

THE CARNAC CAMPAIGN

SKY HUNTER

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WARHAMMER
40,000

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THE CARNAC CAMPAIGN: EPISODE TWO

SKY HUNTER

Graeme Lyon

In the interstellar depths, far from the eyes of man, lay a world that was not a world. No sun shone upon this structure of soaring wraithbone spires, great crystal domes and delicate walkways. No other planets circled with it, awaiting the inevitable death of the star around which they clustered.

This was Alaitoc, craftworld of the eldar, home to millions of souls, and though it orbited nothing, it had satellites of its own, smaller conglomerations that encircled it, performing a leisurely dance as Alaitoc slowly, ever so slowly, travelled between the stars.

One such satellite looked for all the universe like a miniature version of the great craftworld itself, with domes and connecting passages and wraithbone spires. It was the Bloody Blade shrine, home of Alaitoc's small cadre of Crimson Hunters, those who walked the Path of the Warrior and practised their killing arts from the cockpit of a flyer.

Keladry Ragefyre pulled his fighter into a steep dive and wove through the narrow confines of a covered walkway barely larger than his Nightshade interceptor. He was a mere heartbeat behind his opponent, but the gracefully curving tunnel precluded a killing shot.

Then the tunnel was behind him and he flew out into a massive open dome, filled with trees older than entire civilisations and architecture that had been crafted more than ten millennia before. He twisted the ship around sharply and slipped beneath a finely-carved archway representing Khaine and Vaul locked in combat. With a thought, he fired.

Two bolts of light lanced towards his opponent, who jinked out of the way at the last moment. Keladry smiled. His foe was good. As well she should be.

Ilthana was his prize pupil, the greatest of his Bloody Blades. She had already lasted more than twice as long as any of the others.

The deep red craft – shaped to resemble a gore-soaked weapon, sleek, curved and deadly – was the mirror of his own, though his was the black of mourning. Ilthana sped away, accelerating out of his sights. His targeting system chimed sadly at the loss of the target lock.

Keladry flew upwards towards the great expanse of the void above, twisting his Nightshade upside down and bringing it close to the surface of the dome, mere metres away, and speeding forward. One false move, one stray thought, and he would be dashed against the nigh-impenetrable crystal, his soul lost to She Who Thirsts as his waystone shattered in the explosive destruction of his interceptor.

The thought was exhilarating.

For an exarch of the Crimson Hunters, there was no communion with other souls in his ritual armour, as other Aspects had. When a Crimson Hunter died, it was usually in a fiery explosion, far above the world. There was rarely armour left to recover, let alone a spirit stone. To walk this path was to know that at the end lay damnation.

He wondered – had always wondered – if the tales were true, if the loss of an eldar's soul to the immaterium really left them prey for She Who Thirsts. Were he to die here, dashed against the surface of the craftworld, lost to the void, would he really be consigned to an eternity of torture as the hungry god the eldar had created feasted on all that he was?

Or would he know oblivion, the sleep of eternity?

Either way, he mused as he followed the gentle curve of the immense dome, it might be better than being trapped within Alaitoc's infinity circuit, all that he had been in life laid bare to the billions of other spirits that occupied the craftworld's communal afterlife.

He swept away from the dome's surface and began a dizzying descent towards the ground far below. Trapped, he considered, in the infinity circuit without the one soul he would want to spend eternity with...

Keladry Ragefyre had become snared on the Path of the Warrior after...
Alianna.

'Alianna!'

Keladry ran, his voice echoing through wraithbone corridors as he screamed for his love. He heard laughter, the cruel, dark laughter of a soul that was cold and dead, sustained only by suffering and evil. Around him were the corpses of his crew, his friends, slaughtered by the pirates, their spirit stones cracked and

*broken, their faces locked in the unimaginable agony of their final moments.
He would not allow the same fate to befall. Alianna...*

Keladry shook off the memory. She had been a gentle soul and had kept him grounded when he removed his war-mask. Her loss, and with no spirit stone to recover, had driven Keladry onto the warrior path, and further along it than he had ever wanted to travel, into solitude. Inevitably, into death – and with every cycle that passed, the desire to meet that death became stronger.

A gentle chime interrupted Keladry's musings. There she was... Ilthana had taken her craft beneath the eaves of the mighty trees, skimming the ground. Daring. Very daring. She had such potential. She was coming now from beneath him, flying directly upwards in defiance of gravity's pull.

That would work against craft of the lesser races, or even the guardian pilots of a Nightwing. But not a Crimson Hunter, and certainly not an exarch. He watched the vessel, sleek and elegant with its swan neck and dipped wings, speed towards him. At the last moment, even as she fired, he arrested his forward momentum and fired his thrusters, just enough to drop back slightly. Ilthana's fighter flew past, the two Nightshades almost grazing one another. For a split second, he saw her through the crystal canopy of her cockpit, clad in the blood-red armour of the shrine, with a helm of black, emblazoned with the rune of the Crimson Hunter. The twin pulses of laser light she had fired spattered harmlessly against a wraithbone spire in the distance.

Keladry angled his ship's nose towards Ilthana and issued the mental order to fire. His bright lances pulsed once and cerulean beams of energy impacted upon Ilthana's hull. Immediately, her Nightshade shut down, the ship registering the hit and removing the Aspect Warrior from control. The engines flared and the fighter halted, switching to thrusters to keep it aloft.

The last remaining lit sigil on the console before him winked out. It was the twelfth such symbol to do so, and Ilthana's was the twelfth ship floating amongst the silent domes and walkways of the shrine.

With a thought, Keladry activated the communications system in the Nightshade and broadcast a message to the squadron.

'Training is complete. Lessons have been learned, I trust. Return to the shrine.'

He received a chorus of acknowledgements as he guided his Nightshade towards the hangar. As he passed back through the corridors and domes, the runes on his console lit back up as the Nightshades returned control to their pilots. One by one, his Aspect Warriors fell into formation around him, all flying

in perfect time, their positions creating an aesthetically pleasing symmetry as well as being battle-ready.

Except...

Tuaren Stormwarden, who had felt the war god's call only recently after many passes walking another Path, though the exarch could not remember which, was out of alignment. Keladry was about to open a channel to him, to chide him for his failure – his second failure of the cycle, as he had been the first to fall prey to the exarch's fire – when Tuaren's Nightshade spun on its axis and drifted. Its bladed wing clipped a great wraithbone pillar garlanded with a climbing plant and flowers, and sparks flew. The wing sheared loose in a spray of petals and the Nightshade's gentle drift became a dangerous fall as its systems cut out.

Before Keladry could react, Ilthana was already in motion, guiding her craft down beneath Tuaren's and gently nudging him upwards. Abruptly, the fighter's engines flared back into life and Tuaren corrected his course. His voice came through the communications system.

'My lord, exarch, I... I apologise for my lapse in concentration. I saw something.'

Keladry frowned. 'Saw what, Stormwarden? Explain thy meaning, hunter. Help me comprehend.'

The young Aspect Warrior was silent, hesitant, unsure. He had not yet achieved the full discipline that donning his war-mask required. He stood with one foot in the world of the Crimson Hunters and the other...

The Path of the Seer. Tuaren had previously walked the Path of the Seer. Keladry knew now what had happened, had seen it occur before.

'You had a vision. The skein revealed a future. What fate awaits us?'

Tuaren, his travels on the path of witchery so recent, had experienced an echo of the skein, a glimpse at some possible fate. It was an uncommon occurrence, and one that almost always boded ill.

'I saw a battle against the ancient foe, my lord Ragefyre. A legion of metal skeletons marching across the plains of a maiden world. I saw, standing against them, the high autarch and his armies, and... I saw him die. I saw Lord Swiftblade struck down.'

Horror flooded Keladry. The loss of such a warrior as Elarique Swiftblade would be an immeasurable blow to the embattled Alaitocii. With the upstart Imperium of Man in a state of permanent warfare with the craftworld, along with the myriad other alien foes that stalked the galaxy, and the ever-present threat of Chaos, losing such a mighty leader would be damage unparalleled.

‘Return to the shrine,’ Keladry ordered again, ‘and prepare for departure. I visit the seers.’

If the ancient enemy would dare to try and lay low the high autarch of Alaitoc, the Bloody Blades of Alaitoc would meet them and stop them. And if Keladry Ragefyre could meet his end in saving Swiftblade’s life, then all the better.

Eldorath Starbane flew.

His body was still, cross-legged in the sanctum at the heart of the Dome of Crystal Seers on tranquil Alaitoc, surrounded by his fellow seers and the crystalline remains of those who had once been like them. They were at once a harsh reminder of what Eldorath would one day become, and a reassurance. The dead were never really gone, not on a craftworld.

Eldorath’s body was sedate, but his soul soared. Around him were the glittering threads of time and causality, the skeins of fate itself, and his spirit-form grasped them with both hands – *both hands* – and followed them to his destination, passing through what had once been, what was, what might yet be...

...and what must never come to pass.

He saw flashes of futures unwritten, lives yet to be lived, wars yet to be won. Or lost.

Carnac.

He had not seen it coming. None of them had. The coming to Carnac of the souldark, ancient enemies of the gods themselves, had taken the Alaitocii seers by surprise. *Surprise...* It was so rare to one such as he, who walked in eternity; past, present and future open to him. He would have relished it, had it brought joy. But with it had come only pain. Death. And he had not foreseen it. He had failed. Eldorath Starbane had failed his people, and not for the first time. The *yingiract* – the necrons, as they called themselves – were making a habit of taking from Eldorath. His purpose, his confidence. His hand. His spirit-form was whole and unsullied, but his body was broken, one hand lost on Cano’var. He felt once again the pain, the fury, the humiliation and the overwhelming hatred for the creature that had taken the hand, the Stormlord.

As soon as the call for aid had been received from the exodites of Carnac, a psychic message that had held such pain and sorrow that even to remember it hurt, a force had been despatched through the webway. Eldorath was determined not to repeat the mistakes of Cano’var, so his response was overwhelming. Elarique led the Alaitocii host, of course. Headstrong Elarique, the Swiftblade.

But if Eldorath did not focus, the autarch would likely die soon. He pulled

himself from his thoughts and focused on the threads that led to Carnac, to the acts that he had set in motion. Elarique planned to face the souldark on the field of battle, blades flashing like the heroes of myth. It was commendable, and it might work – but the more likely outcome was that the autarch would lose, that the yngiract would take Carnac and that Eldorath – again – would fail.

The farseer had enacted another plan. He had followed the twisted skein as best he could, had seen the leaders of the souldark force gathered for a council of war: their overlord, Anraky, known in the ancient tales of the War in Heaven as the Traveller; Orikan, the Diviner; Trazyn, the Infinite; names that lived in infamy amongst the children of Asuryan. And Imotekh, the so-called Stormlord. Eldorath held an especial hatred for this foe. He would see him dead. He would see all of them dead. He had summoned the outcasts and recalled the Nightspear. They could destroy the commanders of the unliving automata before their attack could be launched.

He found the thread of Illic Nightspear's life and focused on it, sweeping along hundreds of years of war and death in a heartbeat. Until...

Carnac.

Eldorath watched as Nightspear took aim at the yngiract known as the Traveller... But then the creature was gone. The ranger and his comrades, both Alaitocii and exodite, scattered, marked for death by soulless hunters. They fled into canyons and caves, their threads diverging, many of them cut as the soulless predators caught them with their synaptic disintegrators, melting brain tissue and ending lives.

Eldorath held fast to Illic's thread, watching as he fled, as he fought back, as his fellows died for him. Eventually, he escaped into the webway, through the sacrifice of many. Alaitocii and Carnacian alike. Catritheyn, Eldorath's pupil, was with Nightspear, as was the Mawr, clan-chief of the exodites. Eldorath knew where they were going. He let himself slip from the skein, but was wrenched about, his spirit spinning away from the threads of fate. As he grasped for purchase, he saw stars moving and exploding, and a metal skull with a single green orb glowing balefully in its centre. It was haloed by a ring of gold and its monstrous, unmoving maw whispered to him...

Even your prophecies are not safe, Eldorath One-Hand. What does that leave you?

With a jolt, Eldorath felt reality reassert itself. He knew that yngiract, by reputation at least. The Diviner. Was it the source of the problems he and his seers had walking the skein? Senses returned, gravity took its hold and he felt

the steady buzz of the infinity circuit, the whispers of seers long gone. Then he heard a voice, tentative and uncertain.

‘My lord Starbane...?’

He opened his eyes and figures resolved before him, seven of his fellow seers, all mighty and wise. They, too, had travelled the skeins, though they had taken different paths and seen different fates, different futures.

‘Nightspear lives.’

A psychic ripple of relief went through the chamber, and the infinity circuit buzzed in sympathetic response. Many of the council – and many of those that had once been but were no more – believed that Illic Nightspear was vital to the future of the eldar race. Some whispered that he was all that stood between their people and the Rhana Dandra, the end of all things. There had been disagreement in the council when Eldorath had sent Nightspear on his mission to Carnac. Some had decried the high farseer, claiming that he allowed his anger to cloud his judgement.

They had been right. He saw that now.

‘Did he achieve his mission?’ asked Thirianna, youngest of the council, and so instrumental in saving the craftworld from destruction just a short time before.

‘He... did not,’ admitted Eldorath. He looked each of his fellow seers in the eyes, one by one, as he spoke.

‘My prophecies were wrong. Again. By some vile sorcery, the necrons are disrupting the skeins of fate. We cannot trust anything that we have seen of Carnac. The Traveller was not in the valley. Nightspear’s force was ambushed. Many... Many died. Through their sacrifice did Illic escape. He returns here now. We must convene a war council.’

Thirianna nodded. ‘And send word to Lord Swiftblade that your plan failed. It is time for him to make his stand against the souldark.’

Stiffly, Eldorath nodded. ‘Yes. If we cannot trust the skein, we must turn to the sword and the shuriken for victory. If we cannot trust me, Elarique must be our salvation. Carnac’s salvation. Send word to the high autarch that he may launch his attack when he is ready.’

The tide of metal swept across the plains. Great phalanxes of necron warriors, balefully glowing rifles clutched in skeletal hands, moved thoughtlessly forward. Swarms of hideous metal insects flowed across the valley ahead of the unliving host, devouring all vegetation from the ground so that the warriors’ feet fell only on bare, dead earth.

‘Even as they move, they destroy,’ muttered Elarique Swiftblade, shaking his head sadly. He stood at the centre of the eldar line, far distant from the advancing enemy. Where the necron line stretched across the plains as far as eye could see, the eldar were a tight knot of warriors, a single drop against the ocean of enemy, arrayed between tall hills on the approach to the world shrine. Elarique was surrounded by his bodyguard, Dire Avengers sworn to preserve his life. The idea of another eldar laying down their life for his always made him vaguely uncomfortable, but he bore it with stoicism – his position as high autarch was as much a symbol for the people of the craftworld as it was a necessity of war. When he finally fell – and he would, on the field of battle, as did all of his kind – he would be spoken of in the same breath as giants of history such as Kael Ra, the Prince Ecliptic, and Amenteth Worldsbane. It was a weighty responsibility. As was the fate of a world.

Elarique prepared to give the order to open fire. He knew every weapon in the force – he had wielded most of them himself as he had walked the various warrior paths on his journey towards becoming an autarch. He retained several – the graceful wings of the Swooping Hawk adorned his back, Scorpion mandiblasters worked into his crested helm allowed him to spit laser death at his foes and he carried both a delicately curved powered blade and a deadly fusion gun.

Finally, the first of the enemy came into what he judged to be effective range, and Elarique opened a channel.

‘Swiftblade to all forces. What we do this day, we do for Carnac, for Alaitoc and for revenge against the eternal foe... You may fire when ready.’

Maireth Voidwalker strode the paths of the dead.

Spirits surrounded her, clamouring for her attention. Some recently dead wished to pass a message or remembrance to those they had left behind. Some longer gone wondered if their names were remembered. Some of the very oldest, spirits who had wandered the infinity circuit for as long as it had existed, simply desired a moment of contact with a living soul, a reminder of what they had once been, millennia before. She was their conduit to the mortal world, a spiritseer, and she would do their bidding.

But one spirit wanted more.

The spirit of Mardorath Lifestone wanted to tell her that she was going to die.

‘I know this, Mardorath,’ she said, her soulvoice soft and ethereal, echoing through the unworld she inhabited. ‘Death comes to us all.’

It comes to you soon, spiritseer. Very soon. I have seen it. On the world of Carnac, when the dead walk and the threads tangle. The unliving scythe will be sundered and your end will be at hand.

The spirit faded away, rejoining the tumult of the infinity circuit, and Maireth Voidwalker put the strange prophecy from her mind and continued her work.

Elarique fought his way through the throng, power sword flashing. He struck out at a necron warrior, removing its head. As it fell, another three fired their rifles and, with a cry, he beat his wings, flying above the streams of energy before throwing himself towards the necrons, mandiblasters peppering them with laser fire. His blade met their living metal forms, cutting through vital systems and ending the warriors, who phased out even as their skeletal remains crumpled to the ground.

Even as he landed, Elarique was seeking another foe to kill. A bladed skimmer floated towards him, weapon barrels crackling with electrical energy. The Dire Avengers fired shurikens at it, but they did not even graze it. If it fired, they would all die. Elarique would not allow it. No more eldar would die if he could prevent it.

Sheathing his sword, he pulled the fusion gun from his back and loosed nuclear fury at the vehicle. Parts of it turned molten and dripped from the craft, splattering the necrons below with boiling metal that burned through them, reducing them to scrap.

The skimmer exploded and more necrons were destroyed, pierced by shards of spinning metal or consumed by the fiery blast. Elarique exulted at the carnage he had unleashed.

But at the same time, he knew that his kills were as nothing compared to the sheer weight of the foe. He was the commander of this army, not a soldier, and he needed to look at the bigger picture. The necron numbers were fearsome and, around him, eldar died in droves. His Dire Avenger bodyguard dwindled, and each death stabbed at his heart like a cold blade.

He remembered the words of Eldorath Starbane when he had sent Nightspear on his mission: *Cut off the head and the body will die.* A rudimentary tactic, but an effective one. Casting his gaze around, he saw his quarry – a leader of the souldark, its golden frame twice the size of even its heavily-armoured guards. It carried a great staff that crackled with eldritch energy, and the green balefire of its eyes was deeper and more disturbing than looking into the void at the heart of the galaxy.

It saw him, and pointed its weapon in challenge. Elarique returned the gesture and inclined his head. One of the enemy commander's bodyguards stepped forward, a huge shield clutched in one hand and a great crackling axe in the other. The overlord held out a hand and shook its head, cackling something in their ancient tongue. The praetorian took a step back and lowered its weapon, though its infernal gaze remained fixed upon the autarch.

Elarique gestured for his remaining Dire Avengers to remain where they were, and leapt at his foe. His hissing blade was met by the enemy's staff and, for a moment, the two weapons crackled together, energy fields clashing, before the necron pulled away and readdressed, swinging his weapon round in a blindingly fast arc and smashing the autarch's flight pack. The sundered wings dropped to the ground and the necron barked what Elarique supposed to be laughter.

'You like playing, do you?' asked the autarch through gritted teeth, pain coursing down his spine. 'I shall remember that when I carve you into a hundred pieces.' He lunged low and his blade struck an armoured leg, carving a deep gash into the golden plate. Almost instantly, it closed and repaired, and in moments there was no sign that the necron had ever been struck.

'Foolish mortal,' grated his opponent in an approximation of the ancient eldar language, his clumsy mispronunciations stoking Elarique's fury. 'I am eternal. I cannot tire. I cannot slow. I cannot fail. You will do all of these, and you will die.' It swung the staff in an overhead blow. Elarique threw himself to the side and barely avoided being gutted by the backswing. He rolled to his feet, under the necron's guard, and battered its chest and shoulder with a flurry of blows. One of its arms fell limp, useless until it repaired. The autarch did not intend to give it the chance.

Suddenly, the waystone on his chest flared with heat and he felt a presence, the warmth of another eldar soul sharing his form. He smiled as this interloper's thoughts mingled with his and he understood what – who – she was. Then he returned his full focus to the battle before him.

He swung his blade high, aiming directly for the grinning metal skull. The overlord moved faster than seemed possible for its bulky metal frame, and then Elarique was sprawled on his belly. He rolled and was up, shuriken pistol pulled from its holster and firing shots into the necron at the speed of thought. It staggered, projectiles jutting from its chest, vital systems sparking, and it slowed. Elarique pressed the attack, blade flashing as he forced it back step by step, its staff a blur as it parried every strike.

Then Elarique dropped and drove his sword through the souldark's leg,

severing it. As it fell, as if in slow motion, he spun around and removed its head, which hit the hard earth and bounced, landing at the feet of its one remaining praetorian, the rest laid low by the Dire Avengers, who now cheered Elarique's name.

He paused, allowing himself a moment to collect his thoughts. He made to commune with the spirit that had entered his waystone, but she was gone. He wondered... But there was no time for that. The necron commander may have been defeated, but the battle was still in the balance.

And then it no longer was.

A crescent-shaped aircraft swooped down and opened fire, and Elarique Swiftblade rolled to avoid the deadly blasts from its weapons. He watched in horror as his remaining Dire Avengers were consumed by fire, and he screamed, a sound of rage and fury. So busy was he mourning that he never saw the necron overlord rise from where it had fallen, still headless, staff clutched in skeletal hands, raised to strike. So busy was Elarique Swiftblade screaming his grief to the heavens that he never felt the blow that killed him.

Eldorath loosed his grip on the skeins and fell back into himself. His eyes snapped open.

'Swiftblade!'

'My lord Starbane?'

Eldorath focused and saw a figure kneeling before him, camouflaged robes sweeping the floor and covering form-fitting blue armour. Grey hair was pulled into a tall topknot held with a golden band, and a long rifle, worked with an amethyst stone, was strapped across his back.

'Illic,' said the seer, his voice quavering with grief and fear. 'My foresight has failed again. I have just seen... Lord Swiftblade...'

'Aye, lord seer,' whispered Illic Nightspear. 'The situation on Carnac is graver than we thought.'

Both eldar, seer and outcast, were silent for a moment. Eldorath calmed himself, immersed himself briefly in the infinity circuit, allowing the thoughts and perceptions of the long-dead to flow over, around, through him. The mood was mournful, and angry. Alaitocii were dead. Revenge must be had. Eldorath came back to himself.

'The Avatar will not awaken,' he murmured. 'The Young King remains inviolate.'

'Elarique?'

‘Will die,’ said Starbane, voice cracking.

‘This will not happen,’ said a third voice. Both seer and pathfinder turned to see a figure silhouetted in the light at the entrance to the sanctum. It moved towards them, resolving into a warrior in crimson aspect armour, crafted to appear as if it burned when the light caught it. Over the armour, the eldar wore robes of black in the style of archaic mourning garb. He was unhelmed; his face narrow and pale, with eyes of deep amber burning out from beneath long black hair. ‘This fate cannot come to pass. I will prevent it.’

‘Crimson Hunter...’ breathed Illic Nightspear, awe in his voice. Eldorath understood. It was only rarely that the Aspect Warriors of the Crimson Hunters came aboard the craftworld proper, preferring the sanctuary of their satellite and the kinship with their craft. For their exarch to venture into Alaitoc itself...

‘You know what is to come to pass, Keladry Ragefyre?’ asked Eldorath.

The exarch nodded. ‘I offer my ships, and the lives of my pupils. And my own, of course.’

‘Yes,’ said Eldorath. ‘You can reach Carnac in time to stop the yngiract craft from distracting Swiftblade. Prevent his fall. Perhaps the world can still be saved, and revenge had.’ He paused. ‘Something comes to me. A scrap of prophecy, perhaps, or a dream. It is hard to tell in these days, but... “When the golden one falls beneath the swift blade, strike.” Pass this to all in the force, Ragefyre. It may be of use.’

‘I have something more,’ said Ragefyre, his lilting voice curiously hesitant. ‘The souls of those lost to me, pilots of great skill.’

‘I do not understand,’ Illic said. ‘What use are souls—’

‘You propose to use wraithfighters, Ragefyre?’ Eldorath’s tone was sharp. He had never approved of the terror-weapon that was the Hemlock wraithfighter, or of the sacrifices required by those who piloted them. But still, the situation was desperate. He softened his voice. ‘I agree. I shall rouse the spritseers, and we will depart immediately.’

‘We, my lord Starbane?’ asked the exarch. ‘You will join us on Carnac, though you risk your life?’

‘Aye, exarch,’ said Eldorath, his eyes meeting Keladry’s amber orbs. ‘Through my errors, many eldar have fallen on that world, as Lord Nightspear knows. If any more are to die, I will see it happen with my own eyes. Or I will die with them.’

Maireth Voidwalker rode the waystones of the warriors on Carnac, slipping from

one to another, watching for the moment the dead had predicted. She needed to be careful though... If she lingered too long in any body, she risked losing herself, or dying if her host did. At least that would cheat her fate, though not in the way she would like...

She darted across the battlefield clad in the blue armour of a Dire Avenger. She fired her shuriken catapult from the hip as she dove into cover behind a wrecked grav-tank, watching with satisfaction as the blade-edged projectiles slammed into warrior constructs, severing metal limbs and damaging vital systems. Several of the necrons fell, the viridian glow dimming from the eye sockets of their skull-like visages. Several other members of her squad joined her behind the downed Falcon, the exarch amongst them. He signalled to them in Alaitocii battle-sign to target a squad of heavier necrons, armed with great, double-barrelled weapons that glowed the same eldritch green as their eyes.

Maireth exulted in this form of combat. It was alien to her, to be so close to the foe, to see the light bleed from their eyes as death claimed them. To be in this body, fighting in this way... And then, from her left, a great floating machine, long and lined with metal ribs, emerged from behind a cloud of drifting mist. It fired once and the world disappeared and—

She was a Howling Banshee and parried blows from a necron's blade, the energised sword gripped in her hand flashing faster than the eye could follow to deflect precise strikes that would have removed her arm or head. The shuriken pistol in her other hand whined and the immortal warrior, towering above her, raised its great coffin-shaped shield to deflect them. She ducked beneath the shield and screamed in rage, channeling all her emotions over her impending death into the shout. Her Banshee mask turned her fury into a monstrous howl that momentarily rocked her foe. She drove her power sword deep into her opponent's body before spinning. The blade came free, bisecting the necron's torso.

Maireth barely felt the pain of the necron's last blow as its hyperphase sword split her from groin to sternum and—

She hunkered down atop the cliff-face, hidden from view by the cameleoline weave of her cloak, watching the battle unfold. Through the scope of her longrifle, she tracked a group of heavy warrior-forms wired into flying weapons

platforms. She calmly followed one as it approached a knot of combatants, green-armoured Striking Scorpions who danced around a necron commander with a long-bladed scythe, trading blows in a blur of chainsword and scythe before darting back out of reach of the necron's long sweeping strikes. She watched as the barrel of the Destroyer's weapon glowed with viridian balefire and she breathed out, ordering the psychically-attuned rifle to fire.

There was a soft *pop* and a laser-guided needle lanced from the barrel. The distance was huge, but in moments, the shot hit the necron construct's weapon power cell, which exploded, consuming the Destroyer in green fire. Two more shots and the other two Destroyers were similarly disabled. Maireth turned her sights back to the combat, seeing that most of the Scorpions were down. Only the exarch remained standing, his heavy powered claw swinging to deflect the blows from the necron's warscythe.

She aimed for the lord's eye socket, the baleful green glow the only thing in her consciousness... No, wait, there was a green light, but not from there. She looked up from her scope and saw that a viridian glow pulsed around her. Fear filled her and she turned, staring directly into the single pulsing eye of a necron carrying a long-barrelled weapon, which was pointed directly at her head. She raised her rifle quicker than thought, but it was too late. The necron fired and—

She steadied the starcannon attached to the Vyper's weapons platform. Her grip was tight on the gun as the pilot jinked and wove through the chaos of the battle. She saw a group of warriors below, exchanging shots with an entrenched guardian squad. She squeezed the trigger and reduced the necrons to molten slag in a stream of plasma fire, thrilling at the deadly potential of the weapon.

The pilot veered towards a large, spider-like monstrosity that spewed forth swarms of tiny scarabs, and Maireth turned the weapon on it, smoothly loosing a blast of incandescent energy, vaporising it. But the minuscule creatures it had created came for her, taking to the sky on wings of metal. They landed on the Vyper and began eating away at it. Panic filled her as one quickly gnawed through the containment bottle for the starcannon. The Vyper exploded with the unleashed fury of a star gone nova and—

She stalked through the carnage, turning her Reaper missile launcher left and right, releasing its explosive payload and turning away before the projectile even hit the target. She knew it would. It always did. She exulted in the destruction, in the ruin she brought to this ancient enemy. Her brothers and sisters did likewise,

and as one, they sang a deep funereal dirge, a song from the Long Ago that praised the Bloody-Handed One and stirred Maireth's blood even as their mighty weapons reaped a dreadful harvest in His name.

A sound from behind drew Maireth's attention and she turned, already firing. Her first missile went straight through her foe, its serpentine, metal form simply fading into nothingness as it glided towards her. A second shot missed, and then a third, as the creature evaded the missiles with sinuous movements. And then it was on her, physical again, wrapping itself around her, squeezing the breath from her lungs as its tail constricted. Its claws, great shimmering blades, flashed and—

She was at the heart of the battle. She was sharing the body of the high autarch himself, Elarique Swiftblade and, unlike the others, he knew that she was with him. He laughed as he launched himself at the commander of the yngiract force.

Maireth watched in detached awe as Elarique swung his blade high, bringing it crashing down towards the alien's grinning gold skull in a graceful arc. The necron stepped to one side faster than she would have believed possible and the blade sliced through empty air. The overlord's staff struck the autarch across the back and he fell, sprawling on the hard earth. In a heartbeat, he was rolling and up, snap shots from his shuriken pistol causing it to stagger back as he came around and readdressed.

A flurry of blows put it on the back foot, his sword impacting again and again against the ornate staff as the necron desperately parried every strike. Maireth remained in the autarch's waystone, knowing that his skill at arms was greater than she could dream of. If she dared to try to control his body, it would mean his death. Briefly, she wondered if that had been true of the others she had puppeted, and the thought grieved her.

Around them, a squad of Dire Avengers held off the warlord's praetorian bodyguards, bursts of pinpoint shuriken fire keeping them away from the duel.

Elarique struck low, his blade cutting through the leg of the enemy commander, and then spun and parted the necron's head from its shoulders.

It collapsed, and he turned to aid his warriors as an exultant cry of 'Swiftblade!' went up from the eldar who had witnessed the combat—

When the golden one falls beneath the swift blade, strike...

Maireth Voidwalker came back to herself. A spiritseer, she had flitted through

the waystones of warriors in the battle, waiting for the moment that Eldorath Starbane had foreseen. The instructions had been given to all those joining the assault, and the golden one had now fallen. And now it was time.

For a second, her body felt alien, *other*. For a second, she grieved for the deaths she had just witnessed, for the lives that had been sold in the name of stopping the ancient ones, though she also thanked the dead gods of her people that she had fled their waystones in time to allow their souls to be saved. If another's soul were to be claimed by She Who Thirsts by her actions... The thought chilled her.

She took a deep breath. If the prophecies of the dead were to be believed – and the seers had informed her, sadness in their eyes, that they were, then her purple stone would be warm and filled by the end of this war. Her path, she had been told, would end here, on Carnac. This would be the last world that she would see with living eyes or touch with living flesh. Carnacian air would be the last to fill her lungs. And this would be her last battle, unless she assented to be placed in a wraith construct for some future conflict.

Be not sad, whispered the spirit that shared control of the Hemlock with her, the soul of Kyanorath, a long-dead warrior who had walked the Path of the Crimson Hunter before his fall. *Death is not to be feared, Maireth Voidwalker. You, spiritseer, know that more than any.*

It was true that death, for an eldar of the craftworlds, was almost a second life. Communion in the infinity circuit was a peace of a kind that the lesser races could never experience. And yet... Maireth was young. There was so much more that she had hoped to do, to experience, to *be*.

She was roused from her reverie by the singing of the spirits across the squadron of wraithfighters. It was time.

War calls, they chorused, a dozen voices flowing through her. She joined in, and in the psychic communion she felt the spiritseer pilots of the other vessels do the same, their spirits mingling and imbuing her with strength and purpose, and a bravery she did not feel alone. War was calling, and it would bring her death.

With a thought, Maireth Voidwalker ordered the attack.

A crescent-shaped aircraft swooped down and opened fire, and Elarique Swiftblade rolled to avoid the deadly blasts from its weapons. But those blasts never came. Instead, the enemy ship was pierced by a blinding beam of energy. It continued its steep descent and crashed to the ground amongst a knot of souldark warriors, who were consumed in the fiery explosion that destroyed the

craft.

A shape shot overhead, black and red, followed by more – a dozen in all – of a deep crimson. He recognised the silhouette of the Nightshade interceptor and realised that – from somewhere, though he knew not where – a squadron of Crimson Hunters Aspect Warriors had arrived to turn the tide. As he gazed upwards, he saw also a flight of elegant ships in the blue and gold of Alaitoc, their profile similar to the Nightshades, but with a distinctive central fin... He fought back a tide of distaste as he realised what these were.

‘Hemlocks,’ he hissed. ‘Starbane has unleashed this witchery?’

The Hemlock wraithfighter was a weapon of terror, not one of war. He watched as one of the craft swooped low over a pack of lumbering necron immortals, who raised their double-barrelled cannons to meet it with ineffectual gauss fire. The Hemlock’s weapons flared, and though there was no sign of a discharge, Elarique heard a discordant wail and the necrons fell, like puppets with cut strings. They did not repair, and their bodies did not phase out. Had they been mortal, their spirits would have been hurled into the warp, doomed to spend eternity as the playthings of daemons. What such infernal devices would do to the souldark, Elarique could not guess.

‘It cannot be pleasant though,’ he whispered to himself. ‘Not even upon my greatest foe would I wish it.’ He heard a sound behind him and turned, activating the power field on his sword with a thought and stabbing it straight through the chest of the golden lord, who had self-repaired and had been about to club Elarique with his great staff. He pulled the sword free and the construct collapsed again. It looked up at him through those baleful green eyes, the hatred of millennia gazing at the autarch. Elarique grinned, the look of a predator.

‘Stay down this time,’ he said, and stabbed the necron through the head.

Keladry pulled up from his dive at the last moment, tail scraping the ground in a spray of sparks, and a thrill ran through him at the close call. The Doom Scythe that had been pursuing him crashed into the hard earth at full speed, a billowing green explosion annihilating it. He jinked left and right to avoid the fire of two more and then looped behind. He fired a stream of pulsar fire that caught one of the crescent-shaped craft on its starboard side, buffeting it to the side, before pulling around and stabbing bright lance fire into the other. One of the beams caught something explosive and the necron ship detonated, a green sun flaring briefly into life in the darkening sky.

The other ship rose unsteadily, wobbling in the air even as the hole torn

through it by the pulsar blast began to knit together. Keladry targeted the warrior construct in a nook on top of the ship and let loose more pulsar fire at it. A bright flare erupted around the pilot, clearly an energy field designed to protect it. The exarch let the fire continue as he flew towards the necron ship. Alarms began to blare as collision became imminent.

He grinned and continued. If this would be his death, then what a death!

The stream of crimson pulsar fire battered against the shield until, suddenly, with a blaze of energy, the field collapsed and the pulsar fire destroyed the necron pilot. The Doom Scythe dipped and fell towards the battlefield, and Keladry flew through the space it had occupied moments more, cheated once again of his demise.

The exarch checked the status of his warriors. All were still flying, though he had become separated from them. He located their beacons and turned in their direction. A few seconds and he saw them, locked in battle against ten times their number. The last time he had seen warriors under his command face such odds had been...

'Alianna!'

Keladry ran, his voice echoing through wraithbone corridors as he screamed for his love. He heard laughter, the cruel, dark laughter of a soul that was cold and dead, sustained only by suffering and evil. Around him were the corpses of his crew, his friends, slaughtered by the pirates, their spirit stones cracked and broken, their faces locked in the unimaginable agony of their final moments.

He would not allow the same fate to befall. Alianna.

He turned a corridor and there she was, the cameleoline cloak of a ranger over her armour; pistol trained on a Commorrite. She saw him and turned, and the soulthief seized his chance, knocking the pistol from her grasp and pulling her to him, arm around her throat...

Pulsar and lance fire speared from elegant eldar craft as they wove through a barrage of crackling electricity that emanated from the long-barrelled cannons underslung on the falcate necron flyers. They jinked from side to side, the arcs of tesla fire bubbling paint from their hulls as they passed, but otherwise missing.

Taking a deep breath and clearing his head, Keladry flew into the midst of the combat, targeting a squadron of three Doom Scythes. He signalled to his Crimson Hunters and five of the warriors peeled off and followed him. The enemy squadron faced away from them, hunting a Hemlock wraithfighter that

swept towards the necron ground forces, cutting yngiract down with its blasphemous weaponry.

The Hemlock dove low and the necron flyers followed, tesla blasts burning into the eldar ship's rear. With a thought, Keladry oriented his fighter towards one of the foes, pulling into a steep dive and unleashing laser fire at the craft. Behind him, his Crimson Hunters did the same. Bright beams of energy tore through the necron ship, reducing it to a hulk that slewed down towards the battlefield below. The other two Doom Scythes pulled away in opposite directions, and Keladry ordered that the Crimson Hunters focus on one of the enemy.

'Strength is in numbers,' he said. 'Focus on one enemy. The other can wait.'

That had always been Keladry Ragefyre's way. Focus on one enemy to the exclusion of all others. Kill it and target another. It worked for him in the training domes of the shrine, and it had worked on countless battlefields, against the crude ships and unskilled pilots of the humans, tau and orks. It was basic, and it was blunt, but that was what Keladry was – a weapon to be pointed at the foe and fired, a single-minded force of nature. He had not always been so, but the loss of Alianna... She flashed through his mind: her smile, her laugh, the feel of her skin against his. He hardened his thoughts and focused on the battle. On his impending – and oh so welcome – death.

Maireth breathed a sigh of relief as one of the Doom Scythes raking her Hemlock with fierce streams of electricity slewed away, struck by volleys of pulsar and lance fire from the Crimson Hunters. The other two disengaged and Maireth pulled out of her dive and prepared for another pass.

She avoided the main swirl of combat, wary of the great weapons mounted on the vehicles that floated around the centre of the swirling melee. If she was to avoid her fate, she must take no needless risks.

Instead, she looked to the fringes of the battlefield. She spotted a knot of necrons far from the combat, draped in what looked like cloaks of freshly-flayed skin. Great claws tipped their long arms and they loped towards a squad of guardians who were pinned down by volleys of gauss fire. She locked the distortion scythes on to them, and Kyanorath chimed agreement.

The Hemlock swooped low and sent what passed for souls in those creatures of the damned to oblivion. Exultation fought with disgust in Maireth Voidwalker at the effects of the infernal weaponry.

She pulled the Hemlock back up, searching for another target, and saw the

Nightshade interceptors that had saved her moments before sweep overhead in pursuit of another Doom Scythe. Bright blue streams of energy battered the necron ship, but still it flew, though. The Crimson Hunters continued on, so focused on their kill that they were oblivious to the death that approached... And not just for them.

A stream of lance fire split the necron craft in two, the broken piece tumbling from the sky.

The unliving scythe will be sundered and your end will be at hand.

The other necron flyer that had fled from them had returned, with reinforcements. Fully five of the enemy craft came from behind and beneath them. Their tesla cannons were silent, but great crystal orbs mounted between the long-barrelled weapons glowed a lambent green. Before Maireth could react or warn the Aspect Warriors, the death rays fired. Beams of blinding white light burst from the necron ships, and three of the blood-coloured craft simply disintegrated. Another two were hit in vital systems and, after a moment, exploded.

The black fighter lost a wing, and plummeted towards the ground below.

And Maireth Voidwalker, doomed to die on this world, at this time, was left vulnerable and without protection in front of five Doom Scythes, their death ray emitters recharging as they circled her like apex predators.

Keladry smiled as his Nightshade hurtled towards the ground. If this was his death, he would meet it as a friend. If he was lost to the depredations of warp beasts, he would go to them with a smile. If today was his last day in the universe, he would—

No, Keladry Ragefyre. Your path does not end here. Your part is yet to be played.

A voice, ancient and dry, echoed in Keladry's mind and he felt his body move, activating the control for the interceptor's ejector. The canopy of the ship blasted outwards, carried away by the rushing winds, and as his seat was pushed out of the cockpit with explosive force, his last thought before the gravitational forces threw him into unconsciousness was that he had been cheated of death. Again.

In desperation, Maireth fired her Hemlock's weapons at the approaching Doom Scythes, to no avail. Designed to bring horrific death to infantry far below, the distortion scythes failed to penetrate the shields around the necron pilots. She screamed her rage at Kyanorath, but the only response was a sad and

sympathetic voice in her mind.

Death comes to all, little spiritseer. How we meet it matters as much as that we do.

‘But I’m not ready,’ she wailed. ‘It’s too soon.’

Taking a deep breath, Maireth Voidwalker closed her eyes and began to chant a lament from the Long Ago, a song that was sung even before the Fall, when the eldar race ruled the galaxy. She prepared to meet her death. Through closed eyelids, she saw the bright flare of light that signalled her end.

The light faded, and Maireth opened her eyes. She sat still in the cockpit of the Hemlock. She felt laughter on the edge of her consciousness.

Perhaps it is not yet your time, little spiritseer, whispered Kyanorath.

Maireth surveyed the skies around her Hemlock. The necron ships were all gone. In their place were more Crimson Hunters, four of the red and black craft, wings dipped in mourning for their lost brethren.

A voice came to her over the communications system.

‘The battle in the skies is lost, necromancer. Gather your wraithships. We must flee.’

‘But what of below? What of Lord Swiftblade?’

‘He has come to the same conclusion, spiritseer. His forces fall back.’

Maireth turned her sensors on to the battlefield. The Aspect Warrior was right. The eldar forces were falling back in disciplined lines, harrying the enemy with fire as they went. The other Hemlocks – those that had survived – flew low over the retreating craftworld forces, dissuading the foe from following with their deadly distortion scythes. Maireth cursed softly.

‘Very well. I will mourn for your fallen with you when we reach the ground, Crimson Hunter.’

With heavy heart, Maireth Voidwalker joined the retreat.

‘Explain to me,’ said Elarique Swiftblade slowly, ‘what happened up there.’

It was morning, and after a restless night spent tending to the wounded and mourning for the lost Maireth had been summoned to see the autarch.

‘I don’t understand what you–’ she began, before Elarique interrupted.

‘I have spoken to Lord Starbane. You and your fellows were sent to get into the midst of the foe and reap a mighty toll with your blasphemous weapons. Yet you followed your own agenda instead.’

Elarique looked into her eyes.

‘You and I shared my body for a brief time, Maireth Voidwalker. Our spirits

mingled, and you were laid bare to me.'

He paused, and the implication of his words hit Maireth. Did he know? How could he?

'My lord Swiftblade, I—'

'You seek to avoid a fate foreseen, Voidwalker. This I understand. Know that it is possible. Death can be cheated, but always at a cost. You have cheated the fate that the seers had divined. What will you have to pay, I wonder?'

Sighing, the autarch turned and walked over to the holo-map of the Carnacian geography, marked with eerie green sigils showing the locations of enemy forces, all moving towards the world shrine. He placed a hand over the marker for that spot, the repository for the souls of millennia of Carnacian exodites.

'Sometimes, Maireth, an act of sacrifice is necessary, when there is a greater good to come from it.'

Maireth saw the truth behind his words.

'My sacrifice, lord autarch?'

'I rarely speak in such singular terms, Maireth. It is a truth of our galaxy that great acts of conflict are often mirrored in lesser ones. What is true of one is often true of the other. Your sacrifice may be necessary to serve a greater purpose. As may the sacrifice of this world.'

'You would flee this world? Give the souldark victory? You are a coward!'

Keladry Ragefyre entered blazing with fury, his usually pale face flushed with blood as he spat invective at Elarique.

The autarch turned from the holographic map table. He stared into the exarch's face for a long moment, his eyes dark and cold, and when he spoke, it brought a chill to her bones.

'You speak of cowardice, Ragefyre? You who seeks to embrace oblivion? You who are willing to sacrifice other precious souls in your own pursuit of death? How many of your acolytes died?'

Keladry just glared. Elarique shook his head.

'You disgust me. You have no conception of the greater picture of which Carnac is just a small part. Sometimes, we must accept defeat in order to secure a larger victory.'

'Larger victory?' Keladry's voice dripped with contempt. 'What use is that to us now?'

'And what will your own death achieve, especially at the cost of innocent lives?' Elarique waved a hand towards Maireth. 'Victory does require sacrifice, it is true. But sacrifice for a cause is not the same as wasting a life that has

meaning still. What if I were to tell you, Ragefyre, that the seers have seen a greater role for you in Alaitoc's future? Darkness is coming, we all know this. The Rhana Dandra approaches, and the skeins of fate draw us together in ways we could never expect. Sometimes, a single life can be all that stands between the craftworld and oblivion.' He glanced sideways at Maireth 'Or sometimes, a single death.'

Keladry snarled. 'I care not for words. I will seek the fate I choose. Nothing else matters.'

'You would put your own selfish desires above those of Alaitoc, above those of our very race? Alas, you are truly lost to us. Even the soulthieves of Commorragh would be less vainglorious.'

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Keladry ran, his voice echoing through wraithbone corridors as he screamed for his love. He heard laughter, the cruel, dark laughter of a soul that was cold and dead, sustained only by suffering and evil. Around him were the corpses of his crew, his friends, slaughtered by the pirates, their spirit stones cracked and broken, their faces locked in the unimaginable agony of their final moments.

He would not allow the same fate to befall. Alianna.

He turned a corridor and there she was, the cameleoline cloak of a ranger over her armour, pistol trained on a Commorrite. She saw him and turned, and the soulthief seized his chance, knocking the pistol from her grasp and pulling her to him, arm around her throat, her own pistol aimed at her head.

Keladry pulled his longrifle from his back, priming and aiming it in a fluid motion.

'Release her, dark one, or you die.'

The monster laughed that cruel laugh.

'Then kill me, little outcast. The fleshworkers of Commorragh will clone me and revive me. But your lover here will be dead by my final act in this body. And then I will come for you.' The soulthief leered at Alianna and whispered something to her that Keladry couldn't hear. His focus shifted for a moment, from the scope of his rifle to Alianna's face, the pleading look in her eyes.

He heard, rather than saw, a pistol fire...

'You dare say such things?' shouted the Crimson Hunter, pulling Elarique around and delivering a strike to his face. The autarch fell back, blood flowing from a broken nose. 'You compare me to the lost? You know not my heart!'

‘I know much, for I see clearly,’ said Swiftblade quietly as he pulled himself to his feet and stood before the exarch. ‘I see that your name is apt, Ragefyre, for you have been consumed by the flames of your fury. I pray that you can emulate the Phoenix and emerge unscathed.’

‘As do I.’ A dry voice, redolent with age, sounded from behind the trio.

Maireth turned slowly, and fell to one knee as she saw who had spoken. Swathed in robes of the deepest blue, adorned with eldritch runes and representations of the skeins of fate picked out in golden thread, stood Eldorath Starbane. The farseer leant heavily on his long wraithbone staff as he moved slowly towards the exarch and autarch.

‘Off your knees, spiritseer,’ he whispered to her as he passed. ‘I am unworthy of worship. Save that for the gods and those with the egos of gods. Like these fools.’ He gestured towards the pair of warriors with his left hand, and Maireth marvelled at the glittering crystalline limb. Seeing her staring, Eldorath shrugged his long sleeves back over the artificial hand and smiled sadly at her.

‘One way or another, my limbs would be crystal eventually. This was simply sooner than I had expected.’ His gaze hardened again as he looked at the autarch. ‘The threat we face here on Carnac is grave. If we are to defeat it, we must all be working as one, not pursuing our own agendas.’

‘If we are to defeat it...?’ echoed Maireth. ‘Then we are not abandoning the world to the souldark?’

‘Abandon Carnac? Certainly not.’ There was steel in Eldorath’s voice and he clenched his crystal fist so hard that Maireth feared it might shatter. ‘While a single yngiract walks on this world, we shall defend it.’

‘Even at the cost of all our lives?’ asked Elarique quietly. Starbane turned to him with an appraising look, but said nothing. He returned his gaze to Maireth.

‘You will be the key to our next attack, you and your wraithfighters.’

A thrill of fear ran through the spiritseer, but she fought it down and proudly lifted her head. Elarique’s words had inspired her. She would face what came, and she would do so with courage. ‘What would you have us do, lord?’

‘We return to the original plan,’ said Eldorath, casting a pointed look at Elarique. ‘The assassination of the necron commanders.’

‘Tried once before, by the Nightspear and his starstriders,’ said Elarique. ‘At your command, Lord Starbane. What makes you think we will fare any better this time?’

Maireth could see anger and sorrow warring on the farseer’s face. ‘Many died, Alaitocii and Carnacian,’ he whispered. ‘More blood on my... hands. And more

still, perhaps, but we must save this world. We cannot let another planet fall to the souldark. I *will* not.'

Elarique continued as the farseer fell silent. 'Cut their Crone's Cords, Maireth Voidwalker. The Traveller, the Diviner, the Infinite—'

'And the Stormlord.' Eldorath's voice was steel again, his artificial fist clenched. 'Send his twisted soul screaming to oblivion.'

Elarique stepped close to Maireth and lowered his voice.

'This will be dangerous, spiritseer, and will require much courage and no little sacrifice. Are you ready for that?'

'I am, Lord Swiftblade. If giving my life will help to win this war, then that will be a fair price to pay.'

'And you, Keladry Ragefyre?' asked Eldorath, his voice ancient and dry. 'Would you allow the effort I put into saving your life to be wasted?'

'No, my lord Starbane. If there is a craft for me, I will fight for you.'

'Then we may have a small chance of victory. Protect the wraithships, Ragefyre. Live, so that our foes may die. Let Maireth and her spiritseers do their work, and we may see Carnac saved.' The farseer paused. 'One spiritseer must return to Alaitoc, Maireth. For... reinforcements. A precaution.'

She nodded, his meaning clear. 'Nestra Orphiel's ship was damaged. I will send her back. She will gather souls.'

The dead would walk on Carnac. As if they weren't already.

Maireth scanned the enemy army for signs of its commanders. The horde below was stretched to the horizon. Even the monstrous firepower of the Engines of Vault was making only the barest dent in their lines. Super-heavy Scorpions and Cobras destroyed entire phalanxes of souldark with single shots, while nimble Vypers and Lynx attack craft targeted low-ranking leaders, disrupting the command structure to draw out the enemy commanders.

How many tomb worlds had been emptied to field this army, Maireth wondered? What victories could Alaitoc have had by striking elsewhere, sacrificing Carnac for the greater good of the ongoing war?

Focus, little spiritseer, cautioned Kyanorath. *A target awaits.*

Maireth saw what the spirit meant. At the heart of a tight knot of heavily armed and armoured yngiract stood the golden necron lord who had duelled with Swiftblade the previous day. The damage wrought by the autarch was gone and the overlord directed its servants as they poured fire at the skimmers that harassed them. Maireth sent a psychic command to her fellow spiritseers and

guided the Hemlock towards the enemy leader.

To her left, she saw a pair of Crimson Hunters, one of the craft hastily repainted black. Ragefyre. He and his fellow Aspect Warrior swept skywards, vigilant for threats to the wraithfighters. As long as he stayed so and did not give in to his nihilistic urges...

Maireth shook the thought away. Elarique and Eldorath had been persuasive. They had convinced her to put the good of the war first. Surely Keladry would have come to the same conclusion? A soft chime indicated that she was in range of the golden necron. Maireth realised that she was holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, and fired.

The newly-repainted Nightshade felt strange to Keladry. The kinship he had built up with his previous fighter was missing, and this new one felt sluggish and slow to respond to his commands. He would have to be more careful, he had been told. It would take time before he would be able to manoeuvre as fluidly as before. *Careful*. He had scoffed at the notion.

Ilthana flew alongside him, matching his every movement. He had been pleased that she had been one of the few survivors of the previous battle, though she had not spoken to him since his return to the camp. None of his pupils had, so deep was their mourning.

He did not care particularly. In the end, death was death.

They circled above the Hemlock squadron and watched as the terror-craft fired their distortion scythes. A swathe of the enemy fell, never to rise again, amongst them a golden-skinned lord of their kind. The first of many such, if the day were to be won.

There was a perceptible change in the necron deployment after the lord fell. Keladry watched as heavy craft – great slab-sided constructs bristling with glowing weapons and topped by great luminous crystals – began to drift towards the wraithfighters.

‘It is time to strike,’ he signalled to Ilthana and the other pair of Crimson Hunters who patrolled the skies around the spiritseers. ‘The enemy know our plan. Retribution comes.’

He banked to the left, Ilthana matching the manoeuvre, and trained his weapons on the long, spinal shape of a light necron transport. He opened fire, and laser energy cut through the craft, bisecting it. The two halves crashed into the tightly-packed necrons below, metal skeletons slewing from its remains and knocking others to the ground. Keladry swept around, looking for his next target.

One of the slab-sided monoliths closed on the Hemlocks, the huge crystal embedded in its upper surface glowing with baleful viridian energy. Ilthana fired first, and a pinpoint bright lance strike destroyed one of the smaller weapons mounted at the corners of the great oblong construct. The crystal atop it flared, white-hot, and unleashed great beams of energy, striking a wraithfighter from the sky. Keladry let loose his rage, pulsar and lance fire burning against the infernal vehicle, doing nothing. He fired again, and again, to little effect. The device's weapons glowed again and another arc of verdant fury split the sky. Another Hemlock was shattered, and two of the three remaining runes representing his Crimson Hunters winked out. Only he and Ilthana remained. Keladry focused on the green crystal. If he could destroy that, the vehicle would fall.

His weapons fire continued to batter ineffectually against the monstrosity. Another white glow, another arc of energy and Ilthana was no more. With a wordless cry of rage, the exarch pushed his Nightshade to full speed. This was it. The moment of his death, and he would take this abominable device with him.

Maireth watched in horror as the massive yngiract vehicle blasted fighter after fighter from the sky, Hemlock and Nightshade alike. She jinked and wove to avoid the arcs of cruel energy that it fired, but she knew that her luck could not hold forever. She watched as Ragefyre and his fellow Crimson Hunter poured fire into the Monolith, and she saw that it was useless. She dove low as crackling electrical arcs flared through the space she had occupied, leaving a searing after-image on her retinas. A near-miss. One more like that...

She saw the last remaining Crimson Hunter – besides the exarch himself – fall, caught so directly in a beam of green force that it simply no longer was. Only Keladry Ragefyre remained now, last of his shrine. If he were to die, the Bloody Blades would be no more. No one could walk the path without an exarch to train them. And Keladry, it seemed, did not care. He accelerated towards the Monolith, clearly intent on ramming it in a futile act of self-sacrifice.

'Ragefyre, no! Remember the autarch's words!' she screamed across the communications channels, but there was no response. Only one course of action remained.

Sometimes, a single life can be all that stands between the craftworld and oblivion. Or sometimes, a single death.

Maireth Voidwalker took a deep breath and allowed her consciousness to flow from her body, through the world spirit of Carnac, seeking a particular waystone...

Keladry gasped in shock as suddenly, without warning, he was no longer alone.

‘Damn you, Lord Starbane,’ he muttered. ‘I control my own actions. My end is now here.’

I am not Eldorath Starbane. A voice, soft and mellifluous flowed through him. He knew it; he had heard it already this day. Voidwalker. He went to speak, but could not.

Silence, exarch. This is a time for you to listen. You wish to die. I didn't understand that before, but now, sharing your soul, I see... Alianna. That was her name. You have to let her go. She can never again be yours.

‘No!’ screamed Keladry. ‘She can't. I lost her to the dark kin. She is dead and our souls will never be joined!’

Show me, Keladry Ragefyre. Let me in. Let me see the death of your love.

Keladry opened his mind and let Maireth in to his darkest memory.

‘Alianna!’

Keladry ran, his voice echoing through wraithbone corridors as he screamed for his love. He heard laughter, the cruel, dark laughter of a soul that was cold and dead, sustained only by suffering and evil. Around him were the corpses of his crew, his friends, slaughtered by the pirates, their spirit stones cracked and broken, their faces locked in the unimaginable agony of their final moments.

He would not allow the same fate to befall. Alianna.

He turned a corridor and there she was, the cameleoline cloak of a ranger over her armour, pistol trained on a Commorrite. She saw him and turned, and the soulthief seized his chance, knocking the pistol from her grasp and pulling her to him, arm around her throat, her own pistol aimed at her head.

Keladry pulled his longrifle from his back, priming and aiming it in a fluid motion.

‘Release her, dark one, or you die.’

The monster laughed that cruel laugh.

‘Then kill me, little outcast. The fleshworkers of Commorragh will clone me and revive me. But your lover here will be dead by my final act in this body. And then I will come for you.’ The soulthief leered at Alianna and whispered something to her that Keladry couldn't hear. His focus shifted for a moment, from the scope of his rifle to Alianna's face, the pleading look in her eyes.

He heard, rather than saw, a pistol fire...

He fell, blood spilling from the wound in his stomach. He lay on his back, pain filling him, and looked up at the face that loomed over him.

'Alianna...' he breathed.

'I am sorry, my love. But he offered me my life in exchange for yours. I... don't want to die.'

Keladry tried to plead with her, to beg for his life, but he couldn't. He would sacrifice himself for her, he knew that.

'Come, young one,' he heard the soulthief say. 'Your life can begin anew in the dark city.'

'Alianna...' he whispered again as darkness took him.

'You understand now, spiritseer?' spat Keladry. She did not die, but she is lost all the same. Worse than lost.'

Oh, Keladry, said Maireth. I never imagined... I am so sorry.

'I was rescued by another ranger ship,' Keladry told her. 'Returned to Alaitoc, and restored to health. I fell into rage, into the Path of the Warrior, and became trapped. The only way out now is death, and the end to pain.'

There can be another end, Keladry. While Alianna lives, there is hope. We can find her, you and I, and bring her back.

'I... Why, Maireth Voidwalker? Why would you do this? Why not, like those before you, tell me that she is lost and to forget her?'

Because you cannot. I know this. I walk with the dead, and through them I understand the living. And I know that you can never live – truly live – until Alianna is returned... or released into the infinity circuit.

'I... yes. Yes. You are right, and I thank you. Return to your body, seer, before—'

The entire exchange, conducted at the speed of thought, had taken only seconds. But still, it was too late. Keladry watched, and Maireth watched through him, as an arc of electricity from the weapons on the necron war machine annihilated the Hemlock wraithfighter that sat motionless in the sky, and the spiritseer's body was consumed by fire.

Keladry's waystone flared a bright crimson and warmed. With a cry of rage, he pulled hard on the throttle, avoiding impact with the monolithic necron construct by mere metres.

'Maireth?'

I... am here, Keladry. Your waystone saved me. It... is my spirit stone now. You must return me to Alaitoc. And then I will join you, in spirit or in wraith-form, on your quest for Alianna.

He angled back down and surveyed the battlefield. The day was lost. The

wrecks of grav-tanks and Engines of Vaul littered the plain, and another trio of heavy necron vehicles closed on the few remaining Hemlocks.

Maireth had destroyed the golden lord – a minor member of the necron hierarchy, at best – and the response was overwhelming. To try to kill the others – the Traveller, the Stormlord – would be ruinous. The day was definitely lost. And, apparently, Lord Swiftblade agreed. Keladry Ragefyre opened his communications channels, to hear orders from the autarch, orders to all forces to disengage, to evacuate to the Crescent-Kharellion, the primary webway gate on the world.

The eldar had failed.

Carnac was lost.

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Hailing from East Kilbride in Scotland, GRAEME LYON moved to Nottingham in 2011 to join the ranks of the Black Library as a Desk Editor. His first published short story, 'The Hunted', was featured in the monthly digital anthology *Hammer and Bolter*. It is well documented that Graeme has a deep loathing of cheese, likes dogs but fears cats. He also makes a mean chocolate chip cookie.

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