of violence that left slashed throats and pierced organs in its wake.

The soulbound formed up around their mistress. The incubi of the Visarch's Coiled Blade cleaved as a single entity through the first wave of purebred genestealers, matching shrieking klaives against deadly speed. Her gladiatrices in the Bloodbrides bounded past, intent upon a fresh surge of attackers coming now from two of the other archways – part-aeldari hybrids with pallid skin and extra limbs, their Zaisuthran heritage perverted by the alien genes within.

Neither as graceful as their aeldari parents, nor as naturally swift as their alien sires, these half-born fell easily to the arena weapons of the Bloodbrides, their corrupted flesh left scattered across the tiles of the hall.

But the Zaisuthrans were resilient in mind and number, thrown forward by the unthinking desire of the groupmind, whose baleful energy fluxed and waxed strong through the arteries surrounding the Hall of Gates. Volleys of lasfire sprang from the archways, and the rasp of semi-organic blades on Commorraghan armour sounded loud among the fighting.

'We must set free the passed ones from the starships,' the Visarch called out, in the brief lull between parting the body of one foe and parrying the descending claws of the next.

'The groupmind stills all thought,' answered Yvraine.

He felt his mistress probe the amorphous darkness at the back of their minds, but it merged and flexed with her, formed of many points, no focus for her to attack.

'Only if we mount up the dead of those that make it so strong can we penetrate its veil,' she concluded.

Melinie took a moment to survey the ongoing battle, piecing together what he could physically see with what he recalled from the last reports.

It seemed that, as he had thought, Azkahr was right. The few forays into the

central building had been feints, while the majority of the Zaisuthran forces consolidated their positions in the outer towers, stables and halls.

He could see many of them now, the telltale glint of silver in windows and at doorways, their lasrifles trained on the upper storeys of the manse itself. The grav-tanks prowled above, keeping guard against counter-attack rather than supporting a thrust into the main building.

Doubtless they were also taking stock, marshalling their forces for a final incursion.

The Ynnari could reach some of the wave serpents and raiders, a few jetbikes. Several had been left in an underground space beneath the tower-wall, more in the courtyards and on the main road leading up through the moors. If they could find some way of distracting the Zaisuthrans, just for a short while, they could sally forth, retake some of the transports and break free.

Where to after that?

It didn't matter, Meliniel realised.

The aeldari were always loath to be pinned to a place, preferring the flexibility and space of roving combat. From his time as the wielder of the Swordwind he knew perfectly well the value of space and distance. And among his number were reaver-bikers, hellion riders and others that not only excelled at such fast moving battles but craved it. Only his most adamant commands and their loyalty to Ynnead had convinced them to remain inside the manse when the first attacks had taken place – had they left then, he had no doubt they would have all been hunted down and slain piecemeal by now.

'Where's my dagger in the sleeve, Azkahr?' he demanded over the messenger carrier. 'Now would be a good time to see it slipped into the back of our enemy.'

No reply was forthcoming. Meliniel checked below, to assure himself that the Striking Scorpions had finished eliminating the attack across the bridge. He saw them standing in a group amid the scattered remnants of their enemies, their attention drawn to something at the far end of the slender span. Their leader's warning came at the same time as Meliniel spied movement on the opposite side of the gap.

'Infiltrators of the Great Devourer! Zaisuthra is beset by alien corruption, autarch.'

From the slender tower across the divide, dozens of powerful, loping creatures burst into view, claws flexing, black eyes fixed upon the eight green-armoured warriors on the pale stones of the skybridge. Meliniel's chest tightened as he watched the tyranid-spawned monstrosities, even as his befuddled thoughts

sought to comprehend how they came to be here.

‘Azkahr!’ Desperation tore clarity into his clouded mind. ‘Get everyone to the transports. Now! Children of the air, cast Ynnead’s net upon the skies!’

He was torn between jumping down to help the Striking Scorpions, and following his own command. The aspect warriors fired their shuriken pistols at the approaching knot of whip-fast aliens, cutting down several of their number, but a fraction of their strength.

It was pointless for them to turn and run – the genestealers were swifter even than aeldari, especially the heavily armoured Striking Scorpions. Meliniel fired down, a few volleys of shuriken that did little to blunt the coming spearpoint of horrific alien warriors.

Above the roofs around him the first jetbikes and skyweavers lifted against the pale clouds, their riders gunning their machines to full speed as they cleared the enclosing walls and hills. Hearing augmented by the systems of his autarch suit, he caught a distant but familiar purr of grav-motors, and cast his eye to the skyline in time to see the sleek shapes of two raiders slip over the crest, their open decks filled with the warriors of Azkahr’s ‘concealed blade’.

He gave silent thanks, their timing could not have been better.

Meliniel turned away and broke into a run. It would be up to Iyanna or Yvraine to call down the wrath of the dead waiting in the starships, for in a single pounding beat of his heart his mission had gone from winning to simply surviving.



CHAPTER 27

A GOD WHISPERS

The Patriarch hissed its displeasure, thrusting the tip of the Suin Dallae towards Iyanna. She was gone from the groupmind again, ejected as an outsider, and felt nothing of the psychic imperative that accompanied the gesture. The results were immediate though, as the members of the House of Arienal released their hand-holding and advanced with snarls and curses.

Iyanna leapt towards Sydari, who had drawn a dagger shaped like Khaine's rune from his sleeve. She batted aside the clumsy blow, breaking his wrist so that the blade clattered to the floor. With her other hand she snatched him around the throat, talon-like nails of her ungloved hand pressing welts into the flesh above his artery. She had felt his presence in the groupmind, and although the Patriarch was the end and the beginning of the psychic web, Sydari was the focus, the aeldari lens through which the alien's thoughts were broadcast. His loss would cripple the Zaisuthrans even as they warred with the Ynnari.

'Your Lord-Guardian dies before I do,' Iyanna snarled, turning around from the Patriarch to the coven and back again. 'Stay where you are.'

The command to halt was as immediate as the one to attack, obeyed without hesitation. A few of the Arienali had weapons – laspistols brought forth from beneath cloaks, swords and daggers dragged from sheaths. Others had only their claws and fangs, the genetic legacy of the creature that had corrupted them, but such weapons were as equally lethal as those fashioned in Zaisuthra's weaponshops.

'They will not let you leave,' croaked Sydari. With a grimace he prised himself from her grip and stepped back. 'You were a fool to leave behind your weapon. So easily manipulated. Your grief makes you weak.'

‘I do not carry a weapon to comfort me in my grief,’ Iyanna replied. Her heart quickened as she held out an empty hand. ‘I carry it to assuage my rage. And that is *always* with me.’

Blue flame burst from her open palm, a rod of fire that solidified in her grasp to become the gleaming Spear of Teuthlas, the horrified expression of Sydari reflected in its golden blade.

Before the Lord-Guardian could react, Iyanna thrust the polearm, lancing it through the chest of Sydari, tip shearing through ribs, heart and spine without pause. In his death-throes she saw her father still, and wondered if he had looked the same when the conflagration from the torpedoes had engulfed her family.

As though a spell were broken, the Arienal coven closed on her again in an instant, but Iyanna’s thoughts were not of them. She leapt over Sydari’s falling corpse, propelling herself towards the Patriarch.

It rose out of the throne, flames erupting from its darkened flesh, iron-and-bronze chitin-shaped armour reflecting the inferno gleam. The Suin Dallae screeched its own bloodlust as the Patriarch hauled its bulk from the iron chair, hampered by its unnatural hybrid form. Neither demigod nor alien broodfather, the Patriarch was not comfortable in its own body and slashed a clumsy blow, the burning head of its weapon passing well clear of the spear of Teuthlas raised to defend against it.

‘You are an abomination in every sense,’ snapped Iyanna, ducking beneath a claw tip. ‘Gods and fiends both disown you!’

The auric-edge of her weapon caught its chest, setting free a gout of sparks that turned to pattering droplets of alien ichor. Iyanna dodged another swiping claw-blow, narrowly avoiding the throne as she darted past the Patriarch. Its backswing was faster, catching a glancing blow against her shoulder, setting a blaze of psychic fire burning from her armour, a resonant flare of power setting fire to Iyanna’s thoughts.

It had another weapon though, more powerful than even the spear of a wargod.

For a heartbeat Iyanna felt the intake of power, the sudden vacuum as the Patriarch absorbed the psychic latency of the groupmind, syphoning away the vestigial thoughts of all the aeldari that comprised it. The Arienali stumbled and shuddered. Some cried out, others gasped in ecstasy as their wicked master took their psychic power into itself.

The blunt force of the psychic attack hurled Iyanna sideways through the air, to crash her against the remnants of the inner sanctum’s fleshy wall. The impact sent coruscations of white and green power scything across the embrace of her

runic armour while talons of pure psychic energy tried to shred her thoughts and a silent wail of alien malignancy shuddered through her senses.

Iyanna knew better than to fight the force of the groupmind. She knew the power there, and could no more resist its battering waves than she could hold back a starship with her hand. But she had been within, had seen its structure and purpose, and knew that it was as much a part of Zaisuthra itself as it was the Zaisuthrans and the Patriarch.

And somewhere out there, through the crackle of alien minds and corrupted aeldari spirits, her companions, the Ynnari were dying.

She felt the wisps of their escaping spirits, like a vortex around Yvraine, the emissary herself a stalagmite-like pillar of ice among the swirl, the blood-hued dagger of the Visarch by her side.

Iyanna knew nothing of the unfolding battle, only that there was death on both sides. For each loss of the Zaisuthrans, the groupmind was diminished.

For every Ynnari death...

Iyanna let her thoughts fold into themselves, creating a short-lived psychic implosion. Within the storm of the groupmind, targeted by the Patriarch's assault, Iyanna became a lode for the departing aeldari spirits. Through her, through the tissue-memory of the craftworld itself, the power raged, spreading frost and numbness where they passed.

It was not enough and Iyanna reached out, sending barbs of thought out into the groupmind, piercing and prodding, anchoring her thoughts with slender hooks in the soul of her sister-of-the-dead, a silver chain linking their minds.

'Yvraine!' Iyanna called out, the words giving impetus to the thoughts. 'The Whispering God rises.'

The brushing contact from Iyanna set Yvraine's soul afire. Like a bridge across a dark chasm, a piercing beacon in the depth of night, the spiritseer's thoughts reached out through the murk of the groupmind. More than that, she opened up her thoughts to Yvraine, every fibre of her mortal being attuned to the forces of the dead.

The sudden influx of power from across Zaisuthra, fuelled by dying Ynnari in the Highlands of Distant Repose, struck Yvraine like a thunderbolt. She lit like an oil-soaked brand, white fire engulfing her from head to foot.

The dead raged and screamed in her thoughts, their raw force twisting inside her skin, tearing at her heart, drowning her lungs with their agony. Quivering, teeth in a rictus, Yvraine held in the power. It crawled along her nerve endings

and sent flickers of colour dancing across her vision but she would not let the unbound fury of the dead leave her.

Iyanna was there still, as though holding out a hand, all but her pale fingers lost in the darkness of the groupmind.

Yvraine realised what the spiritseer intended, saw that her mind was inside the monstrous brood-thoughts of the genestealers. Her words drifted through and Yvraine regained focus.

‘Ynnead rises,’ echoed the Opener of the Seventh Way.

Yvraine did not release the fires of the dead, but channelled it in, deep down through her own soul into the abyss where the Whispering God awaited. She became the fulcrum of a psychic lever between realms, her mind the axle upon which fate turned for a heartbeat.

Silently shrieking, the vengeful dead incarnate, the Yncarne rose up from its somnolence, conjured into being by the death cries of Ynnead’s faithful.

It clawed at the threads between immaterial and material, trying to weave for itself a form with which to smite the enemies of the Whispering God. Yvraine did not allow it, her thoughts a barrier to its incarnation, and in return she received a blistering wave of anger-heat washing through her.

She took the pain and shared it with Iyanna, the sister-of-the-dead drawing away the ire of the Yncarne with the chill of the tomb.

Yvraine flexed her thoughts, pulling the Yncarne into the material realm through her own body, a scream wrenched from her lips, every fibre singing with razor pain as the manifesting entity passed through her.

She let the rising power flow on, from her thoughts into those of Iyanna, passing the Yncarne’s emerging soul as one might pour water from one vessel to the next.

As the last vestiges of the god of the dead’s avatar slipped out from her senses, Yvraine saw through its presence into the heart of the groupmind. For an instant she witnessed the constellation of thousands of aeldari thoughts, bound together by the grotesque matrix of Zaisuthra’s half-living body, the nodes of the purestrain genestealers, their minds like black firelight.

The Opener of the Seventh Way felt a surge of joy as Iyanna released the Yncarne, not into the physical plane but into the essence of the groupmind itself.

Like electricity along a circuit, the chill touch of the Dead One flared and multiplied across the reeling psychic network. Dagger icicles of the Whispering God’s wrath arrowed through the minds of the Zaisuthrans and speared into the

alien thoughts of the genestealers.

The craftworld shuddered, a great upheaval that sent Ynnari and Zaisuthran alike stumbling and seeking support. A hideous moan, born in the mind not the ear, rumbled through the domes and arterial ways, the ground shuddering and walls bowing as the vibration passed from the hub to the outer rim.

Triumphant, the Yncarne raged through the bio-crystalline vessels of Zaisuthra, feeding on the soul-matter that permeated the artificial organs and arteries. The Whispering God's avatar smote down all resistance, crashing through the barriers of the genestealers' brood-presence, its birth-thrashing sending ripples of destruction across the craftworld.

Artificial stars fell from domed skies, bringing fiery ruin to the hillside towns and mountain fastnesses below. Explosions blossomed, as bright as noon, until a few heartbeats later their energy was spent and a disquieting dusk befell Zaisuthra.

The Yncarne roared and howling winds raged across dunes and tundra, becoming the death scream of Zaisuthra. Forests toppled and seas bucked, tidal waves and hurricanes sweeping away thousands of aeldari in their torrents and storms.

Great crevasses tore open the towers of Sundervale, plunging halls and bridges and hundreds of members of the House of Arienal into the spasming crystal structure far below. Cruel laughter met their demise, the Yncarne supping upon soulstuff wrenched from the protective enclave of the groupmind.

No part of Zaisuthra was spared the cataclysm, the catastrophe every part as destructive and deadly as the birth-throes of the Yncarne that had fractured the craftworld of Biel-tan. To Ynnead went all, the souls of the loyal and the uncaring equally; to the Whispering God all spirits returned.

It was a divine deliverance, one that was perhaps more than the Zaisuthrans deserved for their perfidy. Having traded their souls to their alien invader, perhaps not willingly but knowingly, they had eluded She Who Thirsts for a time. In the bosom of Ynnead they would know the peace of eternal rest, a foretaste of the future of all aeldari should Yvraine's plan come to fruition and Ynnead was fully awoken.

Even in the bowels of Zaisuthra the Yncarne's devastation was felt. The floor rocked and the walls buckled, scattering the combatants of both sides.

Around the Opener and across the craftworld, the Zaisuthrans screamed, adding their cries to the voiceless dismay of their home. They flailed and staggered, hands held to their heads, retching and shrieking as the core of the groupmind

was shredded by the ice-claws of Ynnead's revenge.

Genestealers hissed and skittered about in mindless instinct, flailing claws at the floor and walls, twitching and rolling as raw aeldari power flooded their alien skulls.

The whine of anti-grav engines at full throttle drowned out the keening wind as Meliniel and his remaining warriors soared over the undulating moors. Their swift jetbikes, raiders and wave serpents had left behind the more sedate transports of the Zaisuthrans but ornithopter gunships swooped after them.

Beak-prows parted to reveal laser-spitting cannons, the Zaisuthran flyers opened fire. Flashes of red and blue sparked past the fleeing Ynnari, confounded by the criss-cross of skyweavers and voidweavers from the Masque of Midnight Sorrow, the aim of their pursuers thrown awry by the Harlequins' holofields and mirage launchers.

Meliniel winced as a salvo caught one of the other raiders, screeching along its length in a series of detonations, tossing Howling Banshees to the ground blurring past below. The transport veered sharply and crashed into an outcrop of rock, bladed shards of armour and grav-engine scattered over the hillside.

'This is all well for now,' said Azkahr beside him on the deck of a raider. 'But we cannot flee indefinitely. At some point we are going to run out of dome.'

'Sometimes it is not important where you are running to,' replied the autarch. 'Only what we are running from. Adapt. That is the greatest lesson I have learned from the Ynnari. Death waits for us all, it is not wise to plan too far ahead.'

The Highlands of Distant Repose reverberated to a crack louder than any thunder Meliniel had ever heard. From the aftdeck of the raider, he looked up to see storm clouds roiling unnaturally across the twilight sky. He thought he saw a face carved by the billowing mass, half aeldari, half daemoniac. The face of the Yncarne.

'Was that...' began Azkahr, but his words were cut short by another ear-splitting crash.

Lightning lashed down from the raging storm, blasts of black that earthed through the circling ornithopters, setting artificial flesh and feathers ablaze. A pulse of light drew the eye back to Withershield.

The ground beneath the manse and towers erupted as though upon a black-fired volcano. It was not boiling magma that exploded from the ground, but a coruscation of raging souls. Hundreds-strong, the deceased vortex shattered the

buildings, casting the stones far out upon the hillsides, crushing hybrids and genestealers beneath a rain of blocks and bricks.

Swirling, the dead became a towering whirlwind, dragging in gunships and transports, hurling boulders and trees through the dazed squads of Zaisuthrans. In the centre of the tornado Meliniel saw again the grim figure of the Yncarne, drawn in the blur of detritus and spinning corpses.

On the moorlands about the broken ruins the Zaisuthrans were in disarray, many of them struck down by some invisible hand, others running to and fro in panic.

‘Now is our chance,’ said Meliniel. ‘We must strike while they are reeling.’

‘I thought we were running away?’ said Azkahr. He pointed to one of the nearby dome gates, half hidden by an upheaval of earth and splintered rock.

‘Adapt,’ replied Meliniel. A laugh of relief escaped before he regained some measure of self-control. ‘Adapt and survive. All wings, counter-attack!’

‘Kill them all!’ raged Yvraine, her command directed not only to the Yncarne wreaking havoc and despair, but through its presence into the minds of every Ynnari. Like a siren, her thoughts soared from the confines of the groupmind, reaching out to the crews still upon the ships, alighting in the spirit-slumber of the wraith-dead legion that waited there.

And fey was the mood of the Ynnari, merciless as they put gun and blade to use against the devastated and disorientated Zaisuthrans. With each that died the groupmind dwindled, every escaping soul now swelling the disembodied Yncarne. Like a parasite with tendrils set into every artery of its host, the avatar of the Whispering God absorbed the escaping soulstuff, wringing every drop of strength from each aeldari and alien death, syphoning away the immense lifeforce of Zaisuthra itself.

Yvraine gloried in the triumph. She was the Yncarne and her fingers and limbs were its incorporeal reach. She felt the craftworld buckling under the twisting grip of her hatred, energy fields flickering into nothing, exposing domes to the freezing, airless void. Thousands more died in moments, another huge upswell of power for Ynnead, and as it flooded her mind and body she rose up, gown aflame with white fire, eyes a pale blaze.

The Yncarne demanded more, demanded the spirit of Zaisuthra in return for the agony the craftworld had caused.

Yvraine fought back the Ynnead-born, straining against its wild death-lust. The Doom of Zaisuthra craved every particle of soulstuff, its hunger as deep as the

chasm of She Who Thirsts.

The Opener of the Seventh Way almost lost herself in the bottomless gulf of the Whispering God.

She remembered the oblivion of Starshone's test, the nothingness that had engulfed her. Had it been a foresight of this moment, or simply an abstraction of her hopes and dreams?

Thinking on that moment focused Yvraine's thoughts, separating her mortal aeldari mind from the tempest of the Yncarne. With the separation came growing clarity, but it was hard to concentrate, to step back from the abyss that beckoned.

A red-masked helm swam in her vision.

The past, half remembered.

Fleeing for her life, pursued through the streets of Commorrhagh. A crimson warrior who fought in the same manner as her former exarch, his blade a flashing thing of beautiful lethality. Words, softly spoken, sincere but with an edge of humour.

'I am simply called the Visarch, for I cast aside my name long ago, but it would be very familiar to you. Yvraine of the Biel-tani, our paths join once more.'

And older still, recollections from a life so distant now it could have belonged to another. That same dancing sword, upon a dozen battlefields, the death of hundreds. But more than just bloodshed. Cycles spent in peace, a brief tranquility snatched from the chaos that had been her life before and since. Quiet repose in the shrine of the Silvered Blade.

A different sort of peace swept through her, the silence of the tomb. It quenched the ire of the Yncarne that goaded her to lash out at the dying Zaisuthrans.

'Mistress! Would you see us all dead?' The Visarch's voice cut through the euphoria. 'Would you destroy that which we sought?'

She resisted, turning the Whisper against the Yncarne, corralling its power even as she regained her mortal senses and understood how close she had come to destroying everything.

Yvraine turned her eye to the Gate of Malice, its runes but a fitful gleam in the twilight of the hall. If Zaisuthra died entirely, so too their path to the Well of the Dead.

She became aware of her immediate surroundings, and floated gently back to the floor as the energy of the Whisper departed. The gates about her were dim, their essence sucked dry by the demigod unleashed within the psychic matrix that sustained them. In a last fleeting glimpse into the Yncarne's otherworldly senses she saw starships spitting forth shuttles and gunships, the companies of

the Ghost Halls descending towards the broken craftworld.

‘It is done,’ she said, almost collapsing as she let the presence of Ynnead fall from her as one might let slip a coat to the floor. She shed its power with a sigh, the Visarch there to support her with a hand beneath her arm.

For one heartbeat, then another she felt the Whisper a-quiver with receding power.

And then silence.



CHAPTER 28

SAVING IYANNA

The purging of Zaisuthra continued. In the void beyond the domes and defence fields *Ynnead's Dream* and the other starships of the Ynnari levelled weapons batteries and torpedoes at the attendant fleet of the craftworld.

The Opener of the Seventh Way remained at the Hall of Gates. With the groupmind shattered she was able to feel her Ynnari again, a reassuring wash of souls dedicated to Ynnead. The Whisper linked her to them and they to her, though it was on conventional messenger-waves that she contacted Meliniel and the others.

‘Let nothing of this taint survive,’ Yvraine commanded her followers, referring to the genestealer infestation that had waylaid the aeldari. ‘Not one of these aliens or savages escapes.’

Across the craftworld itself, the Ynnari and hosts of the Ghost Halls swept through chamber and moorland, mountain valley and audience hall, breaking towers and bringing ruin to all that they encountered. They broke open the structure of Zaisuthra itself, exposing the malignant arteries of the groupmind, of withered vines of black and plates of bruised crystal left near lifeless by the ravages of the vengeful Yncarne – the Whispering God’s avatar now departed, its thirst for souls eventually sated.

Wraithlords set upon the survivors with gleaming blades and the burning energy of brightlances and firepikes. Wraithblade and wraithguard cohorts marched alongside coterie of wyches and squads of aspect warriors to clear all presence of the Zaisuthrans from subterranean palaces and floating sky-temples.

They toppled the statues and shrines also, feeling nothing but loathing for those that had erected the monuments and cathedrals to the memory of dead gods, their

worship nothing more than a delusional mask for the alien dominance that had taken them generations past.

The Visarch led one of the companies, his Coiled Blade and a handful of aspect warriors at his back. Vindication fuelled him, the thought that he had waited idly for the Zaisuthrans to spring their attack like a thorn that worried at his thoughts.

Complacency had almost seen them doomed and the former exarch expunged his residual guilt with the blood of those who had wronged his people.

It mattered not that many were unwitting in the scheme that had ensnared the Ynnari. Few had gone willingly into the embrace of alien corruption, but all were touched by it. Zaisuthra itself, the streets and bridges, the rivers and rocks, was sick with the tyrannid taint, and none were more aghast at this than Telathaus and Iyasta. Too strong were the memories of the destruction brought to their home, and too righteous their mood to bring equal devastation to the legacy of the genestealers. While the Ynnari slew the mortal remnants of the enslaving cartel, the two warlocks dragged into the purging light the last shadows of the groupmind.

Iyanna... did nothing.

Yvraine found her in the Temple of the Patriarch, standing among the Zaisuthran dead, her spear held to one side, gaze distant.

She was physically and spiritually spent by the battle and the drain of unleashing the Yncarne into the groupmind, but it was emotionally that the fatigue hung most heavily.

There was barely a flicker of recognition for the sister-of-the-dead, and though the Opener of the Seventh Way reached out with hand and mind, and spoke words of condolence and comfort, the spiritseer gave no response.

Concerned, Yvraine passed word for Althenian to attend them, in the knowledge that the former exarch knew her better than any other and shared an even greater bond than she.

When the wraithlord entered the hall, his first look was to the throne of Khaine and the blasted remains of the Patriarch slumped before it.

‘On thin thread, most slender of the crone’s weave, hung our fate,’ he told Yvraine. ‘A great debt, owed by all to Iyanna, for this chance. A great debt that not a life of account could repay.’

‘You are right, and I fear she pays the cost afresh,’ said Yvraine, guiding his attention to the inert spiritseer. ‘Not casually do we share our thoughts with the darkness of the alien soul. She touched something powerful and diseased and

allowed it into her spirit so that we could strike back. I think we have lost her to the groupmind.'

'She is safe,' said the wraithlord, crouching beside the unmoving seer. A massive hand gently touched the breastplate of her armour, palm upon the glowing waystone set there. 'I will bring her back to you, I promise.'

The air was thick with smoke, light grey plumes that rose from the burning ruin of the temples. Along the vast length of the street all had been engulfed by the conflagration. The porticoes and domes had fallen, the statues toppled by the blasts that had wracked the Street of the Dead.

Iyanna wandered the ruination, clothed in tattered rags, tears streaking the soot that coated her face. Life fluid, crimson and hot, dripped from her fingers in a grotesque mimicry of Bloody-Handed Khaine. Her bare feet stepped upon shards of shattered bone and slivers of sharp crystal but she felt nothing.

She felt nothing.

Such could be said for everything about her.

As Iyanna looked at the fallen mausoleums and stepped over the broken rubble of her ancestors' memory she had eyes only for the horizon, where a burning spear thrust into the sky like a rising sun.

Her toe caught on something and she finally looked down.

Her father's face, absent the tip of his nose and an ear, looked back up at her, a crack running from chin to the corner of his right eye.

In the next instant she saw him whole and alive, and standing before her, smiling, offering kinship and hope and comfort.

'A lie,' she murmured.

She did not believe her own testimony. It was too visceral to ignore.

But the face was not her father's. It was Sydari's. And he... What had he been? A distant uncle? A severed cousin?

She mused on the detail for the moment, seeking distraction from the truth.

He had been family. They had been of the House of Arienal.

And she had doomed them all.

She stooped to pick up the broken head but stopped, her tears falling onto the sculpted eyes, making them glisten as if also crying. Iyanna's fingers traced the curve of the jaw, remembering.

Iyanna felt a presence behind her, burning, close, familiar. In the droplet of a tear she saw the distorted reflection of her visitor. A figure of shadow with fire for eyes, of smoke given form.

‘You have finally come back for me, Kaela Mensha Khaine,’ she said, closing her eyes. ‘You let none walk free from your grasp.’

Feel no guilt. They died not at your demand, Iyanna, said her companion, his voice soft and compelling. *Heed my words. Blood is not upon your hands, they are clean. This was fated, a doom set into motion, before we lived.*

‘They are all dead, Althenian,’ Iyanna replied, rising, opening her eyes, the emptiness replaced with a mournfulness so deep it threatened to drown her.

Yes they are. They have been taken from you. Yet you live.

The simple admission was more powerful than any platitude or sympathy. It was acceptance, and from it came strength and from the strength came a strange comfort. Not hope. Hope was for poets. Simply determination, resolution that even without hope not all was lost.

All are dead, but it is not the end yet, Iyanna. We fight on. We are the ghost warriors. Ynnari.



CHAPTER 29

THE GATE OF MALICE

They stood before the Gate of Malice and there was not one, not even the dead, that did not feel the hot wrath of the war god flowing from its metal. The runes of Kaela Mensha Khaine wrought into the crossed blades of the gateway flickered with fire and the air between writhed as though tortured by heat. The smell of blood hung about the dire portal, the black marble step upon which it sat veined with crimson.

Its glow fell upon the featureless domes of the wraithnobles, the Houseless such as Althenian arrayed behind them. In the corridors and chambers around the Hall of Gates the hosts of the Ghost Halls waited for the command of their leaders, as did the Ynnari army hanging on the word of Yvraine. Only absent were Iyasta and Telathaus. With all hope of alliance with Zaisuthra destroyed, the twins had excused themselves of any further involvement in ‘this sorry mess’ and had returned to their ship with the handful of survivors from their escort. Their presence was not missed by the Ynnari.

The Opener of the Seventh Way stood before its bleak majesty, the Sword of Sorrows bared, her war fan held across her face, shielding her mouth from the wash of vapours that coiled from the energised portal.

‘It fed on their deaths,’ said Yvraine, meaning the Zaisuthrans.

‘No, Ynnead took that power,’ countered the Visarch. ‘Death holds no lure for Khaine, only the taking of life. The soul departed is the ephemera of our lives cast aside, and that goes to Ynnead. The Bloody-Handed, he is more desiring of the act, the moment when mortality is cleaved in half, when violence breaks the bond.’

‘Bloodshed, then,’ said Iyanna. The gate let out a low moan, echoing the words

from her, indistinct but perverted with cruel intonation.

‘War, murder, it matters not,’ said the Visarch. ‘The slaughter we have perpetrated must echo loud through the halls of time.’

‘Not least that perversion of Khaine’s Avatar that died by your hand, sister,’ said Yvraine.

She had looked upon the grotesque corpse of the Patriarch and marvelled at the fusion of alien beast and metaphysical demigod. The fusing of immaterial and material made her wonder more about herself, about the energies she channelled when she summoned the Yncarne. She had brought forth the manifestation of the Whispering God, drawn the Yncarne from the place between worlds where it had been born among the death throes of Biel-tan, there had been a moment when she had not known any barrier. She and the Yncarne had been one.

Was it possible that the fate that awaited her in the blooding of the five croneswords was not simply the waking of Ynnead but her own personal transformation into something beyond mortal? Not simply Reborn, but Ascended?

It was like Yvraine to think of such a grandiose becoming, to accept the death of her species yet expect remarkable destiny for herself. But it was not purely selfishness that drove these thoughts. Time and again it seemed that since her awakening in the Crucibael Yvraine had been destined for something more than to share the quiet death of her people. She was an emissary of a god, after all.

‘Life and death.’ Runes cut the air with a hiss as the wraithseer Kelmon Firesight moved from the group of tall constructs. ‘Beyond, if myth is to be believed, lies the Well of the Dead. Who can say what that name foretells?’

‘A seer, maybe?’ muttered the Visarch.

Kelmon turned on Yvraine’s champion, runes spinning faster, swirling around the warrior and seer, binding them together in a blur of flashing psychic trails.

‘I cannot look past death, foolish creature,’ Kelmon said slowly. ‘Nor into the depths of legend. If we are to believe what has been written, we step through to the burial place of Eldanesh. More than that, to the site where bloody Khaine struck him down. It is not simply a resting place, it is a nexus of fate.’

He moved to Yvraine, his shadow chilling after the prickling heat from the Gate of Malice. A single rune, of the Blood God, swayed back and forth in front of the Opener of the Seventh Way, hypnotising as it spun about its axis, alternating colours of bone, shadow and blood.

‘Ynnead controls power over the dead. I must ask again the question raised by the Souseeker, Lord Aethon. What do you hope to find on the other side? If you

would resurrect the ancient dead, think carefully on what you bring back. If Ynnead should rise, would other gods return?’ Kelmon waved a broad hand, indicating the other gates arrayed about the group. His hand came to rest, a finger pointing up to the rune of Khaine that smoldered in the ceiling above them. ‘Not all gods wish our people well.’

‘A sword,’ said Yvraine. ‘I seek the cronesword. Nothing more.’

Kelmon withdrew, leaving Yvraine stood before the baleful portal once more. She took a step, and then another, heart beating faster and faster as she approached.

She was three strides from the base of the gate when the Visarch intercepted her. He shook his head.

‘You are not stepping through first,’ he declared. ‘We have no idea what lies beyond, if anything at all.’

‘I would ask no other to do what I would not,’ said Yvraine. ‘Stand aside, my champion.’

The Visarch did not move. Alorynis raked claws across the metal of his greaves, the screech of their touch jarring the nerves of all present that drew breath.

‘Together, if you must,’ conceded Yvraine, indicating for the Visarch to step to her side. Behind, the surviving Bloodbrides and Coiled Blade moved closer, joined by the blue-armoured warriors of the Silvered Blade Dire Avengers. The soulbound.

Blades held before them, they stepped onto the plinth and, together, passed into the hot wind that sighed around them in greeting.

Transition was near-instant, the Visarch realised. There was no traversing of the webway, simply stepping from Zaisuthra to... this place. He had expected something more, perhaps a ring of fire, a clarion of harsh trumpets. For a journey of such import it struck him as underwhelming.

The heat from the gate did not dissipate as the Visarch felt his tread sink into soft sand. Everything was harsh, from the bright red sky to the dryness of the air, to the shrill keen of a sharp wind across his armour.

A faltering breath reminded him of Yvraine at his side. The Opener of the Seventh Way held her fan across her face, deflecting the particles of sand carried in the air – particles he had not even noticed, enclosed within his warsuit.

He took another step, the sketch of sand shifting beneath his tread. The Visarch’s eyes adjusted to the glare and he made out dunes of dark red. The

desert seemed endless, stretching in every direction to the horizon, where it bled into the sky with barely a change in hue.

The sound of footsteps caused him to move forwards, to make room for those coming through the portal behind. A shadow fell over him and he did not need to turn to recognise the shape of Althenian, the far smaller shadow of Iyanna at the wraithlord's side.

More came, the soulbound bodyguard of Yvraine. Their arrival through the heat shimmer was like a mirage taking shape, first a vague movement that then became an outline, which eventually resolved into solid figures, as though emerging from a great distance though the gate was no more than a dozen paces away.

A murmur of discontent and several shouts of dismay escaped the throats of the hardened fighters, even those of his former shrine on Biel-tan and the battle-sworn of the incubi. Taken aback, the Visarch took a moment to realise that they were staring almost directly up.

He turned then, to see the gate behind. From this side it was a black obelisk, easily ten times his height, tapering to a point far above his head. There was not a mark upon its surface, only the telltale glimmer of the heat wash to betray the portalway.

He continued to follow their gazes and saw the reason for their dismay.

Directly above the monolith hung a red moon, its surface pocked with craters, edged by a halo of what seemed to be dark flame. Its presence loomed on the thought as well as in the eye, a weight that settled upon the minds of all that looked upon it, oppressive and unkind. It sucked in all vitality, leeching the energy from the sky.

Looking too long upon the sight inverted one's perception, so that instead of looking up at an object against the sky, one was looking down into terrible depths.

The Well of the Dead.

The Visarch trembled to look upon it, despite all thought and experience to the contrary. It was beyond reasoning, beyond training and any appeal to willpower or discipline. It was raw fear. Jaw clenched, he tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword and felt sweat run down his cheek – though it may have been a tear.

Not any red moon this, but the Red Moon of darkest legend; the orb stained by the blood of Eldanesh. Throughout aeldari culture it had been an ill sign, a portent of disaster even to those in Commorrhagh and the outcasts, a symbol so ingrained in the spirit-memory of his people that even reference in poetry or

representation in art brought a cold shudder.

He heard a gasp and turned just in time to see Iyanna almost faint. Althenian caught the seer, stooping swiftly despite his immense frame.

‘Poor sister,’ said Yvraine, and the Visarch recalled how the spiritseer’s family had been wiped out during the ill-named Battle of the Red Moon – not just her kin but the spirits of her ancestors eradicated.

More and more Ynnari marched out of the heat haze, directed by Meliniel, dispersed to defensive positions around the gate-stone. Their disquiet was evident, not just in their whispers and glances, but the hunch of shoulders, the manner in which they held themselves taut.

Meliniel moved to join Yvraine as the air about the monolith churned darkly, stuttering almost, a shadow played about the sands that had not been there before. Hands moved to weapons and all eyes were drawn to the sputtering web portal.

They relaxed as more of the Ghost Hall cohort emerged. Their wraithbone bodies shimmered in the transition.

Gasps of surprise greeted them, as the dead-that-walk emerged from the shimmer, clad in forms not unlike those they had worn when alive, but rendered from psychoplastic. They were not alive, not flesh, but less like the abstract mannequins that had been fashioned for them by the bonesingers, into which shells Yvraine’s power had now permanently bound their souls.

Faces, the sketchiest of expressions, danced across domed heads, and limbs clad in a weave of strange skin were raised, fingers clad in not-flesh wriggled in surprise before eyes that were nothing more than deeper shadows upon the curve of their artificial skulls.

Surprised whispers, exclamations of shock and joy sounded from the dead legion, given strange voice by their transformation. They looked about, blessed with physical senses, many had not seen or heard as a mortal for several lifetimes.

Through them strode the wraithnobles, banners fluttering at their backs, pennants on their gun barrels and hanging from the hilts of swords. Sharing the celebration of their companies.

Kelmon emerged, and like Althenian, Lady Faenorith, Faristar Danceblade and the other greater spirits, their bodies were unchanged. Kelmon quickly marshalled the excited wraith companies, urging their leaders to maintain some semblance of order despite this unusual turn of events.

Discipline had to be quickly restored, for in transforming to an approximation

of mortality the frailties of the living had also been returned. At Kelmon's direction the assembled Houses formed cohorts and squads, mingled with the forces of Meliniel to guard against whatever other unknowns might arise from the remarkable world in which they found themselves.

'I cannot believe it,' said Yvraine, kneeling to run her slender fingers through the fine blood-red grains by her feet. 'Can it be true, that we walk upon Firstworld?'

'A version of it,' Kelmon replied. 'A facsimile, perhaps, or the world itself transported into a different sphere. The world was lost during the War in Heaven, antiquity even before the Fall. Given the means by which we came here, it was moved, or fell, into the webway when the gods clashed.'

'Or fell further.' This disturbing conjecture came from Idraesci Dreamspear, who stepped lightly across the sands, his troupe close upon his heel. 'There are places outside the webway where lost worlds might settle.'

'The Eye of Terror,' said Yvraine darkly, standing up. She scattered the sand from her palm and gazed about with narrowed eyes. 'I had not thought, or I might have delayed further our entry. It is fresh in the memory that we barely escaped our last journey into the Womb of Destruction.'

'Nothing is certain but the fading of glory and the treachery of our hearts,' said Dreamspear, clasping a hand to his breast as though struck through.

'Where trod the gods themselves, and the first dominions began,' said Iyanna, who had recovered her composure after the shock of seeing the baleful red moon.

'Where it ended,' laughed Dreamspear. He pirouetted, a flamboyant wave of the hand encompassed the desolation around them. 'The first time, at the least. You know, we are a sorry people, so long of history yet short of memory. To lose one empire might be considered unfortunate. To lose two... carelessness.'

'An absence,' said Althenian, even his deep voice lost in the vastness, his spirit-tone dissipated into the endless wastes. 'That which we came here to find, where is it? The tomb hall, of Khaine's first murdered victim, Eldanesh?'

'I do not desire to trek across an entire world seeking it,' said Yvraine. 'We should bring through transports and...'

She trailed off as an almost imperceptible shudder quivered through the dunes.

The Visarch felt something else, a brightness behind the eyes, the sudden quickening of the pulse. It was a sensation he remembered well, when in the past he had donned his war mask in the shrine of the Silvered Blade, or faced a challenger in the Chambers of the incubi.

His nostrils filled with the scent of blood – an intoxicating aroma that reminded him of so many battles. The recollection flashed through him, a dizzying montage of slaughter and vitality, of life and death a blade's width apart, of dancing along the precipice between joy and despair.

The souls within his armour – within him – writhed and contorted at the memories, sharing their own deaths and triumphs until the ground whirled about and the crash of battle rang in his ears.

Through the battle haze he saw the sands ahead piling up into an immense mound, and then spilling away, revealing pale stone pitted by an age of erosion. From the depths of the sands the edifice surfaced, ruddy drifts cascading between pillars and sliding from the shallow slope of many-tiered roofs.

A fey light played about the domed summit of the building, burning blue against the scarlet sky, forming the shape of a rune in the air. A rune that all recognised immediately.

The sigil of Eldanesh, the First, Father of the Aeldari.



CHAPTER 30

THE WELL OF THE DEAD

Yvraine grinned as the tomb revealed itself, three storeys of windowless walls surrounded by a columned plaza, ringed about by shallow steps. A doorway, square and unadorned, broke the smoothness of the lower wall, beneath a lintel inscribed with a language so old that none present could read it.

Her heart soared at the thought of being so close to her prize. She could feel something powerful within, a force beyond nature harboured within plain-cut stone. The sand underfoot fell away, revealing a paved road between the monolith of the portal and the flight of steps leading up to the tomb, barely three hundred paces between them.

The horizon had changed also. No longer desert unending, their environs had resolved into dark rock, split and sundered many times by crevasses from which the flickering light of flame issued. Smog bubbled forth from tar pits heated by the raging earth below and towering mountains with flame-ripped summits belched forth sulphurous billows of darkness. The bright trails of lava down their flanks wrote battleverses in the ancient runes of the aeldari, each flow an ode to conquest, a sonnet to the love of slaying.

Yvraine barely registered the changes, her thoughts fixed upon her goal. She started forwards, calling for her followers to advance. Sensing hesitation, she turned after several steps, wondering what was amiss.

The Ynnari seemed paralysed, some of them frozen in contortions of ecstasy and horror, others staring numbly at the impossibly ancient mausoleum that had risen from the sands. Some of them had glares of feral rage contorting their faces, threads of saliva hanging from their bared teeth. Many were shaking, tormented, fighting something within, their expressions veering between hunger

and terror, grunts and moans escaping tight lips.

The not-dead seemed as bemused as she, turning this way and that, observing the strange conniptions and reactions of their living comrades. Kelmon hurried away, striding into the dunes that flanked the road, his runes trailing behind aflame with power.

‘Something stirs. Can you not feel the hot wind, Khaine’s presence?’ Althenian asked, voice oddly taut, the words sounding as though forced out between gritted teeth even though he required no breath to vocalise them.

‘Feel what?’ Yvraine had not the least idea of what he talked about, the only evidence that something was amiss being the actions of those around her. She was the Emissary of Ynnead, and under the geas of the Whispering God she alone of the living was immune to the siren call that sang in the minds of the others.

The Visarch was close at hand. Nothing could be seen of his face within his helm but his entire posture spoke of tension, hand close to the hilt of Asu-var but not quite gripping the weapon, the slightest quiver of the fingertips revealing a far more violent struggle beneath the surface.

The urge to kill was near overwhelming.

Laarian watched through a blood-red haze as Yvraine stepped closer, head cocked to one side in agitation and confusion.

Kinslayer.

The word echoed around his head and vibrated along his nerves, settling into the core of his being.

Kinslayer.

It was not an accusation – though it was true – but a title. A rank earned. A word of congratulation. Praise.

Kinslayer.

It was a plea. A demand. A command. A desire...

The Visarch’s fingers touched upon the crafted hilt of the Sword of Silent Screams and the instant of connection sang in his blood. The cronesword knew well the song that lifted him, that guided him to pull it free from its sheath. In desiring the knowledge of her own blood, Morai-Heg had given up her hand to Khaine, and the Bloody-Handed had cleaved it from her arm. The five digits of the fate goddess had been wrought into the Keys of the Dead, the croneswords that when united and blooded would open the Seventh Way and bring about the awakening of Ynnead.

The Whispering God slumbered still, His dreaming thoughts no match for the white hot fury of Khaine that rushed through the Visarch.

Kinslayer.

The word crashed like thunder and shook the ground, and it took a moment for Laarian to realise that the sound had not been in his thoughts but reverberated down the slabs of the road, echoing from where the immense doors of the grave-temple had slammed open. Something gleamed in the darkness within, flickering dully like a flame behind smoked glass.

KINSLAYER!

Laarian pulled back his sword, its edge licked with a flame that matched the burning in his heart. He saw the course of blood through the vessels of Yvraine, the vital fluid that pulsed and flowed and kept her alive. So simple a thing, so easily spilt, so quickly ended.

The Visarch fought back. The Visarch, champion of Yvraine, warden of Ynnead, held off the blow, all the while the voice of Kaela Mensha Khaine screamed in his head.

A spark appeared in the dark of the tomb gate. An ember, swiftly growing in brightness, resolving into a blade of pure fire. It transfixed those that looked upon it, including Yvraine, who saw in the rippling flame an end of worlds and the power of stars dying. Her head swam with the thought of it, her body shook with lust to wield such a weapon, to unleash destruction untold.

The cold breath of Ynnead quelled the fire, like a frost on the nape of the neck, a chill that doused the ardour of bloodthirst roused by the creature that stepped forth from Eldanesh's resting place.

Like the avatars of Khaine trapped in the hearts of the scattered craftworlds, the being had flesh of magma and skin of pitted iron. Its face was a mask of fixed rage, eyes as twin chasms into the fiery depths of anger unbound. Two curling horns of shadow curled up from its brow, between them burned the rune of the Bloody-Handed, odious smoke trailing from it like a knight's crest.

This volcanic being was girded in armour of polished bone, sculpted and fused from rib and skull, vertebrae and clavicle, femur and sternum. Scratched into the ivory-colour plates were a thousand runes, each a subtle variation on the symbol of the Bloody-Handed, the Thousand Names of Hate by which He became known during the War in Heaven.

It raised a black fist sheathed in gore, the self-same curse of the Bloody-Hand laid upon Khaine by Asuryan for the slaying of Eldanesh. Yet this hand was not

empty, a heart beat within, the mortal organ of the founder of the first aeldari dominions. Fingers of shadow closed about the pulsing heart and the mortals arraigned before the infernal beast let out cries of pain and shock, as though their own bodies were crushed in the fierce grip.

The Warshard was its title, that benighted fragment of the war god drawn not by the survivors of the aeldari fleeing in their craftworlds, but the most bitter, hateful sliver of Khaine flung back to the site of His most infamous murder. All that saw the apparition of brutal death understood that they looked again at the closest thing to Khaine incarnate, of murder given immortal flesh.

It lifted the blade and screams of terror were torn from the mortal throats of those that witnessed it. As the Warshard was the most malevolent remains of the Bloody-Handed One, so it bore His most infamous weapon. *Anaris*, known as the Sword of Vault, the Splinter of Suns, the Widowmaker, the Spite of the Slain. The same blade that ended the life of Eldanesh, whose blood still hissed along its insubstantial edge.

Dread swelled out from the Warshard, a visible wind of wrath that kicked up the sand and swept over the assembled Ynnari. Overcome by grief, they dropped to their knees, or lifted hands to the air, letting weapons tumble from numb fingers. Agonised howls rose to the boiling clouds above, tears of despair fell to the parched ground.

In Meliniel's grip Ahz-ashir bucked and hissed as though he held a serpent by its tail, answering to the silent warcry of Anaris. The autarch stood tall while others around stumbled and flailed, silent where they sobbed and shouted. The roar of Khaine pounded in his ears, the heat of battle seared his body, but he remained placid, no stranger to the bloodthirst.

'Stand strong.' He did not bellow, but spoke the words calmly, using the messenger-waves to carry his voice across the host of the Ynnari. 'Trust in yourselves, in the power of Ynnead.'

'Autarch,' Kelmon replied. 'We must attack.'

The not-dead host advanced at a signal from the dead battleseer, forming squads and companies about their lords and ladies. Distort-scythes gleamed and heavy weapons turned towards the Warshard.

NONE SHALL SURVIVE!

The pronouncement by Khaine's dark soul sounded like the crash of ten thousand blades striking, the ring of sword on armour, the slam of tomb doors. It was greeted by fresh eruptions across the ring of volcanoes around the shrine-

tomb, their expulsions accompanied by the crash of thunder and flare of lightning in the ruddy clouds that covered the sky.

YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME. I AM SLAUGHTER, I AM CARNAGE. I AM WAR!

The Warshard thrust Anaris towards the Ynnari, a pulse of crimson light springing from the flames. Where the fey illumination fell the spirit of Khaine boiled, setting in the hearts of the afflicted. Guttural shouts tore the skies and the Khaine-touched beat their fists upon the ground and their chests.

THE BLOOD WILL FLOW!

Thus commanded, those bathed in the terrible flamelight of the Widowmaker turned their weapons upon their own, the whisper of splinter rifles and sigh of shuriken catapults setting the air trembling as they opened fire on their unliving comrades. The battlelust spread like a disease, passing from the mind of one to the next, a bloodthirst cancer that took Commorraghan and craftworlder equally.

Aspect warriors snarled and laughed and barked insanely, so long the acolytes of Khaine, bloody desires repressed now given free rein. The exarchs roared and snarled their praises to the Bloody-Handed as they bounded towards their victims. Wych and scourge, incubi and guardian turned upon each other in a sudden orgy of bloodletting, giving no thought to their own safety or survival.

The wraith-warriors defended themselves against their living attackers. Dimension-ripping whorls of distort-cannons and wraithcannons tore the air, ringed about with orange fire in this cursed place, their void-bound victims sucked into the burning heart of the cosmos. Firepikes hissed, reaper launchers crackled and distort-scythes flared, the bare rock awash with blood and littered with severed limbs, the fractured remnants of armoured wraithbodies and the glitter of scattered spirit stones.

Meliniel ran, dodging through the erupting cataclysm, skirting past melees and through crossfires of splinter and shuriken, intent upon the monstrous avatar that stood upon the threshold of the tomb.



CHAPTER 31

KHAINE'S BLOODY GIFT

It was the slightest of movements, a drop of the shoulder, a slight twisting of the foot that betrayed the Visarch's attack. Yvraine's instinct reacted before she did, throwing her aside as the Sword of Silent Screams parted the crest of her headdress where a heartbeat before her skull had been. She rolled over the roadway, a distracting flurry of gown and trail, the warfan flicking out to catch the edge of Asu-var, not hard, but enough to send the tip of the Visarch's enchanted sword clattering against the paving.

She regained her feet, Sword of Sorrows in hand, just in time to parry the next strike, diverting it from her midriff. She moved with the impact, cartwheeling sideways, her foot crashing against the chin of the Visarch's helm mid-wheel. She swept for his legs but he leapt over her kick, plunging the sword down towards her chest as he landed. Forced back a step, Yvraine deflected two more attacks until Alorynis pounced, to land on the thick fur cape of her foe, claws scratching frenziedly across his helm. He flung out a hand, tossing the creature aside without thought.

Self-loathing fuelled Laarian's blows as he thrust his sword at Yvraine's gut, lusting to see the entrails within spilt before the lord of murder's incarnation. The face of the creature churned in his vision, the same that had glowered at him from the mental reflection of his war mask, that had adorned the shadows of his incubi shrine. The ghost of the bloodthirst that had haunted his life took over, directing a vicious slash at Yvraine's shoulder, turned aside by the bladed edge of her warfan.

You are holding back.

The Warshard's admonition burned through him, setting agonising splinters rippling through his limbs. The pain spurred him on, fear turned to anger, desiring the ecstasy of release that would come with his mistress' death. In the shadows of his mind, in the depths beyond the hot fire of his rage, the invention known as the Visarch scrambled to break free of the net of dread that held it down.

Laarian pushed its mewling aside and took up his sword two-handed, switching style mid-strike. His next blow sent Yvraine reeling, retreating several paces under the force of his attack. Triumph filling his limbs with renewed vigour, he advanced after her, blade pointed at his prey.

Meliniel defended himself, using his spear to ward away the flurries of blows aimed at him by those under the sway of the Warshard's curse. He did not strike back, save to trip or disable, never to kill. It was not simply compassion that guided his fighting technique. All about washed the hatred and blood-desire of Khaine, and it was within him also, just below the surface. To slay now, in the heart of the battle-furnace, would be another offering to the war god, and Meliniel was not sure if he could resist the power that would unleash.

Deliberate restraint was anathema to the Bloody-Handed One, the only defence he had against the anarchy that reigned across the rocky battlefield.

He broke away from the general melee, heading towards the tomb. Atop the step the Warshard noticed his approach and brandished Anaris, a stream of fire erupting from the sword to splash across the armour of the autarch. Meliniel pushed on into the inferno, teeth gritted against the projected ire of Khaine as much the unceasing ferocity and heat of the avatar's assault. Like a knight of legend daring the dragonfire of his foe, Meliniel stepped with purpose, forcing himself into the near-fatal heat.

The cessation of the attack was as startling as its initiation. Meliniel almost stumbled, gripped by cold in the absence of the fire-fury. His vision was edged with white cloud, cast with the yellow of the flames, even the filters of his helm yet to recover from the brightness that had engulfed him. Blinking, he cleared his vision in time to see the Warshard set forth from the death-shrine of Eldanesh.

It bellowed, voice mouthing word-shapes, but to Meliniel's ears all that came was a rush of angry sound, not a single word of it distinguishable from the incoherent rage of a wronged child or the roar of a hunting beast. Sword of flame in hand, the Warshard bounded forwards, pounding down the steps, sparks and

rock splinters flaring where it trod on the dark stone.

Meliniel set himself, spear in both hands, awaiting the monster's charge, for charge it must, a creature of such murderous rage.

Being right made it no easier to stand his ground as the incarnation, three times his height, ran over the bare earth, each footfall a drumbeat call to war, the flames and shadows of its body trailing in the speed of its attack. Bone armour flashed in the light of the flickering storm above, the Thousand Names of Hate writ in curls of black fire.

The Warshard was less than a dozen gigantic strides away. Its dead gaze was fixed upon the autarch, the Widowmaker raised aloft for a terrible strike. Meliniel inhaled slowly, picking his spot, channelling his spirit into the blow he would unleash.

His last blow, he reasoned.

There was no means by which he could stop the Sword of Vault, that had slain the greatest aeldari heroes and laid low demigods of legend. He gave no thought to defending himself, and all thought to the strike he would make.

Fuelled by the knowledge of his inevitable and impending death, Meliniel was more awake than he had ever been. Every sense strained for a weakness, an opening in the bone armour, the slightest dimming of flame or paling of shadowform that betrayed a vulnerability. His mind raced, analysing, sweeping the body of his foe in its quest for something to attack. All else faded to nothing, the din of his warriors falling upon each other and the army of the dead, the blast of fusion guns, whine of shuriken and the hate-filled cries from those that had previously sworn kinship to one another.

Five paces distant, the Warshard started to swing its immortal blade.

Meliniel saw an opening beneath the arm, where no armour covered the gap, and calculated the angle at which a spear thrust would penetrate sideways up into the throat.

An assumption based on fighting mortal foes, it has to be said, and therefore no guarantee of slaying the immortal that bore down on him.

An assumption never tested, for even as he started to adjust his stride, a slender beam of blue energy erupted past him, slamming into the chest of the Warshard. Bone splintered and burned while god-flesh iron spattered in droplets of fire.

Darkness swathed Meliniel as a shadow passed over him. Something almost as large as the Warshard hurtled past with the speed and strength of a falling meteor, a flash of yellow and blue. A blade sheathed in black lightning rose to meet Anaris, a flare of soul-power coursing from its wielder through the

wraithsword. The blow fell aside, slashing hot air and nothing more.

Momentum carrying him onwards, Althenian slammed bodily into the Warshard, wraithbone frame crashing into bone-wrought plate with an impact as thunderous as the storm-claps that surged across the battlefield.



CHAPTER 32

KINSLAYER

The Warshard was a vacuum, a bleak hole in reality where pure hate had torn between realms. To the wraith-sight of Althenian it was a maelstrom of blackness, sucking in every shred of rage, every particle of hate and horror. It cast a long shadow across the Well of the Dead and where that cursed umbra fell, the minds of mortals were twisted, filled with a thirst for violence and murder like nothing of mortal origin.

As the wraithlord struck the incarnation of this immortal chasm of hate, he felt the hot blades of its wrath piercing both body and soul. To touch such a fell thing was to invite its cancerous abhorrence into oneself. Barbs of fire split open his mind even as the firebrand *Anaris* slammed against the shell of his torso, carving open wraithbone as though it were simply soft mortal flesh.

A bloody fist pounded into the open wound and Althenian felt himself lifted, even as he slashed down at the leering face of shadow and flame, laying the edge of his wraithblade against the skull and jaw of the immortal. Removed from physical sensation, the former exarch cared nothing for the damage wrought to his frame, nor for the deafening bellow of rage unleashed as the Warshard heaved the wraithlord bodily through the air. That shout resonated through the spirit-mire, daggers of hateful intent that left burning welts across the soul of Althenian.

He crashed to the ground amid splintering rock and splitting wraithbone. Tumbling, an arm came away, and his brightlance with it, while over and over he rolled. He put out steel-strong fingers and skidded to a stop, raking furrows in the dark stone. Althenian lay still for a moment, half twisted, trying to marry the whirling remnants of his physical being with the shout-addled peregrinations of

his spirit.

Mind and body came together just in time to see the Warshard bearing down on Meliniel again.

If the Warshard was a self-consuming storm of darkness, the autarch was a gleaming spark. Ghostlight rippled from his spirit, the touch of the Whispering God, the same that glowed across the aether, the illumination of the dead that burned from the warriors of the Ghost Halls. Though still living he was entirely of Ynnead, the peace of his soul the water to the Warshard's fire.

Althenian hauled himself up, wraithsword in hand. He raised the blade in challenge, the war cry that issued from his mouthless body scouring across the spirit realm as its echoes trembled through the physical plane.

Contempt flared from Khaine's anointed slayer, but it turned all the same, Anaris directed towards Althenian in answer to the wraithlord. Meliniel came on behind it, to be met with a backhanded sweep of its blood-crust hand that snapped his heirloom spear and sent him tumbling painfully across the rock. Intent upon Althenian, the Warshard advanced again, and the two met with shrieking blades.

The wraithsword shattered beneath the cutting edge of Anaris, shards of spirit-infused crystal slashing into the dome of Althenian's head. The blow of the Warshard continued, the tip carving a deep furrow into the wraithlord's shoulder, almost severing his remaining arm. The avatar's fist crashed into his chest again. Burning blood frothed into the injury, lava searing through internal systems and spirit-crystals in a welter of steam and melting wraithbone.

Pain the likes the spirit had never known scorched through him even as his body disintegrated into falling flecks of charred wraithbone and showering molten droplets.

Althenian screamed, a sound he had not uttered in life, not even at his death.

Yvraine realised swiftly that she was going to die. It took all of her speed, guile and skill to keep at bay the relentless attacks of her former tutor, who in an instant could change from butchering, cleaving blows to the most elegant footwork and swordplay, dependent upon which of his many souls he allowed to come to the fore. Pirouetting and ducking, leaping and parrying, Yvraine needed only the slightest cut from the Sword of Sorrows to penetrate his baroque armour, but was certain that no such blow would ever land. Though it seemed the Visarch gave no thought for his defence, so precise and efficient was his attack that it allowed no opportunity to strike. The instant Yvraine tried to

manoeuvre for a riposte he recognised her intent, switched stance or sword-hand, and attacked again with completely different technique.

All was falling to ruin about her. The air seethed with the escaping souls of dying Ynnari and broken spirit stones. Lamenting their demise, wailing the last thoughts that had passed through them in life, the wayward ghosts lapped against her, drawn to Ynnead's power.

Through it all coursed a river of fire from the Warshard, burning into every soul it touched, consuming the dead and igniting the passion of the living. A vortex of heat and hate, Khaine's fragment fed on the unfolding slaughter itself, even as Yvraine tried to draw on the power of the escaping lifestuff.

She rolled beneath a swinging attack, flailing with her gown to distract the Visarch as she regained her feet. Yvraine's warfan fluttered and wavered, constantly moving like a darting wasp, feigning attack while she retreated a step more. Always the Visarch advanced, never giving ground, always gaining. Each time she dodged or sidestepped, Yvraine was aware that she was being manoeuvred across the flat paving towards the more uneven ground of the solidified lava that flanked the road. There, just a chance slip would see her doomed.

The Opener of the Seventh Way had not thought herself immortal, not in the age-worn sense. She flowed with the power of Ynnead, set aside from the precipice of life and death to walk a different path. Watching the blade of her foe flash towards her, eluding its deadly touch by a hair's breadth, she had never considered treachery by her champion to be a possibility. That it would end her seemed faintly ridiculous, almost insulting.

There was nothing to be done though.

Except to trust in Ynnead.

She could see the fire of Khaine burning in the heart of the Visarch, rekindled by the proximity of the Warshard, given fresh life after an age dormant. All the while that it burned the Visarch would be Khaine's creature again. The souls of Ynnead's chosen shrieked their abhorrence of the Bloody-Handed's servant as they whirled about him, but he fought on blind to their approbation.

Only one power could extinguish that fire, but it was beyond Yvraine's reach.

Yvraine moved her hand aside as the Visarch's next blow seared towards her breast. The edge of Asu-var bit deep through gown and the runesuit beneath, hewing into her mortal flesh.

There was no pain. Ynnead had inured her to such consideration. But blood flowed freely, gushing from her wounded flank to stain her gown crimson,

puddling and spattering on the dark road.

She fell backwards, fan in one hand, the Sword of Sorrows still held tightly in the other, a fountain of her life fluid arcing from a severed artery as she collapsed.

Yvraine did not feel the ground as she hit. All was consumed by the icy grip of Ynnead, dulling sound and sight, touch and taste, so that it seemed as though she landed on a bed of welcoming pyre-ash.

Yvraine stared at the storm-wracked skies, and in the roiling clouds saw the face of her god.

Still dazed, Meliniel tried to rise, but a broken leg failed beneath him, leaving him clutching the wounded limb and cursing. Horror gripped the autarch as he saw the body of Althenian torn apart from within, plumes of fire detonating like artillery shells. He heard a wild shriek behind him and rolled over to see Iyanna sprinting through the morass of embattled warriors. Coming up beside him she hurled the Spear of Teuthlas like a javelin.

The eyes of both followed its arcing course towards the back of the Warshard. Meliniel's chest clutched tight about his heart, expecting the immortal to turn and bat away the weapon at any instant.

His fears were unfounded. The white-fired tip of Iyanna's spear struck Khaine's murderous son in the back of the neck, above the rim of the bone cuirass. The impact pitched the monstrous fighter forwards, sending it to one knee as magma spumed like arterial flow.



CHAPTER 33

YNNEAD'S COLD EMBRACE

The sword slipped from Laarian's grip even as the first blood coloured its blade. Yvraine fell away from him as though over a precipice, until he realised he was retreating, staggering back from her, the shock of what he had done as crushing as a physical blow.

Her expression was serene, haunting in its peacefulness, her eyes locked to his for a heartbeat.

She bounced like a discarded doll, blood-wetted courtly garb moulded to body and thigh, a river of crimson seeping out over the dark ground. The Visarch – returned now that Laarian had been sated – stared down at what his anger had wrought.

All went still. Not the battle, for that still raged without pause, but in the cleft between life and death, the spirit world occupied by the shades of the dying, Yvraine's demise rippled out like a thunderous silence. No more the wailing spirits. No more the swirling revenants. No more the contorted agonies of the severed. Pregnant with unreleased potential, the psychic plane shuddered, a single violent convulsion that exploded out of Yvraine's body as the Seventh Way opened to release the dead held within.

The Yncarne flooded into the Well of the Dead, birthcry shrieking in the ear and the mind. Its diaphanous form swept up through Yvraine, lifting her with it as it rose, holding her close to its chest like a grotesque father comforting a hurt child. Up the Yncarne rose, its ghostlight pushing back the storm clouds, white lightning leaping from its ascending body in answer to the scarlet bolts that crashed down.

A howl of grief swamped the battlefield, so forlorn that every living soul was

turned by it, their rage suddenly forgotten, their weapons hanging limp in their hands, even in the throes of killing, all eyes drawn to the pale, beautiful, half-daemonic figure that soared above them.

Cradling Yvraine's head, silver tears fell from the Yncarne's eyes, coating her with a shimmering gown woven from Ynnead's loss. White trails of spirit power streamed behind them as the Yncarne circled, clawed fingers holding tight against face and waist of the fallen Opener of the Seventh Way.

As a bird keeper might throw up one of his charges to aid it in taking flight, the Yncarne cast Yvraine away. She fell, a spark against the clouds, arms outstretched, fan and sword still in hand.

Tethers of power followed her, binding her plunging form to the Yncarne. The avatar of Ynnead's shape unravelled, becoming tendrils of white fire that pulsed along the connection, flowing into the corpse of its summoner.

The Visarch felt rather than saw life burst forth again, though he imagined he saw closed eyes opening wide as the Opener of the Seventh Way returned to the mortal plane. Like a white thunderbolt she fell, and his eye was drawn to the ground beneath, where the Warshard crouched wounded on the black earth, a spear protruding from its back.

Yvraine laughed as she dived. She had believed and she had been rewarded. The power of the Whispering God infused her, was part of her, as she swooped towards the crippled figure of shadow and fire below.

She struck like a meteor, the Sword of Sorrows arrowed before her, parting the Warshard's head from its shoulders with effortless grace.

Landing, the speed of her descent dissipated by an explosion of white fire, Yvraine turned in time to see the Warshard dying. Its body seized, solidifying like cooling iron, all shadow exposed to the light of the fire that had been set within it by the vengeance of Ynnead. A rust-like powder crept across its solidifying remains, dried blood that encased it from severed neck to toe. The ruddy crust flaked away as though in a wind, stripping the Warshard down to nothing, a pile of crimson ash that turned to an even finer powder and then disappeared.



CHAPTER 34

THE HEART OF ELDANESH

The Well of the Dead ached with funereal solemnity. All sound was muted; sobs of guilt, murmurs of disbelief, whispers of heartfelt apology. The survivors looked upon the carnage they had wrought and could not comprehend. Fully a third of the Ynnari that had passed through the gate lay bloodied and dead upon the unforgiving rock, a similar number of the Ghost Halls vanquished by the insanity unleashed by the Warshard.

Some stumbled through the flesh-wreckage, seeking favoured companions, calling softly the names of those they sought. Many sat down, numbed with shock, unblinking stares fixed upon the horizon, seeing only blood-riddled snatches of remembered slaughter.

Iyanna retrieved the Spear of Teuthlas from where it lay. She picked up the ancient weapon, noting that the tip was knocked, a splinter of the blade broken away. The price to pay for the death of a war god's avatar.

‘I’m sorry.’

She turned at Meliniel's apology, confused. The autarch sat with a leg outstretched, gripping the thigh. She saw the pain in his posture and guessed the cause.

‘Sorry for what? You did all you could.’ Kneeling beside him, she laid a hand on his leg. Spirit energy slipped through her fingers, igniting the accelerated healing processes hidden deep inside the core of every aeldari. Coaxing his nervous system into a burst of life, blood flowing from his quickening heart, she guided his body to begin knitting broken bone, replenishing lost cells. ‘Besides, you did not fail.’

When she was done, helping him gingerly to his feet with a hand, Iyanna strode

over to the twisted remains of Althenian's wraithbody. It looked grotesque, like splayed ribs decorated with strings of ribboned organs, but she knew there was nothing of flesh in it, nothing of the former exarch was suffering. Inside the mutilated remains she could feel the steady pulse of a spirit stone, its beat almost admonishment.

She reached in, pushing through the gore of artificial fluids and frayed crystal arteries to pluck free the gem housing the soul of Althenian.

I assume, given we are both still here, that we won?

'Yes. I threw a spear into its spine and Yvraine died so that the spirit of the Yncarne could possess her and destroy it.'

Quite a feat. The stone warmed in her palm. I am glad I could provide... distraction...

'You saved Meliniel, that was no small matter.'

I am glad. What happened to the Visarch? You saw him?

Iyanna looked around and saw the crimson-armoured warrior standing apart from everyone else, the Sword of Silent Screams held at his side, helm turned away.

'It was not his fault.'

Probably. But will Yvraine think the same, of his deed?

Iyanna shrugged and searched the chaos for her sister-of-the-dead. She spied Yvraine moving through her people, the silver light of her presence falling upon the living and dead alike. Those close to the embrace of Ynnead were saved, spirits returned to their bodies before the link was severed. Alorynis, seeming no worse for his rough handling at the fist of Yvraine's champion, scampered behind, bounding from corpse to corpse, stepping lightly over the ruins of the fallen wraithguard and wraithblades.

In time, the Opener of the Seventh Way turned in the direction of the Visarch. Iyanna watched Yvraine approach her warden, a spark of white fire confronting a droplet of blood. She knew not what passed between them, but the Visarch sagged, almost falling to the floor.

It was Yvraine that caught him this time, pushing him to his feet. Something else was said and the Visarch nodded. He took up his blade in both hands, tip to the ground, and knelt, bowing his head almost to the feet of Yvraine.

While the wounded were removed back through the gate and the wraithnobles mustered their dead hosts, and the disembodied spirits of the shattered army, the leaders of the Ynnari gathered on the steps before Eldanesh's tomb. The doors

were open, a constant yellow light within, though nothing of the contents could be seen from this distance.

They remained silent, but Yvraine took a step, the Visarch just to her right, Iyanna and Meliniel on the left. With a hiss, Alorynis held back, refusing to ascend.

The quartet stopped again at the threshold, for beyond the door they could see a black sarcophagus, topped with white marble carved into the effigy of a figure. They parted as they entered, their footfalls sounding harsh and loud in the sacred chamber, circling around the tomb within. Above, the ceiling was decorated with a star-filled void, the constellations of the night Eldanesh was slain, and through an opening the red moon still shone, casting a ruddy glow through a lens upon the chest of the effigy, where Anaris had cut the flesh of the Firstborn.

There was, at least in plain sight, no sign of a weapon, sacred cronesword or otherwise.

Yvraine sighed.

‘I am loath to disturb the tomb of Eldanesh. Death and the dead have been my companions for a long time, but even for me there is a place into which I would not venture freely.’

‘I do not believe he is buried with it,’ agreed Iyanna. She glanced at the sword in Yvraine’s hand, and to its companion held by the Visarch. ‘I feel no presence, nothing akin to the cold aura of the Keys of the Dead already discovered.’

None wished to say it, but it seemed that their quest had failed. Worse, that the hundreds that had perished had done so for nothing.

Yvraine found the idea hard to bear, but held back the anger that threatened to bubble forth. Had she not served Ynnead well? Given her life, metaphorically and, that very day, literally? Was she to ever roam the cosmos seeking the merest hint of a sacred treasure, a bauble dangled by myth and nothing more?

‘There is something else,’ said Meliniel, stepping closer to the tomb.

Yvraine saw nothing and, judging by their reactions, nor did the others. But Meliniel leaned across the tomb effigy, his fingers passing into the red light from above. When he withdrew his hand, it clutched a large ruby, shaped in a thousand facets as a droplet. He lifted it up and the light of the red moon sparkled from its edges.

Causing all to start, the droplet audibly gave a beat, pulsing red from its depth. Meliniel shuddered, faceplate of his helm bathed in the scarlet glow.

‘The Heart of Eldanesh,’ he whispered, the words spoken as though in a trance. ‘Formed of his blood, of his sacrifice for us all.’

He straightened and looked around at the others, coming to his senses.

‘I saw him...’ The words choked in his throat but he continued. ‘Just a fragment, a passing glimpse. Beauty incarnate, a spirit so pure. And his murder. So foul, so hate-filled.’

He turned the droplet left and right, examining it more closely.

‘Does it... *do* anything?’ asked the Visarch.

‘I think it does,’ replied the autarch. He turned back to the door and they followed him out onto the top of the steps. ‘Step back a little.’

They did as he asked, retreating a dozen or so paces. Meliniel held the Heart of Eldanesh to his chest plate, just next to his own heart. Fronds of red light like prismatic blood crawled through his fingers and onto the curve of his armour. He took a stumbling step back, releasing his hold, the gemstone held in place by its own power.

The light spread, growing like a second skin over the autarch, flashing with orange and yellow, as though hiding flame just out of view.

With a convulsive shout, arms thrust outwards, Meliniel immolated. Black and crimson fire engulfing his body. In a heartbeat he stretched, contorted, flesh and blood replaced with fire and shadow, psychoplastic transformed into rune-etched bone.

Flaming Anaris in hand, the Warshard stood where Meliniel had been.

Do not strike! The voice was the iron-echo of Khaine’s most murderous fragment, but the intonation was wholly Meliniel’s. The words sounded in their thoughts, the face of Khaine’s son permanently fixed in a terrifying snarl. The fire-wreathed creature held up a blood-slicked hand, turning it one way and the other as it examined the digits, and then moved its attention to the Widowmaker in its grasp.

It looked down at Yvraine, dead embers for eyes.

Even gods die, and their souls belong to Ynnead, it said. *Through you, the Warshard has been Reborn. It chose me, who resisted its calls for so long. It speaks to me, inside, and says it will serve where before it had only slain. You are to give me a new name. Pureheart. Meliniel Pureheart, Avenger of Eldanesh.*

The apparition shuddered again, flaking away as it had done when struck by Yvraine, a swirl of soot and smoke and heat vapour, until Meliniel was left standing in its place. The jewel had burned into him, through armoured plate, flesh and bone, and sat pulsing where his heart had been. He took off his helm, freeing long black hair, his cheek marked with the sigil of Biel-tan.

Meliniel smiled.

‘And my blade remains yours, and ever will.’

Yvraine looked at the transformed autarch, and the Visarch, spiritseer and other outsiders and outcasts gathered about. Her eye roamed to the host that passed back towards the shimmering portal, of every craftworld and kabal and none, and of the Ghost Halls and wild rider clans and every disparate realm and kindred of the aeldari; and she thought of the other ancient gates on Zaisuthra, the hidden realms and treasures that might lie beyond.

In time, she would find the cronesword, when fate and the gods were ready. Until then, this was her purpose. To lead her people. To be Ynnead’s emissary to guide the Reborn to their future and save the aeldari from their doom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the New York Times bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, as well as several audio dramas including the bestselling *Raven's Flight* and *The Thirteenth Wolf*. He has written many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*, *Jain Zar: The Storm of Silence* and *Asurmen: Hand of Asuryan*. He also wrote the *Path of the Eldar* and *Legacy of Caliban* trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series.

For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. In 2017, Gav was awarded the David Gemmell Legend award for his Age of Sigmar novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

An extract from *Jain Zar – The Storm of Silence*.



The silence choked her. It crowded down from near-empty benches that had once held thousands baying for blood. It washed over white sands stained red. From the open roof of the arena silence poured down from a sky the colour of an old bruise.

Hot and stifling, her lion mask was tight against her face.

The smell of fresh blood in her nostrils.

Faraethil turned her head left and right as she stepped out into the flickering light. Her shadow danced crazily as the floodlights fell dim and surged back into brightness with sputters and sparks.

Liallath was dead on the sands. Her body was entwined with that of the beast she had faced, spear through its chest, her back and neck a ragged mess of skin flaps and torn flesh. Faraethil's gaze moved past and up to the stands.

There were two dozen figures beyond the wall of the large killing ground, dwarfed by the amphitheatre of death that rose up around them. Half were guards, crackling black staves in their hands. The rest were leering cronies of the arena's sole surviving owner, the Master of the Blood-dance.

Her eye turned to the shadow-shrouded throne that overlooked the arena. Two robe-swathed attendants held ornately laced parasol-fans over their patron, though the sun had not burned for nearly a year since the terrifying apocalypse that had slain so many of their fellow eldar. Beneath this feathery cover a lone figure sat, pale fingers gripping the arms of a chair carved from the bones of fallen gladiatrices. Their skulls formed a stool for feet booted in supple black hide. Of the Master of the Blood-dance's face nothing could be seen except the diamond glimmer of artificial eyes. Eyes that missed nothing.

Faraethil raised her weapons in salute to the Master. In her right hand a three-bladed throwing triskele, in her left a long-bladed polearm. She was naked but for a slatted kilt, the sheath of plated armour down her left arm and a helm through the top of which flowed her mane of white and black like a crest. Her

pale flesh was marked with scars, slender lines of darker pink. Before the cataclysm it would have been easy to have such marks removed, but she had refused. The blemishes were her keepsake, each stroke a reminder of an attack she had failed to stop, a mistake made, a brush with death.

She received no acknowledgement from the Master – not since the cataclysm – and instead she turned her attention to the gate at the opposite end of the gore-stained sands. What threat was concealed in the darkness? What foe, what creature had the Master of the Blood-dance chosen for her this time?

A quintet of shambolic figures stumbled into the fractured light, blinking and crying, prodded on by the staves of their two escorts. Their cuirasses and vambraces fitted poorly, jag-bladed spears and serrated swords held slackly in bruised hands. Fearful eyes roamed the arena before fixing on Faraethil.

Dregs from the remains of the city. Not warriors, not even blood cultists or the body-shaped. Sad, desperate survivors half dead from malnourishment. No challenge at all.

She looked again at the Master, her scowl hidden behind her mask but her aggravation obvious all the same. There was no response from her lord.

Realisation trickled into her thoughts. He was no longer interested in the fight, only the kill. The attention was all on her. Executioner, not combatant. She had become a display piece, a plaything that the Master would turn on and watch and then put away again when he was bored.

It sickened Faraethil.

Swallowing her disgust, she looked at the unfortunates that had been herded in for the Master's pleasure. Moving meat, nothing more. Like bait dangled into a pool so that one could watch a wolfshark's attack.

She was a captive, an animal in a cage, performing tricks for her owner.

Anger exploded through her body. In a moment she sped across the sands, bare feet leaving only the slightest trail. Her hands moved and the triskele flew, slashing the throats of the closest two foes before spinning back to her grip. Even as their bodies toppled Faraethil was amongst the others.

They clumsily swung their swords and thrust their spears. Jagged weapons parted empty air. Her blade wove in three wide loops, near-simultaneously decapitating and slicing the legs from two of her enemies. Leaping through the spray of blood, heart hammering, rage burning, she fell upon the last piece of meat. She discarded her weapons to the freshly soaked sands and used her bare hands, splitting, breaking, turning a living being into a broken carcass, grunting and howling as she did so.

Spattered head to foot, rivulets of blood streaming across her skin, she stepped back, panting, limbs trembling. Everything was white-hot and bright for a few moments.

When clarity returned, the guards had already started to drag away the pieces of her enemies.

She looked at the splay of limbs and organs on the ground, and where she might have seen beauty in the random arrangement, today she saw only a bloody mess. The rage was still there, unsatisfied by the slaughter, swimming in her gut and burning in her chest. Her head spun, her lungs tight, unable to take a deep breath inside her cloying mask.

What was different?

Not enemies. Victims.

This was not combat, it was murder. She ripped off the helm and tossed it away. Its gilded leonine face stared accusingly at her from the reddened sand.

There was movement in the shadow of the throne. One of the Master's attendants called out to Faraethyl.

'Put on your mask, bloody one.'

She ignored the command. Bloodstained fingers worked the clasps of her armour. She shrugged and let the segmented plates fall away from her arm.

'The dancer does not disarm in the arena.' The admonition was delivered with testy impatience rather than anger. 'The dancer has not been dismissed.'

Faraethyl shook out her hair, and more scarlet droplets fell to the sand around her.

She saw the shadow of the closest guard approaching and heard the crackle of his staff activated.

Faraethyl turned, slowly, hands held away from her body as though surrendering. The guard relaxed, lowering his staff a fraction. The gladiatrix took a step and kicked. The heel of her foot connected with the other's chin, snapping back his head with a loud crack of breaking bones.

She ran as shouts of anger echoed around the near-empty arena. The first guard had been taken by surprise but she could not overpower them all, even had she kept her armour and weapons. Speed was her ally, not strength.

Faraethyl vaulted effortlessly to the top of the encircling wall. A guard leapt down the steps towards her. She ducked the tip of his staff and dived past, to roll to her feet behind him. She fought the urge to strike. Any delay could be fatal.

Even as he turned she was already sprinting up the steep incline towards the arch of ochre daylight at the summit of the steps.

A hot breeze touched her skin as she sped out into the concourse surrounding the amphitheatre.

Though she had no idea where she was going – had known nothing outside of the arena since the cataclysm – a single thought propelled her on. It mattered not where she was headed. What was important was that she left this place. Even if the outside harboured an uncertain future, the only certainty of the arena was misery and death if she remained.

She did not look back.

The first three days were the hardest – near-endless days in which the darkness of night was barely more than a brief period of dimness, as though a cloud obscured the wound in the sky.

Faraethil put as much distance as she could between herself and the arena on the first day. There was no sign of pursuit. A few scavenging degenerates attacked her, half-physical things tainted by the influx of corrupting power. Her anger had slain them in moments, taking control as it did on the blood-sands.

On the second day she realised she was lost. Even before the cataclysm she had never crossed the skybridges to the other side of the river. The emptiness terrified her. If the silence of the arena, once so bustling with activity, had been unsettling, then to see the whole city empty, every street and building deserted, was a stark assertion that everything had been lost. Everything. There was not a word to describe the disaster that had befallen the eldar people. She knew in her spirit, in her heart, that this was not a localised calamity. It went far beyond the city, beyond even their world, out to the furthest reaches of their far colonies.

Her people were dead, or soon would be.

She cried, sobbing in a garden in the shadow of a phoenix-shaped topiary growing back to its wild, unkempt nature. The slight cooling she took to be evening prompted her to seek out food but she found nothing in the empty house to which the garden belonged, or in the neighbourhood. Every dwelling and communal building had already been emptied.

During her search the trickle of water drew her to a complex of white stone cloisters and pearlescent towers. In one of the courtyards she found a fountain and pool. The ground around it was littered with gnawed bones and droppings. As she approached, a movement in the shadows attracted her attention.

A lyrecat padded out into the light, its shoulder as high as her hip, baring fangs as long as knives, white-and-grey pelt matted with blood. It had probably been someone's pet before the calamity, now returning to its feral state. It circled

warily and she noticed brand marks on the skin beneath the fur. Its owner had not been kind.

Its growl was low and quiet; amber eyes did not leave her as she moved towards the water.

Leaves had fallen into the water and started to rot, and there was a slight covering of foam at the edges. It did not matter. Like the lyrecat, she was focused on survival, nothing else. She needed to drink.

Faraethil's eyes darted around the cloister, measuring the distance to the enclosing roof, the windows and arches. Two strides and a jump would take her to a balcony just to her right on the first floor. From there she could quickly scale to the roof if needed.

She met the beast's gaze and slowly crouched, dipping a hand into the water. Its growl intensified but the lyrecat kept its distance. Supping from her palm, Faraethil let the cold liquid spill across her chin and chest. She wiped at the blood from the fight.

The lyrecat's nostrils flared at the scent and its demeanour changed. Ears pricked, tail lashing, it shifted its bulk, preparing to spring into action.

Faraethil cupped both hands into the water and drank as much as she could.

A flick of whiskers, a twitch of tail warned her in the heartbeat before the lyrecat bunched its muscles. The gladiatrix was already up and running when its snarl resounded around the cloister.

Faraethil leapt, fingers finding purchase on the bottom of the balcony. A swing and a pull brought her up to the slender rail. The lyrecat reared up, swiped claws and gnashed its teeth, frustrated by the escape of its prey.

She knew how it felt.

On the third day she found herself heading back towards the arena. The market squares and souk had filled the approaches in the time before the calamity and she sought the familiarity of the narrow, winding passages and streets.

She found none.

In her flight she had not paid much attention but her cautious return revealed a landscape far different from the one she had known growing up. The winding lanes and alleys had become a nest of shadows and broken lives. Bodies slumped in doorways and glittering eyes stared at her from high windows. Rustling and whispers followed her progress, not of mortal origin.

Her thoughts prickled with tension. She was being watched. More than watched. Something followed her every move, knew her thoughts, its own

monstrous heart beating in time to her quickened pulse.

A laugh in the distance, cackling and insane. A susurrant breath of wind on her neck that caused her to turn sharply, forcing Faraethil to fight the urge to flee again.

She had sought safety here and found no sanctuary. The feeling of being pursued, hunted, continued to rise, making her feel sick with pending disaster.

Her steps faltered, feet scuffing on the ground when once she had danced lightly across the sands. Her breath was becoming a ragged gasping, tightening her chest, causing spots to dance through her vision.

And all the while the predator circled, waiting, ready to seize its moment.

Faraethil staggered from street to alley to plaza in a daze, finding nothing but the dead and the flicker of the immaterial things that now ruled the city in their place. Coming upon a wider vista she spied bizarre towers and spire-like growths that had erupted from the buildings at the heart of the conurbation. Leathery-winged apparitions circled their summits. Sky palaces continued to drift the upper thermals, as devoid of inhabitants as the rest of the city. The burning ruins of others dotted the outskirts where they had crashed. Monorail carriages dangled like entrails from broken bridges and the cadaver of a great starship lay broken at the space dock like a giant, skeletal, beached whale.

Her aimless journey took her into the temple district. She would not have come here before the cataclysm. The shrines had become places of debauchery and sacrifice, of open war between competing sects and stalking shadows looking for victims to splay upon their altars.

Now the area was deserted, the temple steps bloodstained but empty, their doors broken by rampaging mobs while the corpses of the last cultists rotted upon the stairways, savaged by insubstantial claws and immaterial fangs, their last prayers unanswered by the deities they had sought to appease or laud.

A movement caught her eye. Not the half-seen apparition of the things that now haunted her world but an actual motion, like the lyrebat. She headed towards it, suppressing an urge to call out. The Master of the Blade-dance would doubtless still have minions seeking her. It would be unwise to draw attention to herself.

Coming to the corner of a broad boulevard, she found the other eldar standing in the middle of the road. She could not see his face as he stood for some time in contemplation of one of the oldest and grandest temple buildings. Unlike the others it was untouched, still pristine despite the slow decline of the city for generations and the sudden catastrophe that had befallen the eldar civilisation.

Clad in rags, he held a sack over one sagging shoulder, his entire demeanour

that of defeat and dejection.

Faraethyl started towards him, wary of frightening the other survivor. He ascended the steps with a weary tread before she had taken two paces, and disappeared behind one of the columns.

Following, Faraethyl came to the top of the steps and found the great doors were barred. No matter how hard she pushed or teased the locks the massive portal stayed shut.

But the other eldar had made his way in somehow. She retraced his steps and examined the pillar behind which he had passed. Sure enough there was a tiny switch that opened a hidden door to the interior.

She slipped within, feeling the cool and dark like a welcome sheet across her body. She enjoyed the absence of heat and light for several moments, until she heard talking. Moving carefully, she passed into a wider space, dominated by a pool, above which stretched a semicircular balcony. The light here was ambient, originating from no visible source. Shafts of red light illuminated the upper reaches of the temple from windowed domes above.

She crept closer, ears picking out the whisper from the darker depths of the temple.

‘...found more bodies by the orchard alongside Raven’s Plaza. The remnants of the gangs are fighting over what’s left. I can’t go out anymore, it’s too dangerous. I found a passageway beneath the second crypt that leads to the Gardens of Isha on the neighbouring square. There appears to be no taint there, perhaps I will be able to nurture fresh food.’

She had no idea to whom the stranger was talking but there was no reply and she spied no sign of any other inhabitant.

‘What’s the point?’ he cried out. His voice echoed back from the vaulted ceiling of the main shrine, diminishing with each return.

She saw him again, as he strode to the mezzanine at one side of the chamber, overlooking the temple floor a distance below. To his left was a tall carving of a wise-looking figure in red and grey stone, on one knee, with a hand outstretched towards the balcony. Water trickled from his hand into the pool, symbolic of... something. Faraethyl did not know who the deity was.

The stranger had a dead look in his eye as he ascended, seeing nothing of his surroundings, perhaps confronting a vision from the catastrophe. Faraethyl knew the feeling; many nights she had spent staring at the ceiling, reliving the moment when a crowd twenty thousand strong had died in terror and agony as she had carved apart another gladiatrix for their amusement.

The stranger climbed onto the stone balustrade, steadying himself with a hand on the wall. He looked at the stern but caring face of the statue, tears glimmering like blood drops in the ruddy light.

Faraethil knew what was going to happen; an instinct, or something stronger. A connection, the delicate mental touch of one eldar and another, a sharing of common consciousness that had been repressed for so long for fear of being vulnerable, of an inner truth being discovered.

‘Why? Why carry on?’ the other whispered. He glared at the statue. ‘Show me you still care.’

Faraethil was running before she had even decided to intervene, though whether to save the stranger for his sake or simply to keep a connection to another eldar she did not know.

He stepped off the rail.

She grabbed the back of his ragged robe just in time, but his momentum swung him in Faraethil’s iron grip, causing him to slam heavily into the wall beneath the stone rail. She looked down into a face aged by more than the simple turning of the world, though he was at least twice her age even without the care-lines and haunted gaze. His limbs trembled with fatigue, there was dirt and blood smeared across his face and arms, and broken fingernails scrabbled ineffectually at the stone for a few heartbeats.

She took hold of him with her other hand and hauled. Lifted up, he grabbed the rail and helped, pulling himself back to the mezzanine where he slumped to the floor, eyes vacant.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked. It seemed an odd question but Faraethil didn’t know what else to say.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he replied, shaking his head.

‘I followed you in, thought it looked safe. You looked safe. That was a very stupid thing to do.’

‘Was it?’ He sat up, pushing her aside. ‘And who are you to judge?’

‘I’m Faraethil. And you’re welcome.’

‘You’re not,’ he growled back, standing up. ‘This is my home, I didn’t invite you.’

It took every effort not to let the rejection become anger. Fighting the urge to lash out, Faraethil turned and ran, heading back to the open air, the shrine suddenly bitterly chill and claustrophobic and dark and full of pain.

She stumbled into the street and gulped down hot air. There was no salvation here.

Faraethyl survived. Barely.

Life became a continuous nightmare of flight and paranoia, listening to the screams of the dying and the victorious howls, the chill cries of the daemonic things that had seized their world. An interminable time of scavenging and skulking in shadows to eke out an existence barely worth calling a life.

But eke it she did.

The civilisation of the eldar had prided itself on its lack of personal labour. Intricate machines and carefully devised irrigation, seeding and harvesting systems had supplied all of the city's needs for generations. Though much had changed and all was falling to ruin, if one was daring and knew where to look there was clean water and food to be found – snatched from beneath the noses of the gangs that now guarded farms and aquifers as they had once stood sentry at cult fortresses and narcotic dens.

Less than one in a thousand had survived the initial disaster, one in ten thousand even. Spread across the city they had been scarce, but time brought them together, as prey or companions, but Faraethyl desired to be neither. She had seen what lay down that route in the blood-dancers – servility and death for the majority, politics and the ever-present threat of rebellion and usurpation for those whose viciousness took them briefly to the summit of the misery.

And then even the cults disappeared, moving to the webway between dimensions to avoid the increasing encroachment of immaterial fiends that desired dominion over the mortal realm. With each day the world of Eidafaeron slipped further and further into the warp, bringing ever closer the edge of madness that would consume her forever.

It was desperation – a need to hunt and roam on familiar ground – that eventually forced her back towards the racing tracks and arenas of the Kurnusse. She even dared the armoury to retrieve a weapon. A mistake. She was unsuccessful, and worse, roused the hornets' nest against her. Now a very different kind of desperation forced Faraethyl to run for her life, the blood-dancers of the Master just behind like hounds on a scent.

She turned left and right without purpose at first, hoping raw speed and guile could outpace them. Yet there was something different, something enhanced about these pursuers. The way they had come upon her so quickly, the means by which they trailed her through the winding alleys, bounding over walls, leaping through windows and across rooftops.

Without conscious decision her route took her back towards the shrines. If she

could put just enough distance between her and the blood-dancers she might slip into the great temple where the stranger lived. It was her only salvation for the moment, and she cared nothing for the consequences of leading her pursuers to the stranger's home. Given his mood when she had left, it was unlikely the suicidal eldar even lived there, though the thought of finding his corpse, someone dead by their own hand, gave her a momentary pause despite the hundreds that had died by hers in the past.

She came to the column where the lock was hidden and the side door opened with a click that resounded back from the great space of the temple.

The sound of feet on the steps behind warned that she had not been swift enough. She let the door close behind her, hoping they would not find the catch.

She felt a surge of anger before she saw the stranger sweeping down the stairs towards her. He looked different. Bigger, healthier. His hands formed fists as he ran down the stairs. He slowed and stopped, rage dissipating when he reached the entrance hall and looked upon her. Pity. She saw pity in his eyes.

The others came in cautiously, wary of the rarefied air of the temple. The tranquillity confounded them and they approached slowly, sniffing the air like dogs. Clad in scraps of armour and clothing, long blades in their hands, hooks and barbs passed through skin and flesh as ornamentation.

One of them, a female with red-dyed hair slicked up in spines, snarled then, eyes wild with madness and hunger.

'Who are you?' she demanded, pointing her curved dagger at the stranger.

The stranger looked at Faraethil and then back at the witch-leader.

'Asurmen.'

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