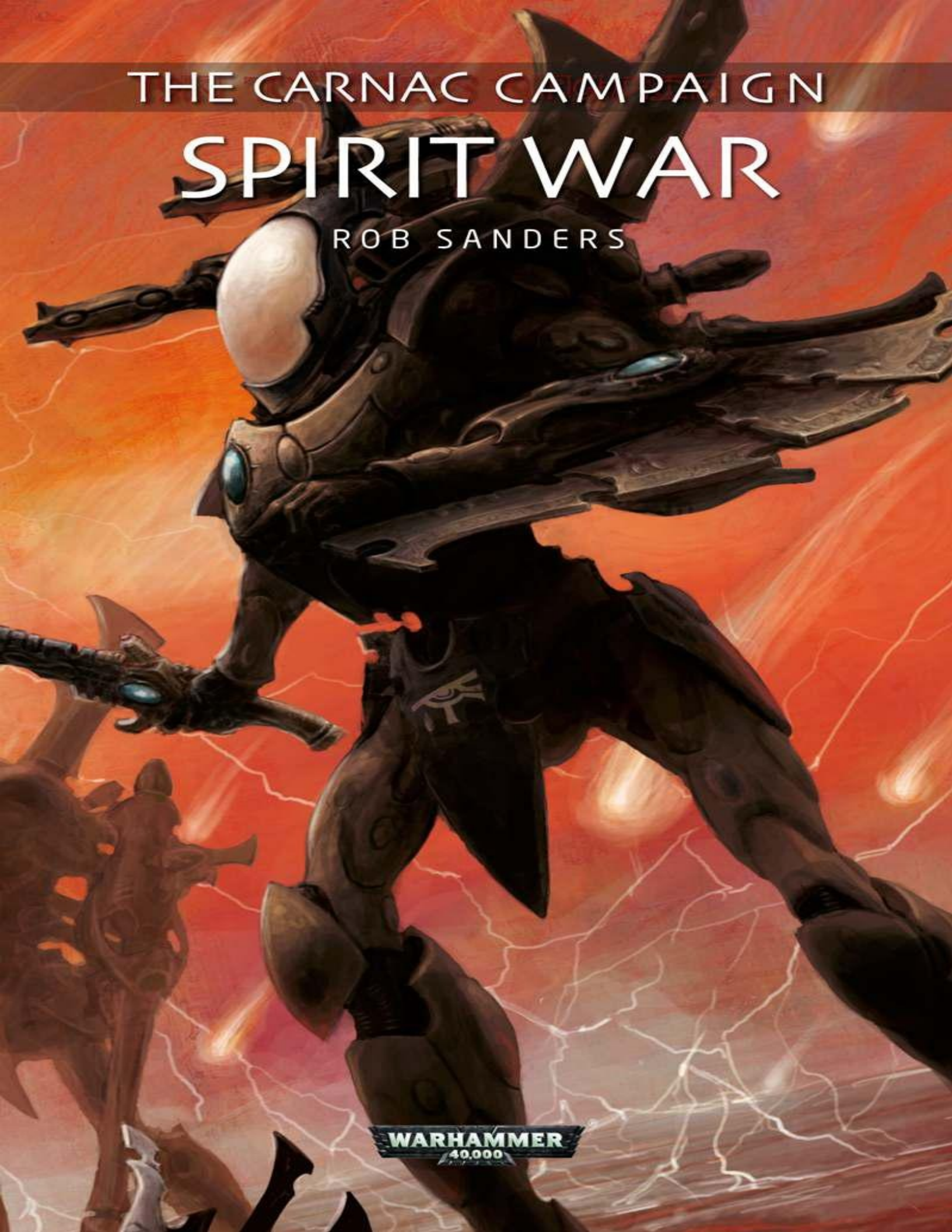


THE CARNAC CAMPAIGN

SPIRIT WAR

ROB SANDERS



WARHAMMER
40,000

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THE CARNAC CAMPAIGN: EPISODE THREE

SPIRIT WAR

Rob Sanders

He was Kael Ra – Prince Ecliptic of the Alaitocii. Avenger. Autarch... Legend.

His diresword knew only its desire to end enemies. His aspect armour was slick with the drizzle of barbarian blood. Gore dripped from the plume of his high-helm, while the fury of greenskin shells – crude but as unrelenting as a storm – turned to lead-splatter against the fluxing pulse of his energy shield. His craftworld kin were there: lithe, shadowy figures, whose blades and shuriken-fire was the bladed shaft of a spear thrust through the meat of the enemy ranks – a spear of which Kael Ra was the tip. The monstrous droves – living testaments to obstinate rage – split before the martial grace of the Prince Ecliptic's advance. The orks bellowed their choler and contempt for the sleight craftworld host but could do nothing to stop the bloody, limb-strewn path the Alaitocii warriors were carving through their hordes. Kael Ra was a vision of serenity – cold, precise and deadly.

His diresword sang with the balletic demise of invader greenskins, while his body arced and extended about its movements, guiding it to greater devastation. Brute-bore weaponry spat its point-blank-range fury into the sizzling shell of the autarch's shielding, while Kael Ra whipped his shuriken pistol about him like the grip of a whip, allowing the trailing flourishes of monomolecular death to scythe through the soon-to-be-dead. All the while, Alaitocii guardians, warriors and the high priests of the god of war, fought at their autarch's back in choreographed darkness and determination.

For a moment, Kael Ra was lost to the battle. It was not rage or confusion. It was fugue not of the body or mind but of the soul. Thousands of foes had died before his blade on hundreds of worlds. Which was this? He had fought the greenskin plague on Ath-Ethon, on Lorachi and Talhennor, and many fringe worlds beyond. The pang of uncertainty shot through his heart, the kind of fear

and uncertainty that the alien enemy had failed to put there. As his killing thrusts and elegant bladework took apart oncoming brutes, Kael Ra allowed himself a moment of consideration, a second or two away from the calculating contrivance of battle. Had he become lost on some darkened path? He had walked many but none seemed as potent and captivating as this. The figures about his pirouetting form – both foe and fellow eldar – appeared bleached in darkness. Their shapes were immediate and recognisable but their movements blotted into one another.

His diresword skewered one beastbreed, before slipping it out of the carcass and flicking gore into the face of another. As the monster greenskin blinked the muck from its eyes, it found that its throat had been slashed open by the twirling sweep of the autarch's shuriken pistol. A clawed arm flew off here, a tusk-twisted head there. Kael Ra ducked. He back flipped. He rolled, each movement taking him clear of a felling broadblade, crackling power claw or stream of lead. Crouching down in the blood-mulch and dismembered body parts, the Prince Ecliptic span on the toe-tip of his boot, his blade cutting through the gristle and bone of shins and ankles. Monsters fell about him, and like the harvester in the field Kael Ra reared to survey the fruits of his labour. It was then that he saw her.

A single figure in the robes of a seer – her hair plaited into silver buns above her ears – walked through the enemy mobs with a tranquil abandon. It was as though the drooling beasts were not there; charging, wildly swinging and firing their weapons, roaring at the Alaitoc and each other. In turn, the greenskin monstrosities seemed unaware of her. She drifted through their throngs of violence and alien hatred, her steps light and her eyes on the Prince Ecliptic. Unlike the spiky silhouette of the enemy or the dark assurance of the warriors at his back, the wandering eldar ghosted her way through the scene. She positively glowed and Kael Ra felt drawn to her strangeness.

Fearing she was one of his number – a straggler cut off from the spearhead by a barricade of furious green flesh – Kael Ra turned the lethal point of the battle formation aside. With his pistol empty and holstered, the autarch surged into the enemy ranks. With footwork fast and the grace of economical blade work, Kael Ra slipped through the beasts. Using his slender gauntlet like a grapnel, the Prince Ecliptic anchored himself on a greenskin giant, visiting centrifugal kicks and sword sweeps through the surrounding creatures. Greenskins fired on the ghost moving through their ranks but only served to maul further the toppling bodies Kael Ra left in his wake. The shadowy forces of the Alaitoc craftworld moved through the neat carnage, the point-blank shuriken fury of their number like a razored wedge being driven through the muscle and sinew of the ork

hordes. Bestial clusters of greenskins fell upon the Prince Ecliptic – drawn down on the threat by animal instinct. Mob after blood-fevered mob dropped about the autarch, his lightning thrusts punching through their heart-skewered carcasses, and arcs gliding through throats and the tops of skulls.

Rising from the demolished collection of greenskin bodies, Kael Ra watched the seer walk purposely towards him. She was a spectral vision advancing through their ranks, unseen by their alien eyes. The Prince Ecliptic's gaze rose into the murk of the battlefield sky. There too, war was being waged. The heavens were overcast. Cloud banks flashed with the gunfire of dogfights and detonating aircraft. Kael Ra watched as the bulbous outline of a greenskin bomber dropped out of the clouds. Chugging its way in for a low pass, Kael Ra could see its belly, swollen with ordnance. It would have worried the autarch if it were not for the pair of Nightwing fighters searing up behind it, accelerating to attack speed. Within moments they had streamed through the greenskin obscenity with their lances and banked skyward in search of more challenging prey. With precision fire and ease the Alaitocii fighter pilots had burned through the bomber's engines. As the oppression above swallowed the Nightwings, the ork bomber fell into a messy and inevitable descent.

It was like a nightmare from which the autarch could not wake. Hacking and stabbing his way through the barbarian hordes, Kael Ra was powerless to stop the unfolding tragedy. The bomber turned as it tumbled, rolling onto its side and slamming into the enemy lines. Impossibly, the ork at the stick found its way to some kind of crash landing. Like the fin of an ocean predator, the aircraft's remaining wing cut its way through the greenskin swarm. Alien brutes died in their droves, splattered against the flaming fuselage or smeared into the landscape under the beastcraft's bulk. As it came to a stop, fires raging through its superstructure, Kael Ra went to call out. His lips moved but no sound proceeded from them. The Alaitoc force at his back never got the warning he intended for them. The flames had spread through the ordnance bay and like an erupting nova, the fat aircraft exploded – turning the battle gloom to brilliant white.

Moments later, the Prince Ecliptic came to. He was on his back. Somewhere in the distance, the wreckage of the greenskin bomber was still throwing an infernal glow across the battlefield. The force of the explosion had thrown him some distance. He could hear the agonies of his warriors in the darkness beyond and the butchery of greenskin savages falling on the shattered remains of his spearhead force. The autarch's field protection sizzled and spat to nothingness.

Kael Ra went to get to his feet, but he could not. His legs were no longer there. Even for an autarch – such as he, the shock was overwhelming. He turned and retched into the dark dirt. The earth was already saturated with his blood. He looked down again at the horror of his ragged midriff and the absence beyond. Through a sickening numbness he could still feel his boots and armour.

Wild gunfire hammered into the ground nearby, alerting the autarch to the barbed silhouettes of alien barbarians in the murk. They were running, their steps heavy and their howls jubilant. The sudden violence of detonation was like a drug to them. Their hunger for further carnage became all that Kael Ra knew. Slapping about in the gore-soaked mulch for his weapon, the Prince Ecliptic found that his diresword had landed a little distance away. Rolling over onto his chest and allowing the agony of his grievous wounds to lance through the numbness of shock and stupefaction, Kael Ra crawled arm over arm towards the weapon.

As the tapering tips of his gauntlet reached the hilt of the sword he felt the beasts all about him. Retracting his arm and rolling, Kael Ra managed to avoid the axe intending to split open his skull and sliced through the throat of its wielder with the tip of his sword. Arching, reaching, slipping and sliding in the mud, the Prince Ecliptic fought for what was left of his life, the life messily bleeding away into the ground about him. He cut out legs from under his attackers. He gored them through their guts. He turned aside heavy blades and the squat barrels of their barbaric weapons. Soon the bloody morass surrounding the prone autarch was carpeted with alien bodies. Just as the Prince Ecliptic thought he might actually escape the butchery of a battlefield death, the studded boot of a greenskin monstrosity slammed down on his wrist, squelching both his gauntlet and diresword into the mud.

Kael Ra fought to free himself but the beast put its other boot on his chest. It looked down the gaping barrel of its obscene weapon. The creature was huge, some kind of tribal boss or chieftain. Beyond, the Prince Ecliptic could hear the sound of guardians and Aspect Warriors trying to reach him but a small mountain range of green flesh – the chieftain's entourage brute kindred and arch-maniacs – had erupted between them, leaving Kael Ra to their monstrous leader. The thing looked down at the struggling autarch. It was difficult to tell through the set of teeth and tusks sprouting from the horror's maw but Kael Ra thought that it was smiling. Its beady eyes fixed on him with unbridled hatred and stringy drool slipped out through the gaps in its teeth and splattered against the autarch's rising and falling chest. Kael Ra found himself snarling back at the creature. His

moved his free hand unconsciously over his chest to the ornate spirit stone set in the psycho-plastic intricacies of his armour. He found himself holding his breath, willing the beast on. The greenskin hulk did not require any encouragement, however. Holding the bucking weapon steady in its claws, the monster blasted a long and thunderous stream of lead into the Prince Ecliptic.

Suddenly the chieftain's attentions were elsewhere. Driven on by concern for their autarch, the regrouping Alaitoc warriors had cut through the muscular ranks of the chieftain's legion of bodyguards, necessitating intervention from the monstrous leader itself. As the battle raged on in the gloom beyond, the autarch's chest fell for the final time. Kael Ra – Prince Ecliptic of the Alaitocii – Avenger. Autarch. Legend... was dead. With the light gone from his eyes, the blood-speckled lids drew slowly to a close.

When Kael Ra opened them, the seer was with him. Kneeling in the blood and mud at the side of his corpse, she gave him a kindly smile. Once again, she seemed to glow and was oblivious to the carnage unfolding about her. From the obscurity and darkness, two further elder presented themselves. The first was a spectral vision, like his mistress; the second shared the bleakness of the surrounding shadow. The pair were dressed in the same bone-woven mesh, clutched matching shuriken catapults and wore the same cold judgement on their identical faces. They were twins, one the disdainful mirror image of the other. They flanked the seer like a watchful escort.

'Are you sure?' the first put to his mistress in syllables of broken glass.

'We can do this...' the second twin assured her, his voice no less mellifluous and cutting.

'I am sure,' the seer answered them. She held out a slender hand to the fallen autarch.

'Kael Ra of Alaitoc,' she said, her voice like a half-remembered battle hymn. 'Prince Ecliptic. Take my hand, if once again, you wish to live.'

Without knowing it, the dead autarch's hand was in hers. She reared to her full and imposing height, pulling him to her. Together they stood. Kael Ra was unsteady. She held him to her lithe body.

He looked down at the bloody patch of earth from which he had risen. He had risen... The Prince Ecliptic reached down for legs that moments before had not been there. Kael Ra stared about the field of battle and watched as the Alaitocii took the furious fight to the greenskin barbarians. Their rallying advance had the grief-stricken sting of disbelief. Their weapons shredded through the hated enemy. Kael Ra turned to the seer. The fires of battle glinted off the silver buns

above her ears. For the first time in forever, the Prince Ecliptic found that words proceeded from the thoughts in his head. It was strange hearing himself again.

‘Who are you.’

It was neither question nor demand and was delivered with all the added humility a master in the arts of war could muster.

‘My name is Nestra, my lord. Nestra Orphiel,’ the seer told him. Her words proceeded from lips, soft and sharp, but echoed about his skull like distant thunder. She gestured to the members of her escort. ‘This is Castien and this is Ehrendril, the Brothers Rhespasian.’

‘Where am I?’

‘The Darcassion Heights, on Talhennor,’ Orphiel told him, leading the unsteady prince up the incline of a ridge running parallel to the chaos and carnage.

‘Talhennor...’

‘This is the Battle of Talhennor,’ Orphiel said, ‘from which you emerged victorious.’

‘I don’t remember...’

‘You fell at Talhennor, my lord,’ Orphiel confessed, ‘but your death rallied the Alaitoc to a great victory against the greenskin and secured Talhennor for our exodite kin.’

‘Then I was not victorious,’ Kael Ra said.

‘Spoken like a warrior,’ the seer observed. ‘Your spirit was carried back to the craftworld to great mourning. Alaitoc had lost the Prince Ecliptic but found the strength to eradicate a mighty enemy of the eldar.’

‘You flatter these greenskin savages.’

‘Perhaps,’ Orphiel said, ‘but without your victory, these savages would have mauled many more fringe worlds and drenched the earth with the blood of our cousins. So said our venerable farseers.’

‘Is that your path?’ Kael Ra asked, ‘the gift of foresight?’

‘By the time you secured victory at Talhennor, I had not even been born,’ Orphiel said as she guided him along the gloomy ridge. The Prince Ecliptic pulled away from her.

‘Stop saying that,’ the autarch said imperiously. ‘There is no victory in death.’

‘You are wrong, my lord.’

Kael Ra looked at the seer. He studied the grave lines of her kindly face, the glyphs and symbols of her dark robes.

‘And you are no farseer...’

‘I did not proclaim to be,’ Orphiel insisted.

‘You’re a necromancer...’ Kael Ra accused.

‘My lord,’ Orphiel continued, allowing the insult to pass on the wind, ‘you were brought back to Alaitoc and taken into the craftworld’s hallowed embrace. You reached the great matrix of souls that guide, protect and continue to serve our people. It is from there that I speak to you now.’

‘So this,’ Kael Ra gestured to the unfolding battle. ‘None of this is happening.’

‘It is happening for you,’ Orphiel told him. ‘But it is the distant past of your descendants.’

The Prince Ecliptic stumbled and Nestra Orphiel reached for him. Once again, Kael Ra pulled away. He was overcome with emptiness. A sombre eternity stretched both before and beyond the ancient autarch. Orphiel allowed him a moment. The Alaitoc rally had begun. Grief had turned to anger. Anger to determination. Determination to cold pride. Guardians fought for their fallen autarch. Aspect Warriors fought for the honour of their craftworld war shrines. Illimitar Skystorm – winged death and exarch of the Swooping Hawks – had emerged from the Alaitoc lines to take his place in history. Orphiel nodded to herself. Illimitar would finish what Kael Ra had started and assume the mantle of high autarch.

‘What perversity is this?’ Kael Ra said, witness to a future he had not known. ‘We send our fallen to the infinity circuit, that is no more than a living hell for its assimilates.’

‘The infinity circuit is many things,’ Orphiel told him cryptically, ‘but for the individual soul it is what their spirit makes of it. Your fear of failure has followed you here, my lord. It is how I knew where to find you. You choose to relive this moment from your past. To replay the game – hoping for a different outcome. It is this quality, Prince Ecliptic, which made you – and still makes you – one of the most powerful of Alaitoc’s warriors and leaders. A spirit of purpose. A soul without fear. You are a warrior that refuses to surrender – even in death.’

The pair of ghostly Nightwings fell out of the cloudy sky, rolling wing over wing. Levelling out and skimming the sea of greenskin rage, the aircraft lanced the battlefield with a stream of las-fire, cutting a path up through the shadowy hordes that Illimitar and warriors used to funnel their invigorated assault. Kael Ra found himself nodding in appreciation.

‘I come to you from Eldorath Starbane,’ Orphiel told the Prince Ecliptic.

‘Never heard of him,’ Kael Ra said absently.

‘He leads the Alaitocii now,’ Orphiel said. ‘But against foes galactic, greater

and more damning than the savages of the green plague. An enemy of old – an enemy risen from oblivion to take back what was lost in the War in Heaven.’

‘That cannot be–’

‘The yngiract,’ Orphiel insisted. ‘The silver servants of ancient destiny, intent on reclaiming the dynastic glory of a silent kingdom.’

Kael Ra knew the yngiract...

‘This Starbane fights the metal menace?’ Kael Ra.

‘As best he can, my lord,’ Orphiel confirmed. ‘He leads the Alaitocii in defending the exodite world of Carnac against a yngiract overlord known as the Traveller. The Traveller claims Carnac as his own.’

‘It sounds like the Alaitoc face a desperate time,’ Kael Ra said, watching the shades of his eldar battleforce cut through the greenskin swarm.

‘The most desperate of times, my lord,’ Orphiel admitted. ‘Eldorath Starbane has sent me for you, Kael Ra. Alaitoc needs you once more, my Prince Ecliptic.’

‘No...’

‘I have an army, crafted in wraithbone,’ Orphiel said, ‘and a shrine suit waiting to lead it. Vessels through which you might once more walk in the realm of the living and bring death to the enemies of the eldar.’

‘The sorceries you speak of,’ Kael Ra said, ‘are unnatural.’

‘They are necessary,’ the seer told him.

‘No.’

‘Your kindred die,’ Nestra Orphiel said. ‘Enemies of the eldar take our hope from the Eastern Fringe, world by world. Our warriors on Carnac face annihilation. Without a rearguard. Without a defensive line that will not break, from behind which our kindred can evacuate, the Traveller will take the webway gate. The world spirit. The eldar that have fought for a doomed world.’

Kael Ra said nothing. The spiritseer pointed down at the Alaitoc army fighting their way through the greenskin host. ‘You see your warriors down there? Your guardians? Your high priests of war? Like you, they walk the webway no more. Each and every one of them would follow you back into bloodshed, should you ask them to.’ Again, Kael Ra said nothing. ‘The Alaitocii have need of their heroes. Warriors ancient and ancestral would flock to your unliving banner for the chance to fight once more with the Prince Ecliptic. Legends like you, Kael Ra.’

The autarch turned away from the Battle of Talhennor. His defeat. His failure. He found the sneers of the Brothers Rhespasian waiting for him. His judgement was complete.

‘Leave me alone.’

‘Your craftworld calls,’ Nestra Orphiel told him, ‘and when your craftworld calls, you damn well answer.’

‘Or what?’ Kael Ra shot back. ‘A fate worse than death? You can devise no greater punishment for a warrior than shame, necromancer, and I have devised that all for myself.’

For a few seconds, both seer and autarch were silent. The distant dirge of battle intruded on the moment. The autarch heard his warriors fighting. Fighting and dying, for him.

‘Asuryan’s light grows dim, departed brother,’ Orphiel said. ‘We are but a shadow of what we were with you to lead us. So it goes with all the children of Isha. The eldar can ill afford defeat but when doom is inevitable we must save all we can. The future of our race belongs to the living, Kael Ra – just as the glories of our past are yours. Know this, Prince Ecliptic. I cannot compel you. Your aid must be given freely. I can no more promise you success at Carnac than fate could bestow at Talhennor. We have lost the fringe world. Success can only be measured in the number of eldar saved, who in turn may fight another day, for some other cause on some other world. Achievement – in the emptiness of these spectral halls. How many more of your brothers and sisters will you welcome into oblivion’s embrace, Kael Ra?’

‘No more,’ the autarch said finally, his words at once empty and leaden. He spoke with the chill certainty of an eldar who had accepted his fate. ‘The craftworld will reach out, through the fury of its fallen, and bring eternal peace to the enemies of the Alaitoc.’

‘Have no doubt, autarch,’ the seer said. ‘The Traveller is powerful. In putting yourself between him and his victims, you risk your very soul.’

‘Souls are for the taking,’ the Prince Ecliptic told her. ‘I dare this Traveller to try...’

The exodite world of Carnac was a bad dream that had come true. At least that was the way Kael Ra experienced it through the medium of a living death. It had been a tiny but beautiful corner of the galaxy once. War had come to the exodite world, however, and brought with it the ugliness of death and destruction. Lush plains were now ashen deserts of razed wilderness. Rivers of blood and rust, choked with bodies. Copse-belts of tropical titanwoods that had been replaced with petrified bone orchards of colossal, black stakes stabbing at the sky.

Beyond the great crumbling archway of the Crescent-Kharellion – the exodite

world's primary nexus gate – Kael Ra stepped out into the wonder of the Carnacian world spirit. A forest of crystal obelisks and menhirs – all perfectly crafted and inscribed with the runes of the ancients – struck out from the webway gate portal in every direction. The mystery of their workings and the immaterial interrelation of their patterns and equidistant orientations were almost palpable. The stone circles, monolithic grids and clusters of lesser tablets about crystal totems housed the dead ancestors of Carnac's exodite clans in the same way that the infinity circuit of the craftworld had provided the safety of a soul matrix for Alaitoc's fallen.

It was among the stones of the world spirit – in the spaces between, the air thick with the immaterial energies of observance and containment – that the Prince Ecliptic saw the first evidence of an evacuation. Nestra Orphiel had informed him that an exodus was already well under way. While the exodite clanspeople fled their farms and villages, their domesticated beastherds heavily laden with the nomadic trappings of their former lives, Orphiel's sister spiritseers evacuated the souls of their long-dead ancestors. Kael Ra observed the essences that powered the world spirit extracted through the observance of solemn ritual and transported in waystones to the safety of the webway and the craftworld beyond. There they would find peace where Kael Ra had failed to achieve, in the wraithscape of the infinity circuit.

Striding through the network of standing stones, at the head of his company of the dead – his Continuum – Kael Ra possessed a giant wraithbone construct, a colossus of gentle lines, psychoactive intricacy and beautiful doom. Its long legs carried the burning soul of the Prince Ecliptic with graceful assurance. In its willowy arms and cannon-mounted gauntlets it carried the broad blade of a mighty ghostglaive that crackled with hate and in length was almost as tall as the towering construct itself. The construct's breechcloth and mantle fluttered from its slight torso like the tail of a comet. The wraithbone vanes elegantly erupting from its shoulders helped to stabilise the living machine's mighty movements and functioned as gyroscopic dampeners for the pair of bulbous missile launching pods, mounted either side of the tapering extravagance of its soulmelding helm. Like a shrine statue infused with a living death, the magnificent construct was worthy of the Prince Ecliptic. To Kael Ra, the wraithbone armour felt like a second skin. Weapons burned in his grasp no less than they had when the autarch was alive. He felt more assured, more capable, more powerful than ever and strode through the Carnacian world spirit like the son of a god.

Behind him, marching with the dread synchrony of an army of the dead were several hundred wraithguard and wraithblade warrior constructs, bearing the dark psychoplastic armour of the Alaitoc. Each was powered by the lost soul of a fallen warrior. Many had fought with Kael Ra at Talhennor. The others simply wished they had. All had traded their souls with the necromancer for the chance to follow the Prince Ecliptic into battle on Carnac. Some carried cannons and vortex weaponry. Some carried pairs of ghost swords – the blades of which crackling with dark energy. Others force shields and crackling axes. Through the Continuum's ranks strode the legends, heroes and former autarchs Nestra Orphiel had recruited – wraithlords all. Each piloted their own distinctive colossus, equipped with the construct-weaponry of their favouring: magnificent spears, swords and shields; gauntlets glowing with destructive power; the cradled lengths of scatter lasers, cannons, launchers and lances.

The spiritseer herself piloted a war walker, shimmering in a nexus of intensified energy fields. One with the machine, Orphiel travelled high above the wraithguard she united with her necromantic powers on the walker's towering legs. At that height the seer almost came level with the Prince Ecliptic's exaggerated helm. Kael Ra informed her that he intended to meet the Traveller's world-crushing armies with his warriors and without the spiritseer. He suggested that she return with her craftworld kin and entrust the defence of the Alaitoc withdrawal to the Continuum. Orphiel conceded that that there was nowhere else she would rather be but told the Prince Ecliptic that without her presence on the field of battle, the wraithbone constructs of the Continuum would give no battle to the enemy at all and stand motionless like the great army of statues they resembled. Feeling the sting of wounded pride through the wraithscape, the spiritseer told the autarch to think of her as the medium through which he commanded rather than the mission commander herself.

'I am the air through which your orders carry,' Orphiel had said. 'Without the air, your orders would not reach those for which they were intended – but without you, Prince Ecliptic, there would be no orders to follow.'

Kael Ra's grim silence seemed to satisfy the spiritseer but the autarch had insisted that she take to the battlefield within the safety of a vehicle. 'I have my own protection,' the seer insisted as they moved through the standing stones of the world spirit. It was not an empty boast. The unliving columns of the Continuum – wraithguard, wraithblades and the wraithlords that led them – marched between the legs of a gargantuan statue. Kael Ra had taken the colossus for some ancient and long-forgotten gate or archway but upon their approach

discovered it to be a wraithbone construct like his own. But larger. Far larger. It was something he had never seen. A towering shrine to destruction, that bestrode the world spirit and stood sentinel before the Crescent-Kharellion.

‘What is it?’ the Prince Ecliptic asked.

‘A wraithknight,’ Orphiel told him. She commanded, ‘Brothers Rhespasian – with me.’

The giant thing moved – its displacements lighter and sharper for a construct so massive it shook the ground upon which it walked. Kael Ra recalled the sentinels that had flanked the seer down in the infinity circuit, one a vision of ghostly life – like his mistress – and the other his fallen twin. Between them, the living and the dead piloted the monstrous structure, giving the war machine unparalleled speed and manoeuvrability among its wraithkind. A pair of scatter lasers sat on its shoulders like birds of prey, while its slender arm bore the seething lengths of a wraithcannon and a suncannon – the monstrous muzzles of which almost reached the ground. It was both wonder and aberration.

‘No,’ the Prince Ecliptic said.

‘Castien and Ehrendril will be a great asset in the battle to come,’ Nestra Orphiel said.

‘This monstrosity is a dealer in death,’ Kael Ra agreed, ‘any fool can see that. But it is the dead that march to meet the yngiract. You said it yourself: success on Carnac can only be measured in the number of eldar saved. With precious few of our kindred enjoying the blessing of Isha, I will not risk the living.’

‘Ehrendril is long fallen but I would not describe what Castien experiences up in that machine as life,’ Orphiel said.

‘Then let him spend whatever miserable existence you have allowed him here,’ Kael Ra said. ‘He can stand sentinel at the gate and watch for our victorious return. If we fail to stop the yngiract, then your Brothers Rhespasian and their monstrous war machine may yet taste of battle.’

The ghost army stomped its way south, leaving the gargantuan wraithknight to tower over the world spirit alone. Their solemn, rhythmic strides took them through collections of standing stones that were beginning to thin. As they did so, the Continuum moved through the withdrawing multitudes of elder, making for the Crescent-Kharellion under Eldorath Starbane’s orders. Clan eldar, exodites and outcasts limped on. They lead hulking beasts of burden north, the placid monsters carrying all that was left of their farms and homesteads. The exodites’s rustic robes and labouring garb was torn and bloody, their faces

besmirched and blank with the horror of war.

Among their number were the throngs of Alaitoc guardians, Aspect Warriors and exarchs that had fought hard for the preservation of their cousins' simple lives against an enemy innumerable. While the unfeeling legions of the yngiract trudged across the verdant plains of Carnac with the tireless efficiency of machines, disintegrating their way through villages, rangeland and farmsteads, the main body of Anrakyr the Traveller's invasion force had marched on the Carnacian world spirit from the south. The Alaitoc had achieved wonders. Their allied pathfinders had created havoc for metal legions en route to wreck genocidal devastation on swiftly evacuating exodite communities. Their Phoenix fighters had chased enemy scythe ships through Carnac's once lush valleys and narrow mountain canyons, bringing down death from above and securing safe passage for refugee caravans and withdrawing craftworld forces. The exarchs, seers and Carnacian chieftains had hit the enemy with searing precision – making use of their knowledge of the planet's geography and using it against the Traveller's minions. They had failed, however. Even with the prognostic advantage that the Alaitoc's seers and warlocks could provide, the yngiract were too many and their mindless advance irresistible.

Eldorath Starbane had achieved the impossible in holding off the Traveller's advance for as long as he had. He had given the eldar tribespeople of Carnac the precious days and hours they needed to reach safety. Withdrawing behind the formations of Alaitoc grav-tanks and the Engines of Vault, Starbane had turned his attentions to the necessities of survival rather than victory. His farsight had shown him that, in order to save those left living, the Alaitoc would need to turn to the dead. His gift revealed that the successful extraction of the eldar from Carnac and safe passage to the craftworld lay in the hands of a young spiritseer named Nestra Orphiel. Despite his distaste for the dread arts, Starbane understood that it would take sacrificing the craftworld's past in order to secure its future and had sent for spiritseer.

As the dour strides of the Continuum took them through the retreating ranks of the Alaitoc, the wounded warriors stared up at the mighty machines and the colossal constructs that loomed above the ordered formations. The weapons of the guardians and Aspect Warriors were empty and their armour smashed. They marched, hobbled and were carried from the smouldering field of battle in their thousands, the weight of their failure apparent on their forlorn faces. Only the sight of unliving legends, crafted from wraithbone and vengeance, seemed to draw their solemn stares. For a merciful moment, the survivors of Carnac were

held by the spectacle of the dead walking to their aid and daydreamed of the destruction about to be visited upon enemies that they had left mere hours before.

The wounded and weary warriors parted to allow the small army of wraithguard and colossi through. Kael Ra felt for the devastated Alaitoc and the exodites that had lost their world. The Prince Ecliptic – like a statue, at once impassive and unheeding, yet inspirational – strode on. He had not come to Carnac to console his descendent kin, he had come to avenge them and ensure that they too survived to have successors. The autarch was no seer but felt that such successors would be needed by the Alaitoc in even darker times to come.

Walking towards Kael Ra with an assurance only foresight could deliver was a small party of warlocks. Their robes were ragged and scorched and the singing spears that they carried smoked with the immaterial energies of their calling. They did not part. They did not step aside. The warlocks stopped before the Prince Ecliptic's mighty form and brought the autarch and his unliving host to a synchronous stop. Carried forward on the biped legs of her war walker, Nestra Orphiel came to a halt beside Kael Ra. As the capsule canopy lowered, the spiritseer presented herself to the warlocks. Two of the powerful warriors uncrossed their spears and moved to one side, revealing a figure in the ancient robes of a farseer. Kael Ra studied the figure through his wraithsight. The farseer stepped forward, the glyphs and symbols on his robes and armour waxing and waning with his movements. He clutched his forearms to his chest within dark sleeves that met, going some way to mask the farseer's missing right hand. He did not remove his cracked high-helm. Such silent obstinacy spoke of rank and entitlement, but Kael Ra saw shame in the slump of the seer's shoulders.

'Farseer,' Nestra Orphiel said, 'I bring the reinforcements you sent for.'

For a few moments, the farseer did not speak.

'You bring me death,' he said in a voice that was as empty as it was ancient.

'I do,' Orphiel admitted. 'I bring death to our enemies. The great and gone of Alaitoc have returned so that the survivors of Carnac may one day do the same and take back the world for which they fought.'

'And this is the Prince Ecliptic?'

'You can speak for me with the living?' Kael Ra asked.

'I can,' Orphiel said. 'Speak, prince and I will give voice to your wraith-borne words.'

'Farseer,' Kael Ra said. 'Like you, I once led the Alaitoc to war.'

'I know who you are, warrior,' Starbane said. 'There are few among our

people who do not.'

'I present myself – and many like me – before the Alaitoc,' Kael Ra said. 'In not being at your side – in the flesh – in these tumultuous times, we have failed you. We do not aim to repeat that mistake, seer. An ancient and malefic enemy has driven our interests from this world. The Continuum will hold back the main body of this invasion force while you evacuate your honoured warriors. It will be our burden, as it is Vaul's to support the skies on his great shoulders, and prevent the enemy from coming crashing down on Isha's sacred children. I pledge my eternal soul to the solemn execution of this endeavour.'

'Your present sacrifices are be honoured no less than those of your past, Prince Ecliptic,' Starbane told the colossus.

'Get your people out, farseer,' Kael Ra said. The seer nodded grimly.

'Sister-seer,' he acknowledged Orphiel, 'Autarch.' With that Eldorath Starbane lowered his helm and walked on with his warlocks. The wraithguard army stood motionless as the farseer and his smashed forces headed for the Crescent-Kharellion. The aged seer paused and turned once more to the towering construct.

'Make them pay,' Starbane said.

Kael Ra spoke. Orphiel conveyed his dark words to the farseer.

'This Traveller should know that the galaxy is a dangerous place. That some paths are ill-advised,' the Prince Ecliptic said. 'The ancient empire of the yngiract is long at an end. They just don't know that yet.'

'Explain it to them,' Starbane said before shuffling on through the walking wounded. Turning his great wraithbone body southward, Kael Ra led his unliving army on through the withdrawing Alaitoc and towards the invader's indomitable approach.

Half an alien horror crawling through the devastation of the battlefield, its byzantine workings trailing behind it where its metal legs used to be. Kael Ra's wraithbone foot came down on the abominate thing, crushing it into the scorched earth. An emerald light blazed beneath the foot and when it was lifted, the Prince Ecliptic found the remains of the mechanical menace to have been teleported away.

'What do the exodites call this place?' Kael Ra asked.

'Valatar-el Ossieth, the Plain of Bone,' Orphiel told him. 'The clans claim that the great beasts of their herds come here to die. It is littered with the generational remains of such gargantuan animals.'

Kael Ra had seen the skeletons. As the Continuum marched impassively through the destruction, the shattered shells of Alaitoc grav-tanks and the mighty Engines of Vault burned about them, the green phase-flash of vectored recalls claimed the mangled metal bodies of yngiract construct warriors that had been left behind.

‘The enemy claim their dead,’ Kael Ra said. It was both statement and question.

Nestra Orphiel came forward on the broad strides of her war walker.

‘No less than we do,’ the spiritseer said before bringing the vehicle to a halt and climbing down from the pilot capsule.

‘What are you doing?’ the autarch said. He cast his wraithsight out across their position. Carnacian highlands rose either side of them, turning the ashen plain upon which they were standing into a broad pass. It was large enough to allow the derelict tank formations that decorated it manoeuvrability they never got to exploit, while not narrow enough to warrant an enemy ambush.

‘Honouring our dead,’ Nestra Orphiel told him. She moved from body to armoured Alaitoc body on the battlefield, extracting the spirit stones of dead warriors with ritual reverence and care. As she moved from the flayed corpse of an Aspect Warrior to the spirit system crystals implanted in the ruined superstructures of smashed grav-tanks, she told the autarch, ‘Under dire circumstance such as these, we may request the aid of our ancestors. The constructs of the yngiract are recalled for purely practical reasons. Each warrior machine is maintained in a constant state of repair and adaptation. They will be vectored back to their unholy tombs, restored, improved and sent back out to fight you again, perhaps only hours later.’

‘What are our options?’ Kael Ra said.

‘Overwhelming force,’ Orphiel replied, returning to her war walker with her robe pockets full of spirit stones.

‘I think we can manage that,’ the Prince Ecliptic said.

‘Kael Ra,’ the seer said as she climbed back into the pilot’s capsule. ‘They cannot just be defeated. They must be destroyed.’

‘You heard her,’ Kael Ra called through the wraithscape to the spirits of the Continuum. ‘Dispense with economy and grace. I want these things blasted apart. I want them cut to pieces. I want there to be nothing left worth recalling.’

‘We go on?’ Nestra Orphiel asked.

‘No,’ Kael Ra said, looking across the field of battle – the grav-tank graveyard a nightmarish landscape of smoke-streaming wrecks and fresh death. ‘The

Alaitoc commanders were right to choose this place to hold the enemy off.’

‘Those commanders died in this place,’ Orphiel reminded him.

‘And that was their tactical mistake,’ the autarch countered. ‘The surrounding relief funnels the enemy into the plain.’

‘So what was the problem?’

‘It funnels the enemy into the plain,’ Kael Ra repeated. ‘The Traveller hit them with everything he had and the Engines of Vault failed to hold the choke point. They bought Starbane and his exodus a few hours, but the yngiract main body force will march across this plain and down on the Carnacian world spirit.’

‘Wouldn’t the geography beyond offer a greater range of strategic options?’ Orphiel asked. ‘If craftworld tank formations could not hold the enemy here then what chance have we?’

‘This invader calls himself the Traveller,’ Kael Ra said. ‘With so many of his machines on foot he will take the most economical route to the world spirit and his retreating foe. We will be the immovable obstacle in his path.’

‘Like the Engines of Vault briefly were?’

‘They failed,’ The Prince Ecliptic said. ‘We shall not. Besides – the remnants of their failure shall provide extra protection for our stand and break up the Traveller’s slave formations as they pass through.’

The spiritseer nodded.

‘Uladhar-Thwe,’ Kael Ra called to a seer-colossus standing like a grim sculpture nearby. ‘The Shadow That Walks. I am in need of your counsel, Shadow.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Uladhar-Thwe said, the wraithseer passing the length of its crackling spear between its willowy gauntlets.

‘I am told that you were keeper of the Ever Sanctums of V’harquara,’ Kael Ra said. ‘And that you once walked the hallowed halls of the Black Library.’

‘That is true, my lord.’

‘In life you were a reader in the uncertain texts of what will come to pass,’ the Prince Ecliptic said. ‘Tales, poems and histories with beginnings but no end.’

‘All future is in flux, Prince Ecliptic.’

‘And there is no greater proof of that than our standing here today – on this Plain of Bone, that fate has selected for the last of our last stands,’ Kael Ra said. ‘Uladhar-Thwe – the Shadow That Walks – like a greedy child, I need the morrow’s bounty today. Tomorrow will be too late for us. In the Ever Sanctums of V’harquara, there will be a tome – as yet unwritten – describing what happened here on this Plain of Bone. I need you to have read that book, seer, and

I need you to regale me with its secrets. Who is coming? Who will hit us first? How does this Traveller intend to reach his destination, given that the forces of the Continuum bar his way? Tell me all, grave seer, so that flux or not, we may fight with the future and count it as our ally in the desperate battle to come.'

'I will be your guide in these matters, my lord,' the Shadow said, 'for as long as I am part of them.'

'I ask no more of any soul that fights at my side,' the Prince Ecliptic told the seer with grim honesty.

If the epic poem *Vaul's Sword and the Eastern Adversities* had been written, it would have devoted a small but significant section to the trials of the Alaitoc on Carnac. It would have told of the Continuum's stand against Anraky the Traveller, the withdrawal of craftworld forces and the planetary exodus of many thousands of Carnacian exodites – desperate to reach the only warp portal on their lost world still in Alaitoc hands and under the protection of their world spirit. It would have shown that Anraky the Traveller – due to cowardice, indifference or expediency – did not take to battle on the Plain of Bone. He had charged one of his Destroyer Lords – Nemesor Raznaak, Emissary of Oblivion, Nomarch of Deneveh and High Slaughtekh of the Cult of the Crimson Doom – with the task of finishing the retreating elder and taking the world spirit in the Traveller's name. The tome would have detailed that the great vanguard legions of the yngiract were led by the Dynasts of the Karnaq Client Annectate, the Royal Hetch and the Deneveh Imperfecta of The High Slaughtekh's own Crimson Doom.

The yngiract were coming. The rhythm of their march could be felt through the ash-caked earth of the plain. With the synchronous thunder of every heavy-metal step – a mindless, machine army on the march – soot cascaded from the shattered wraithbone of demolished grav-tanks. The perfection of their ranks divided as the tomb-spawned warriors of the implacable advance marched about the devastation wrought by the advance constructs of their warrior kin. Kin, in turn, that had suffered the wrath of Eldorath Starbane's heavy gunships and Phoenix fighter craft and whose smashed remains had been vectored back to the stasis-tombs for repair.

Kael Ra watched the yngiract warriors pass. They were laden, heavy-set things, curved of armoured spine and hunched of shoulder-plate. The broad cages of their torsos and the tarnished sheen of their powerful robotic limbs gave the impression of ancient durability. Their machine bodies were cast in the exotic

effulgence of their alien weaponry, while their optics were piercing orbs of emerald incomprehension. These were set in the construct-crania of the alien machines: macabre, metal identi-skulls of the same soulless oblivion. Kael Ra could barely stand to be in the presence of such abominate entities. Their ancient evil was plain to see and their mechanical movements reeked of doom. Kael Ra could stand it no more.

The smouldering wreck of the grav-tank within which his wraithbone form was crouching erupted. The derelict collapsed about the colossus as it rose to full height. The wraithblade came up, arcing and spitting with the flux of destructive energies, before the Prince Ecliptic brought it down through the construct-chassis of the nearest Dynast. The tip of the blade buried itself in ash as the yngiract warrior – split asunder – fell away in two sizzling halves. The colossus moved swiftly for all of its towering size, slipping out of the grav-tank wreckage and stepping lightly and gracefully through the invader ranks. Like vengeance, the length of the wraithbone blade cut through both the air and the Dynasts of the Karnaq Client Annectate with equal ease. There were no screams. Kael Ra's sword passed through the bodies of the constructs – once, twice – sometimes three times – leaving behind small mounds of armoured limbs, cleaved ribcages and sparking metallic innards.

'Repair that,' the autarch dared as he guided the wraithbone colossus to greater feats of acrobatic lethality – belying both the size and abstract nature of his own sentient mechanism.

Looming over the legions of yngiract invaders, Kael Ra danced like a jubilant god through the warrior-slaves of the Slaughtekh. His movements were living expressions of frustration and regret. The autarch was making up for thousands of years of lost time. He was there. In battle. In the moment. Taking the half-lives of his craftworld's foe, the sworn and ancient enemy of his species. The ghostglaive was everywhere. The surrounding Dynasts were slow to react. One moment the great armoured legs were stepping, turning, pirouetting among their number, the next the alien machines were a shower of sheared limbs, shattered armour and the intricacy of polished organs, jangling to the floor.

Kael Ra stamped down on warrior constructs, half burying them in the Carnacian earth. He cleared several ranks of the yngiract – landing with one wraithbone knee to the ground. He circumnavigated his colossal form with the sword, the blade tip searing elegantly through several scores of mindless machines. Crossing beams of emerald energy came at the colossus. Angling his great soulhelm to one side, Kael Ra allowed the flaying blasts to pass harmlessly

into the sky. Then he was up again. Spinning. Decapitating. Cleaving through alien machines with clean, cruciform strokes: down through the construct-chassis, across through the neck, down through the construct-chassis, across through the neck. He ran, the broad, sure-footed steps of his willowy limbs taking him through the lines of equidistant Dynasts. The air glowed green with gauss beams that cut through the Prince Ecliptic's wake. His strides grew broader. His sword sweeps were cyclical and scythed through the yngiract as he passed, clipping metal skulls from hunched shoulders and shattering the long-bladed barrels of beam-casting flayers.

As the mesh of criss-crossing beams intensified and closed in on him like a net, Kael Ra forced the colossus on to its physical limits of speed, precision and grace. He dropped the construct down into a slide, the smooth wraithbone of its leg, side and elbow taking it through the billowing ash, as well as crashing through the Dynasts and into the lines of the Royal Hetch. He came to a stop behind the smashed remains of a super-heavy Scorpion tank. The wreck became a corona of emerald energy as the machine warriors followed their firing protocols and blazed at the obstacle between themselves and their target. The autarch had snatched up a warrior construct of the Royal Hetch as he had slid to a stop. Kael Ra held the yngiract in his crushing gauntlet. The thing fought back. The autarch felt its unthinking hostility. It would never give in. It would never submit. It would fight to be free and then it would attempt to end him in accordance with orders ancient and unforgiving. It would not get the chance. Engaging the shuriken cannon set in his forearm, the Prince Ecliptic shredded the skull, ribcage and grasping appendages from the evil thing as he held it, with a short, controlled blast. Crushing the rest in the palm of his gauntlet, Kael Ra tossed away the slag. It was time. Through the wraithscape, the autarch gave the order.

The derelict Engines of Vault visited vengeance on the enemy once more. Their cannons and pulsars had been silenced but the army of wraithguard and hero-housing colossi smashing out of the silence of the wrecks gave the surrounding warrior machines more than cause for calculated concern. Construct faced construct. While the yngiract machines moved with a hydraulic skulk and subservience that was coded into their souls, the wraithguard's advance spoke of an ethereal solidity. They were stalwart and durable in the way only a living thing could be – like an ancient titanwood. Their wraithcannons blasted dimension-splintering riftstreams through the obliging lines of Dynast warriors. Wraithblades swung their ghostwords about them with disciplined, organic

flourishes. The sizzling blades took skulls from shoulders and cut down through the living curse-metal of the yngiract warriors before the wraithblades turned the weapons in their willowy hands and smashed the ghoulish glow of alien sentience from their still-standing combat frames.

The Dynasts died without ceremony. Some of the wraithguard were yet to slip their weapons from their dorsal vane-racks and simply seized and smashed the machine-foe with their gauntlets. Flayer and gauss casters were chopped in two; silver, skeletal arms were torn from torsos; protocols were smashed from hangdog yngiract skulls as the ghost warriors attacked their construct-opposites. There was a steadfast inevitability to the combat. Long gone was the frenetic fear and fury of battle involving truly living opponents. Dynasts dropped in riftstream-savaged droves; wraithblades were flayed of their armour, their bone-sung workings and their psycho-infused life as their spirit stones were vaporised from existence. There were no shrieks of death or roars of camaraderie. Warriors were not mourned and avenged with mindless acts of grief-stricken bravado. There was only hatred, eternal and silent. When the dogged, mechanical fortitude of the ancient yngiract warriors met the crafted brawn of the soul-driven wraithguard, the battle seemed to slow to ponderous determination. Constructs – locked in appendage-trembling grapples and death-wrangles – fought for simple supremacy and the right to dispassionately despatch their alien opponent.

Before long the battlefield was strewn with yngiract skulls, parts and smashed combat chassis. The Dynasts of the Karnaq Client Annectate were no more than scrap and the emerald brilliance of reclaimed warrior-invalids. The steady massacre had given the Royal Hetch time to form their impassive battle lines. The thick, green beams came at the Continuum broadside, forcing wraithguard and the colossi striding through their doughty ranks to make the most of the cover offered by the grav-tank graveyard. The yngiract reduced the redoubtable wrecks to smouldering, emaciated shells, forcing the heroes of the Alaitoc into the necessity of a line-breaking attack.

Towering above their ancient enemies, the craftworld legends moved like the living statues of their personal shrines and dedications. The bright lances of Maldor Nimitar of the Blood Moon and Galadarn the Venerate punched through the tarnished uniformity of the yngiract front line. Delsarion the Lost Autarch was there, snatching up the living metal skeletons with his power-crackling fists. Smashing the combat chassis into one another and the unforgiving ground, Delsarion wrenched the alien machines apart before tossing their shattered

frames aside and plucking two more unfortunates from the battlefield. Uladhar-Thwe – the Shadow That Walks – made inroads through the Royal Hetch, swinging his wraithspear about him by the tip of its shaft. The lithe spear blade dreamed through the enemy ranks, smoking with the murderous vapours of the warp. The Royal Hetch were as deadly as they were ancient but little could prepare such mechanised death for the cold elegance of the Continuum's onslaught.

Kael Ra did not intend on savaging his way through one legion of warrior-constructs, only to have the ranks of another – battle-hardened and patiently waiting behind – benefit from strategic observance and protocol-adapting redeployment.

'With me!' Kael Ra called to Great Arquin of the Lords of Death. The Prince Ecliptic slammed his smooth shoulder and the full weight of his looming frame against the wreck of the Engine of Vault, behind which he had been sheltering from the gauss flaystorm of the Royal Hetch.

The Lords of Death joined the autarch and together they pushed the grav-tank across the battlefield at the machine-foe's formations. One engine derelict smashed into another, tangling with another and another. Some were just shattered remnants. Others still drifted on partially functioning grav-drives. Before long the colossi had amassed a growing wall of twisted armour and wraithbone wreckage that bulldozed through the disciplined presentations of the Royal Hetch. The yngiract warriors crashed into each other, finding it difficult to bring their weapons to bear in such a tight, clanging crush. Metal bodies became caught beneath the moving barricade of derelict grav-tanks, contorting and shattering before being stamped into the ground by Great Arquin and the Prince Ecliptic as they heaved the relentless wall of beam-soaked wreckage at the enemy. Nestra Orphiel stalked up through their destructive wake on the long legs of her war walker, shredding those trampled abominations that still clung onto artificial life with scything blasts from her shuriken cannons.

Striding up the mauled path in the ash and through the twisted frames of bulldozed bodies, Undwyn Pythax – the Dragon's Breath – earned his title as he bathed the disordered ranks of the Royal Hetch in a streaming inferno from his forearm-mounted flamers and buried oncoming warriors in the rhythmic procession of miniature suns that he pumped from his starcannon. Securing the breach that ran like a runway through the ranks of the Royal Hetch and into the waiting Deneveh Imperfecta – cold warriors of the High Slaughtekh's own Crimson Doom – was the Crone Company. The wraithbone colossi of the

company stomped up through the collateral devastation in a procession, the unrelenting beam-storm of their scatter lasers searing through any chance for the Royal Hetch to regroup and strike back along their flanks. It was carnage – up through which the Continuum’s own unliving army of wraithguard marched, cutting down the machine menace of fragmenting yngiract formations with volleys of cannon fire. Shoving the ancients back with the shimmering surface of their force shields, wraithblade constructs hacked through their alien foe with sizzling axes before retreating back behind their shields. Shoving their way through the next line of skeletal warriors, they repeated the torso-cleaving onslaught.

Kael Ra suddenly felt the wall of wreckage before his shoulder grind to an excruciating halt. At first, the Prince Ecliptic assumed the tangled wreckage had hit some kind of natural feature. Peering over the twisted chaos of yngiract bodies behind, Kael Ra found that he had in fact simply ran into the disciplined ranks of the Deneveh Imperfecta. The legion of living metal had combined their strength to heave their own tangled barricade of bodies – the frames of Royal Hetch – back at the barricade. Like a prophet of doom, ascending a sacred mount, the Prince Ecliptic heaved himself up the side of the heap of wrecked vehicles and presented himself to the Slaughtekh’s Imperfecta – his instruments of the Crimson Doom. The blank skulls of the yngiract warriors peered up at their end. Kael Ra willed the launch pods on his shoulders to priming. The tubes spat their missiles down on the machines. Kael Ra hit them again – and again. The Deneveh Imperfecta – tightly packed behind the wreckage of both the eldar grav-tanks and Royal Hetch – disappeared in a white-hot wave of destruction that rolled outwards through the derelict Engines of Vault.

The autarch stood there, observing – enjoying – the decimation he had visited upon his foe. As the smoke cleared, Kael Ra saw the scorched earth below, decorated with silver skeletons. The colossal construct that was Ishandor Soulstrider was beside the Prince Ecliptic on the small mountain of derelicts. Behind him, Illimitar Skystorm and his unbreakable wraithguard were ascending. They had raised the high ground and had taken it. Now, from the advantage of its derelict heights, they would end the yngiract legions sent in the name of the Traveller to smash the Alaitoc retreat and secure the world spirit. The Dynasts of the Karnaq Client Annectate, the Royal Hetch and the Deneveh Imperfecta – who had all been killing for as long as time itself – would be no more.

The last of the yngiract slave machines were dying. As Kael Ra walked the battlefield, his steps crunching through the carpet of mangled, metal appendages, the crushed warrior chassis and severed parts that Nemesor Raznaak had failed to reclaim. The Shadow That Walks was by his side, as was Nestra Orphiel in her bipedal war-machine. The three of them were watching Phasmae Eshunesra – The Vyper’s Kiss. The miserable remnants of Raznaak’s legions were dispersed, isolated and broken – but like the Continuum – the bastard machines knew nothing of defeat and were fighting on. Phasmae Eshunesra, a looming, willowy shape moving through the demolished grav-tanks, was making them question the futility of such protocols. Like a petrified tree, her war-dancing form stepped lightly through the aftermath, her movements fluid and deadly. The flaying beams of gauss-death that came at her from the defiant remainder of Raznaak’s legions were elegantly negotiated, the arch of her colossal form, a skip, a jump. As she passed through the tarnished forms of the alien invader, her blades flicked and flourished their gift of defeat through the living metal forms. It was a grace, an economy, a battlefield poetry that no eldar or enemy had witnessed in the thousand years since the former exarch’s end.

‘The Alaitoc?’ Kael Ra put to the spiritseer. ‘The exodites?’

‘Eldorath Starbane will get as many of our people back to the craftworld as he can,’ Nestra Orphiel told him, stepping down from her war walker. ‘The Carnacians are coming from all over and have been for a few days now. The world spirit has warned them that the Crescent-Kharellion is the only safe exodus point. Many are transporting wounded. Many are evading movements of the Traveller’s genocidal forces. We have to give them more time.’

‘They will have every moment we can give them,’ Kael Ra promised her. ‘Uladhar-Thwe?’ the autarch addressed the wraithseer.

‘Had they extended their eternities, the legions at our feet were to finish the Alaitoc retreat,’ Uladhar-Thwe said.

‘We may have put our craftworld kin beyond the yngiract’s vengeance. The spiritseer is right, of course. The Traveller can still exercise his murderous frustrations on the fleeing exodites. Also, he will promise the world spirit to another of cold, metal heart,’ the Shadow That Walked told them. ‘The Traveller will honour his promise in that promises to him will be returned. Nemesor Raznaak, if he did not already owe us the intent of utter destruction, is the guarantor of his master’s promises. He will throw everything he has at us to deliver to the world spirit.’

The Prince Ecliptic was no seer but offered a prediction of his own.

‘The Slaughtekh will try...’

Kael Ra looked down at the sling bag Orphiel carried about her robes. It jangled lightly with the chime of crystal. Spirit stones that she had collected from the wraithguard constructs housing warriors of the dead. The autarch knew that she harboured a pitiful hope that she might get to return the stones to the craftworld and have the heroes of the Alaitoc re-join their honoured ancestors in the infinity circuit. Also within the bag she carried the spirit stones of legends lost to the Continuum: Great Arquin, one of the Lords of Death; Galadarn the Venerate and several members of the Crone Company. Their colossal constructs had been bathed in a flaystorm of gaussian brilliance and collapsed before the dauntless advance of Raznaak’s skeletal warriors. ‘The Slaughtekh will fail...’ Kael Ra assured the spiritseer. ‘Uladhar-Thwe,’ Kael Ra said. ‘Who comes to their destruction next?’

‘The Slaughtekh sends us the Everliving – Lychguards of the Royal Engrammic Observance,’ the seer told him with prognostic confidence. ‘He sends us the High Judicator Neferkar – Executrix of the Prime Directive with the Praetor-Edictra of the Qa’a Indemnification. He sends us the technosorceries of the Conclave Apocryptex.’

‘Assemble your ghost army,’ Kael Ra said to Nestra Orphiel. ‘The enemy comes. No pretence this time. Our foe will arrive. We will fight. They will die. They might have slept away their existence but only we know the true gifts of death. Let us be generous. Let us share such gifts with the Slaughtekh and the Traveller’s warrior-slaves.’

The Continuum waited. Like still statues of the ancients, they stood motionless among the wrecks of Alaitoc grav-tanks and the shattered remains of their machine enemy. The Carnacian suns made their way gloriously to the horizon, saturating the sky with a bloody haze. In the half-light, the yngiract elite graced the battlefield. Heavily-armoured lychguard, marching down on the eldar with scythe, shield and the cold assurance of victory. Battle-hardened Praetorians in disciplined ranks – their number a forest of covenant staffs, that advanced on the Continuum. Cryptek sorcerers – weighed down with the technological doom of the ancients – and crackling with the living energies of their anbarmantic studies. The royalists, the technologists and the loyalists hit the wraithforce hard. The Continuum hit back.

The battlefield sang with the clash of metal on wraithbone. It seared with the crackle and snap of cryptek-cast lightning. It blazed with the beams of

brightlances and warp-storming wraithcannon. Smashing the Royal Engrammic Observance aside, his ghostglave sizzling against a wall of presented shields, Kael Ra bestrode the battlefield like the demigods of eldar myth and legend. He shrugged off the living lightning of the Slaughtekh's techno-sorcerers, scything through several of the ancients with his forearm-mounted shuriken cannons. He stepped through the flaming ash spectre of Maldor Nimitar of the Blood Moon – who moments before had succumbed to the Praetor-Edictra of the Qa'a Indemnification – their covenant staffs blasting the wraithbone colossus apart. Coated in Nimitar's destruction, Kael Ra took his place and the fight to the yngiract praetorians. The elite ancients in his path died badly, with Kael Ra shredding through their ornate armour and workings. Waiting for the autarch was a hunched tomb – all broad rachidian sheen and serrated spine. A cloak of preserved alien flesh – the skins of a hundred beings on a hundred worlds long conquered – flapped about its thick-set frame and it span a rod in its skeletal fingers, each end adorned with a smoking hyperphase blade. This was the High Judicator Neferkar – Executrix of the Prime Directive that Uladhar-Thwe had warned him of. The Executrix completed his deadly display of scythemanship – the leering metal skull of the thing seeming to dare the Prince Ecliptic from beneath its extravagant headgear. The pod on Kael Ra's shoulder cycled another missile into the launch tube. The missile launcher streaked destruction at the yngiract before blasting him into a thousand pieces of inferno-surfing frag.

As the wraith-constructs of the Continuum cut through the elite of the Slaughtekh's army it became apparent that Nemesor Raznaak's faith in his own ancients to destroy the eldar ghost army was waning. Kael Ra heard the shrieking whine of reinforcements on the horizon. Single-construct grav-crafts screeched through the wraithguard, slashing the unliving warriors apart with lightning bolts from forward-mounted weaponry. The Prince Ecliptic ripped through several oncoming screechers with his shuriken cannon before slicing another in two with the length of his sword as it passed. Again and again the swarms of bikers hit them, often while the wraith constructs' back were turned and their attentions fixed on utterly destroying the lychguard and praetorians.

The true purpose of the ear-splitting assault, however, was to distract the eldar from the monstrous metal walkers advancing slowly on their crab-like legs. By the time the huge Carnacian moon had taken to the heavens and the yngiract constructs lit the battlefield up with the ghoulish glow of their inner life, the stabbing-scimitar legs of the walkers brought them into the fray. The Continuum had been smashed but were fighting on. The yngiract's ancient elite had failed to

end them and were now but a few brazen warrior-constructs impassively crossing scythes and ghostwords with equally indifferent wraithblades.

The impact of the walkers was felt immediately. The two remaining Lords of Death were cut in half by the blisteringly focused beams of heat rays the arachnoid walkers streamed from cannons on their undercarriage. Kael Ra took several broad steps towards Nestra Orphiel, who had now been stripped of her bodyguards. Sensing the same danger Ishandor Soulstrider came up behind, smashing a shrieking grav-craft aside with a swing of his wraithbone fist. Finally Uladhar-Thwe was beside his sister-seer, spearing cryptek sorcerers into the ash with his warp-seething weapon. The damage was done, however. Their anbaric assault on the war walker had frazzled the life out of the vehicle, forcing Nestra Orphiel to leap down to safety. Illimitar Skystorm rushed several of the walkers with a group of his wraithblades but swiftly became victim to the scimitar legs of the walkers, which stabbed down through their borrowed bodies with mantid savagery. Kael Ra knew he had to do something.

Putting the remains of flaming grav-tanks between his construct-colossus and the individual walkers, Kael Ra advanced on the vehicles. Derelicts detonated about him as the yngiract pilots attempted to acquire the towering but graceful target. Within moments the Prince Ecliptic was among them, lopping off their arachnoid legs with his ghostglaive and mulching pilots in their cabs with point-blank blasts from his shuriken cannon. One after another the walkers went down. Two were blasted from their needle-point footing by the autarch's strategic missile fire, while another Kael Ra simply slammed into with his shoulder and flipped the monstrous thing off its feet and over onto its side. Only then could Undwyn Pythax's starcannon and the las-storm of fire laid down by the remaining members of the Crone Company pin the walkers down.

At false dawn – with the light of the first of the exodite world's suns reaching across the razed plains – the Continuum once again found itself alone on the field of battle. With Raznaak's elite warriors and their heavy support contingents either smashed to oblivion across the ashen wastes or sporadically vanishing in a blaze of emerald light as they responded to their reclamation protocols, the wraith force found themselves once more victorious. If it was a victory, it was a silent one. Nestra Orphiel was making her usual rounds, conducting the ceremonial extraction of spirit stones from their demolished carrier constructs. Her sling bag was heavy with the crystal and responsibility she carried. The yngiract walkers had all but burned the Crone Company out of existence, with only the colossus called Rai-dann remaining. In a desperate battle, Delsarion the

Lost Autarch had fought one of the walkers hand-to-hand, tearing the vehicle apart one piece at a time but had fallen to his wraithbone knees and toppled as a column of grav-craft screamed up behind him and lanced the wraith construct in the back with living lightning.

The wraithguard still operational were a sorry sight. Their armour and wraithbone vanes were smashed and their psychoplastic shell rent and cracked. Some had lost the operation of appendages, while others suffered the shattered remnants of their cranial high-helms. A number bore flash-scarring and evidence of electrical fires while wraithbone of almost all of the surviving constructs displayed the sinks, penetrations and savage molecular withering of the yngiract's gaussian weaponry.

As the ghost army reassumed defensive positions about the graveyard of grav-tanks and enemy combatants, Kael Ra watched the dawn break with Uladhar-Thwe. The seer knew what he was going to say before the autarch said it.

'The Khufan Household Bladestorm,' the seer said of the grav-craft, 'and the Talons of Tantris-Ah in heavy support.'

'The Talons earned their master's appreciations today,' Kael Ra mused.

'Yet they won't ever receive them,' Uladhar-Thwe said, kicking at the battlefield and the pieces of yngiract walker strewn about the plain.

'Neither will we,' Kael Ra replied darkly. 'The Slaughtekh must be running out of options. At least we have his appreciations.'

'Raznaak will accompany his Destroyers. He will finally commit the Crimson Doom,' the seer said.

'Now we're getting somewhere,' Kael Ra said with appreciation.

'Anrakyr the Traveller has sent him a contingent of his own Immortals, the Pyrrhian Eternals.'

'And now we have the appreciations of the Traveller himself,' the Prince Ecliptic said. 'He does not trust that his Slaughtekh will finish us, even like this.'

'There they are,' Uladhar-Thwe said, pointing out a horde of yngiract silhouettes, marching and gliding out of the sun towards them. They seemed in no hurry.

'There is another way,' Nestra Orphiel said, walking up behind the two colossal constructs. Kael Ra and the Shadow That Walked looked down at the tiny spiritseer.

'Speak,' the Prince Ecliptic said. Uladhar-Thwe said nothing. He knew what she was going to say. Knew what the autarch would say in return.

'We could withdraw,' Nestra Orphiel said.

‘Withdraw?’ The autarch could not believe what he was hearing.

‘Starbane. Myself. The other seers. No one thought that you would last this long,’ Orphiel said. ‘The Alaitoc are evacuated. The souls of the world spirit transplanted. All exodites who could reach the Crescent-Kharellion will probably have done so by now.’

‘But not all of them.’

‘This strategy was entertained in order to give our people the chance to escape the alien invader,’ Orphiel insisted. ‘It has succeeded.’

‘Are you afraid, spiritseer?’ Kael Ra accused. ‘Afraid of death?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ she answered honestly. ‘I am. Are you afraid of failing?’

‘I haven’t failed,’ the autarch said.

‘You are not here to win this war,’ Nestra Orphiel told him. ‘You cannot win.’

The spiritseer looked to Uladhar-Thwe. Kael Ra followed her gaze. The wraith seer shook his high-helm slowly from side to side.

‘You asked me to come here...’

‘It’s over,’ the spiritseer said.

‘I’ll decide when it’s over,’ the Prince Ecliptic roared imperiously. ‘I see an enemy. I see an enemy commander. We can’t just walk away, just leave and return to the infinity circuit.’

‘Perhaps that is what you’re most afraid of,’ Nestra Orphiel said to the autarch softly. The pair said nothing for a little while. Uladhar-Thwe watched the blurry silhouettes of the enemy sharpen with their every marching step and become a silver host, glinting with the tarnished dawnlight. Their progress was steady but their course unwavering. Nemesor Raznaak intended to fight his way through the decimated wraithguard and march on the world spirit. Nestra Orphiel lightly jangled the sling bag of crystals and spirit stones. ‘I fear death as all living things do, Kael Ra,’ she told him. ‘But you are no longer a living thing. The spirits of your warriors – these heroes of Alaitoc – were considered collateral damage. An exchange for many more souls of the living, that Eldorath Starbane needed to bring back to our craftworld. As I carry the weight of this bag, I realise that we owe our ancestors better than that. I owe you better than that, Prince Ecliptic – for we don’t know when we will have need of you again.’

Kael Ra remained silent for a few moments more. The battle now took place inside the Prince Ecliptic, rather than on the decimated plain.

‘Enemy entering the range of their heaviest weapons,’ Uladhar-Thwe informed the autarch. ‘And ours.’

Silence.

‘Kael Ra,’ the spiritseer said.

The colossus turned slowly, showing the encroaching enemy the shattered wraithbone vanes of his back before walking north – his stride dark but determined.

‘Order the Continuum to withdraw to the Crescent-Kharellion,’ Orphiel told Uladhar-Thwe before sprinting after the retreating prince.

Across the still air and the heat rising off the sun-kissed plain, came a horrible sound. A booming, metallic laughter – alien but unmistakable. The jubilant derision rolled up into the surrounding highlands and back down onto the plain. Kael Ra felt it pass through the very being of the wraith construct at his command. The colossus stopped. The ghostglaive in his gauntlet crackled back to soul-fuelled life. ‘Kael Ra–’ Orphiel began, but it was too late.

Turning – and with the ghostglaive in hand – the Prince Ecliptic broke into a powerful run. His willowy legs took him swiftly through the demolished tanks and out onto the torched plain. He looked like a god – eager for battle – and attempting to outrun his destiny. Within moments the Continuum were with him. The wraithguard – like the time-ravaged statues of some ancient city – broke into a stately sprint also, weapons held high. The legends of the Alaitoc were with them, striding out of the grav-tank graveyard and across the plain – after the Prince Ecliptic and towards the enemy. Only Uladhar-Thwe and the spiritseer remained. The Shadow That Walks turned to Orphiel.

‘No...’ the seer said to her in terrible realisation.

The Continuum ran. The yngiract laughter had stopped. At the High Slaughtekh’s order, the Destroyers of the Crimson Doom were advancing on their repulsor platforms, their heavy gauss cannons aimed at the oncoming Continuum. The Pyhrrian Eternals were holding back. The gliding serpentine monstrosity with them, carrying a glowing warscythe and surveying the battlefield from the horrid, green optics in its silver skull was Nemesor Raznaak – Emissary of Oblivion, Nomarch of Deneveh and High Slaughtekh of the Crimson Doom.

‘Down!’ Uladhar-Thwe shouted at Nestra Orphiel, shielding her body with the wraithbone construct of his own. A ghostly beam struck the wraithseer at once – straight through the helm. The colossus crashed to the floor – its unliving body motionless and unresponsive to the spiritseer’s calls. Retreating into the burnt out shell of an Engine of Vault, the spiritseer realised that there were machine assassins hiding among the grav-tanks.

Out of the plain, Kael Ra witnessed the impossible. While the Destroyers of

the Crimson Doom floated out to meet him, their High Slaughtekh had become a nexus of emerald light. Nemesor Raznaak was neither being recalled nor retreating from the field of battle. The Prince Ecliptic watched as the enemy he had charged out to destroy was destroyed before him by the Pyhrrian Eternals of Anrakyr the Traveller. The Eternals had turned their gauss blasters on the Slaughtekh and made him pay their master's price for failure. Within seconds, Nemesor Raznaak was nothing more than vaporised ash on the breeze.

As the green blaze of the execution faded, Kael Ra could see the great floating monoliths, megaliths and the gigantic command necrotaph advancing across the plain. Proceeding from gaping green portals in the monolithic superstructures was a yngiract arkmada – arks and barges bearing machine warriors and unimaginable firepower. The dawn darkened as scythefighters poured from the necrotaph and swarmed through the Carnacian skies. Anrakyr the Traveller had come.

The Prince Ecliptic skidded to a stop in the ash of the plain and turned to run back for the cover of the grav-tank graveyard. The wraith constructs of the Continuum were not watching their autarch. The colossi, the wraithguard and the wraithblades were staring at the oncoming apocalypse. Scythefighters swooped in low, their crescent-mounted destructors tearing up the plain like sheet lightning. Their first victims were Raznaak's Destroyers. The Crimson Doom was lost in an anbaric blaze.

Kael Ra ran. He willed the battle-scarred colossus on – one foot after another. He dare not look back for the seconds it would cost him. The attack was devastating. It was doom from above. The plain became a lightning storm behind him. Through the wraithscape he felt Undwyn Pythax and Phasmae Eshunesra – The Vyper's Kiss – slip out of existence. The heroes of the Alaitoc were lost to the craftworld. Kael Ra felt the souls of his warriors from Talhennor go out like candles in a breeze, leaving him alone in the darkness. Rai-dann of the Crone Company was next. By the time the autarch reached the grav-tanks, only Ishandor Soulstrider remained at his side.

As the pair of colossi skidded down into the dirt, the lightning storm struck the side of the Engines of Vault behind which they had taken cover. The shadow of the scythefighter swarm passed overhead.

'Orphiel!' Kael Ra called. The autarch knew she must be alive because his construct was still functioning.

'Kael Ra!' The spiritseer called back through the wraithscape. He found her hiding in a toppled tank nearby. 'Assassins,' she managed.

The colossus went down on one wraithbone knee and presented his back to the spiritseer. Leaping up into the shattered vanes of the construct, Nestra Orphiel held on tight as Kael Ra reared to his full looming height and broke into a sprint. Pounding through the ash of the plain, Kael Ra and Ishandor Soulstrider ran for their unliving existence. Nothing mattered more than reaching the world spirit and the Crescent-Kharellion. The scythefighters shrieked overhead, scouring the grav-tank graveyard of any remaining life. After the final obliterating pass the swarm banked and came in low. Kael Ra could imagine the Traveller's glee at breaking the Continuum and taking his monoliths and arkmada through the smouldering remains of the Alaitoc tanks. The world spirit would now be his for the taking and the giving. The Prince Ecliptic remembered Uladhar-Thwe's insistence that Anrakyr intended to pass the wonder of the world spirit onto another.

'The stones!' Kael Ra roared as the two colossi reached the outskirts of the world spirit. Taking cover behind the standing stones, the three eldar took cover once more – but the lightning storm did not come. Suddenly they were plunged into deep shadow. Something colossal was rearing up above them. From a silent, kneeling crouch to the towering heights of its monstrous frame, the wraithknight cut a silhouette into the dark sky. Bringing up their arms and priming the wraith construct's gargantuan weaponry, the Brothers Rhespasian – the world spirit's remaining sentries – became aware of the enemy. Scythefighters screamed through the sky, their crescent forms cutting a low course across the menhirs and stone-tops of the world spirit's ancient architecture. Seething streams of las-fire sliced through the heavens from the scatter lasers mounted on the wraithknight's shoulders. The blinding staccato of beams lanced through the yngiract flight formations, thinning out the scythefighters and sending the craft spinning into peeling dives.

'Move!' Kael Ra commanded, pushing Ishandor from stone to standing stone, with the spiritseer holding onto his back. Yngiract scythefighters rained from the sky as the Brothers Rhespasian visited the full fury of the wraithknight's shoulder-mounted weaponry on the swarm of craft. Balls of green brilliance reached for the firmament as Doom Scythes crashed into the unforgiving stone of obelisks and monoliths. 'Go for the gate!' the Prince Ecliptic said, driving Ishandor Soulstrider's construct on before him. Kael Ra pushed them on through the maze of stones and circles, scythefighters erupting about them.

As the stream of scythefighters adapted their protocols and broke formation, the Brothers Rhespasian unleashed the devastation of their arm-mounted

weaponry on the yngiract storm. Jabbing its colossal gauntlets with each discharge, the wraithknight blasted oncoming scythefighters from their flight paths, one after another. Hurling thick riftstreams of dimension-curdling energy from its wraithcannon and small novas of furious plasma from its suncannon, the wraithknight punched the crescent-shaped craft out of the sky. Those scythefighters that managed to bank and spin through the monstrosity's scatter storm of las-fire were smashed into streaks of green-glowing wreckage by the construct's arm-mounted weaponry.

With the chaos of the colossal battle unfolding above them, Kael Ra, Ishandor Soulstrider and the spiritseer sprinted on through the stones. The wraith colossus carrying the sentience of Ishandor Soulstrider was leading the way through a stone circle when it suddenly collapsed like a toppled statue. As the Alaitoc hero fell to the ground, Kael Ra saw the silver form of a cyclopean sniper, standing at a stone they had passed moments before. It was as though the metal menace had simply stepped out of reality behind them. The autarch watched the assassin turn its deadly rifle on his towering form. Leaning into a throw, the Prince Ecliptic launched his ghostglave at the yngiract. The soul-searing sword flew blade-over-hilt at the ancient before slamming straight through its caged combat chassis and pinning the thing to the standing stone behind it. Kael Ra watched as the green light died from its single eye, ensuring the thing was dead before he turned his back on it.

The air was thick with charred wraithbone. Above the battle was intensifying. A swarm of scythefighters were shrieking about the colossal form of the wraithknight. As craft routinely plummeted from their course, the victims of the construct's scatter laser barrage, others were blasted clean out of existence by the brothers' arm-mounted cannons. Escaping Doom Scythes had banked about the colossus and were proceeding to sear into the construct's back with streams of living lightning. With exploratory bolts of electricity feeling its way across the wraithknight's armoured shell and the colossus staggered by scythefighters with doom-laden protocols flying straight into its towering form, the Brothers Rhespasian were losing cooperative control of their war-machine. As the autarch and Nestra Orphiel made their way through the wraithknight's stumbling legs and up towards the Crescent-Kharellion, the pair felt a rumbling quake pass through the architecture about them.

'Do you feel that?' Nestra Orphiel said as the Prince Ecliptic strode on through the sea of standing stones, leading with his fists and ready to shred any assassins haunting the world spirit with his shuriken cannons. As he moved past one

particular stone, laying his gauntlet on it for stability, Kael Ra felt the tremors. He could feel them through his feet also. The ground had started to shake. The Prince Ecliptic did not know what it was but it could not be anything good. In the distance, over the tops of the tallest stones, he could see the Crescent-Kharellion.

The quake had been enough to topple the colossal frame of the wraithknight. Failing to recover their balance following a succession of scythefighter impacts and the target of a lightning firestorm, the Brothers Rhespasian could not keep their colossus from falling to its knees. Blasting several incoming craft to flaming wreckage with its suncannon, the wraithknight made an attempt to get back to its feet. As it rose from the sea of standing stones, however, it was struck by a damaged scythefighter in its flank.

‘Castien!’ the spiritseer called. ‘Ehrendril!’

Another – all but a meteoric ball of green flame – slammed into the construct’s chest, followed swiftly by another that span wing over crescent wing in a thunderbolt tumble aimed squarely at the war-engine. The sky lit up in a colossal explosion that scorched the standing stones and rained fragments of wraithbone down on the decimated world spirit.

Kael Ra did not wait to watch the flaming demise of the colossus. The quakes had only grown in intensity. Everything about the autarch was shaking. Stomping his way on through the maze of stones, Kael Ra suddenly saw the crystal monolith before him disappear into the ground. The Carnacian earth rumbled about them.

‘What’s happening?’ Nestra Orphiel cried out. Kael Ra had no idea. Perhaps it was an earthquake. Perhaps some dread weapon of the alien invader. Entire sections of stones were falling through the dirt. The ground was moving. The wraith colossus’s forward motion turned into a drunken stumble, grabbing for the menhirs about them. A huge sinkhole opened to their left forcing the Prince Ecliptic to veer right, but several unsteady steps on the pair found another gaping hole in the ground before them. Looking down into the empty blackness below, Kael Ra found that the darkness had the quality of the grave. The hole was deep but full of dread. It seemed to have had its fill, however, and started vomiting forth something at the sky. A chattering fountain of tiny, silver constructs erupted from the pit. Similar artificial ventings proceeded from the sinkholes opening about Orphiel and the prince. Within stumbling moments, the air was thick with the swarm.

Kael Ra fell against a tall menhir stone, only to have the thing begin to topple

in the tumultuous earth. Several dazed steps more took him towards the Crescent-Kharellion, but the earth fell away from his footing – almost causing the great construct to slip down into an opening fissure. The air trembled. The ground moaned. The perfection of the world spirit disintegrated about the pair. Kael Ra pushed himself away from one standing stone to another, attempting to launch the wraith construct's unsteady form through the quake in stages and on towards the webway portal. The air was a miasma of swirling silver as the plague spilling from the depths achieved some kind of nightmarish organisation.

'What in the dread Eye is this?' Orphiel called through the chaos. Lurching this way and that – his sole objective the great wobbling crescent of the webway portal – spoke of the impossible.

'I think that the world spirit is built on top of an yngiract tomb,' Kael Ra said. 'I think the Traveller wants to reclaim legions thought long lost.'

'Tears of Isha...' Orphiel said. She imagined the stasis crypts below them – full of machine monstrosities, awoken from aeons' old slumber by the battles above, and rising indomitably from the grave.

The pair suddenly tumbled. The ground had given way, threatening to swallow the colossus whole. The Prince Ecliptic fell down into the opening pit. Orphiel screamed. Like grapnels, Kael Ra clawed his gauntlets into the earth at the pit-edge. Dangling by the precarious grip, the autarch felt gravity latch onto the willowy bulk of his colossal form.

'Climb!' the Prince Ecliptic ordered, prompting Nestra Orphiel to haul herself up through the smashed vanes of his back and up to firmer ground. Kael Ra felt the darkness of the pit desire him – like the maw of some hungry predator. Swirling clouds of tiny constructs vented from the oblivion out about his hanging form. The Prince Ecliptic could see the webway portal, but knew that he was not going to make it.

'Get to the gate!' Kael Ra roared at the spiritseer through the wraithscape.

'No,' Orphiel yelled back.

'Go!'

Tremors threw Orphiel about as she struggled to remain upright. She backed into a standing stone, tearing her sling bag and causing spirit stones to jangle to the ground. Desperately, the spiritseer was down on her knees, trying to reclaim the escaping crystals as they rattled away from her on the trembling ground.

Kael Ra felt the tiny constructs swarming about his wraithbone form. The scarab-like drones had anchored themselves in a silver carpet across the dangling form of the colossus. The alien chittering became the Prince Ecliptic's world as

the swarm began to harvest the wraith-construct's gigantic frame. Through the glinting clouds, Kael Ra could hear Nestra Orphiel's screams. She had become lost in a haze of ravenous silver. With cold fury, the Prince Ecliptic willed his colossus up the pit side but it was no use. The swarming plague had already started eating away the crafted workings of the unliving machine. His legs were gone. Kael Ra found himself returning to his first death on Talhennor – lying in the mud, helpless against the enemy as he was now. He prepared himself for the end.

Suddenly there was light in the swarm-cloaked gloom. The Crescent-Kharellion had opened and the trans-dimensional brilliance of the webway intruded on the nightmare. With the colossus failing about his soul-sentience, Kael Ra thought he saw the outline of Eldorath Starbane framed in the blinding portal-light. The farseer's warlocks were cutting their way through the chittering air with their witchblades, their smoking swords swinging from side to side like the paddle of a canoe.

'No!' Orphiel screamed as they grabbed the seer and pulled her towards the webway gate – her arms full of spirit stones. 'I won't leave him.' Starbane's warlocks gave her little choice, however, and within moments the seer was gone.

Kael Ra – the Prince Ecliptic – once-autarch of Alaitoc – felt his wraithsight fail him. The glory of his colossal frame was all but gone and his guide through the eternity of the soulscape had left him. Darkness took the Prince Ecliptic. He welcomed it. It was time.

'I won't leave you!' Nestra Orphiel shouted, bringing Kael Ra back to the swarming, quaking nightmare of the tomb exodus. She was back with the Prince Ecliptic. Kael Ra felt like he had walked back into the light and warmth of a fire from the bitter cold of darkness.

There was no time for ritual and the honouring of ancestors. Nestra Orphiel was already honouring the Prince Ecliptic by risking her life to reclaim his soul from the precipice of oblivion. She snatched his spirit stone from what was left of the wraithbone colossus. The pit-edge gave way and the emaciated half-construct, that had served the Prince Ecliptic and the Alaitoc so well, tumbled into the deep blackness of the awakening tomb. The warlocks pulled the spiritseer back to the Crescent-Kharellion. Like everything else, the swarm had descended on the wraithbone architecture of the gate. There was little time.

As the warlocks bundled Nestra Orphiel through the portal – her arms full of spirit stones and the souls of Alaitoc's heroes – she paused to look up at Eldorath Starbane. The farseer was not looking at her, however. He was taking one last,

lingering look at the exodite world he had failed to save from their ancient and indomitable enemy. As the farseer's silhouette stepped back through the portal and trans-dimensional brilliance about him died, the webway was sealed off from the unfolding destruction. Tiny constructs swarmed the wraithbone elegance of the Crescent-Kharellion. Within moments they completed what the ravages of time had begun and harvested the webway portal. With that the exodite world's link with the craftworld that had fought so desperately to save it was broken forever.

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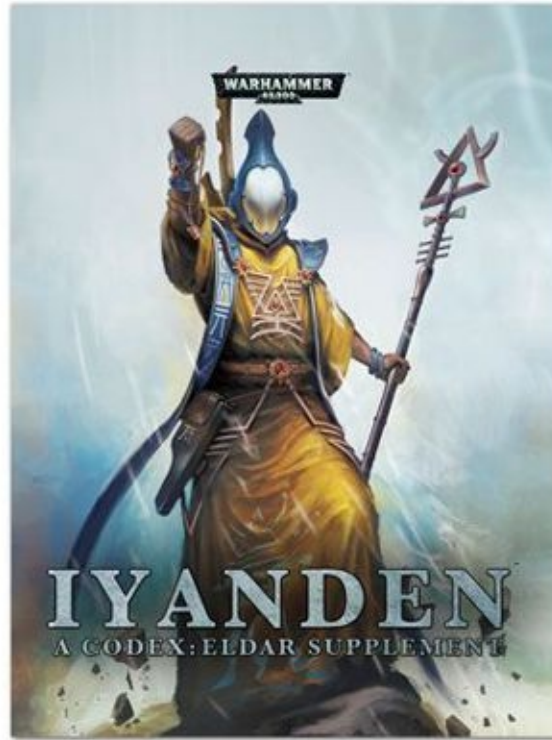
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROB SANDERS is a freelance writer, who spends his nights creating dark visions for regular visitors to the 41st millennium to relive in the privacy of their own nightmares, including the novels *Atlas Infernal* and *Legion of the Damned*. By contrast, as Head of English at a local secondary school, he spends his days beating (not literally) the same creativity out of the next generation in order to cripple any chance of future competition. He lives in the small city of Lincoln, UK.

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