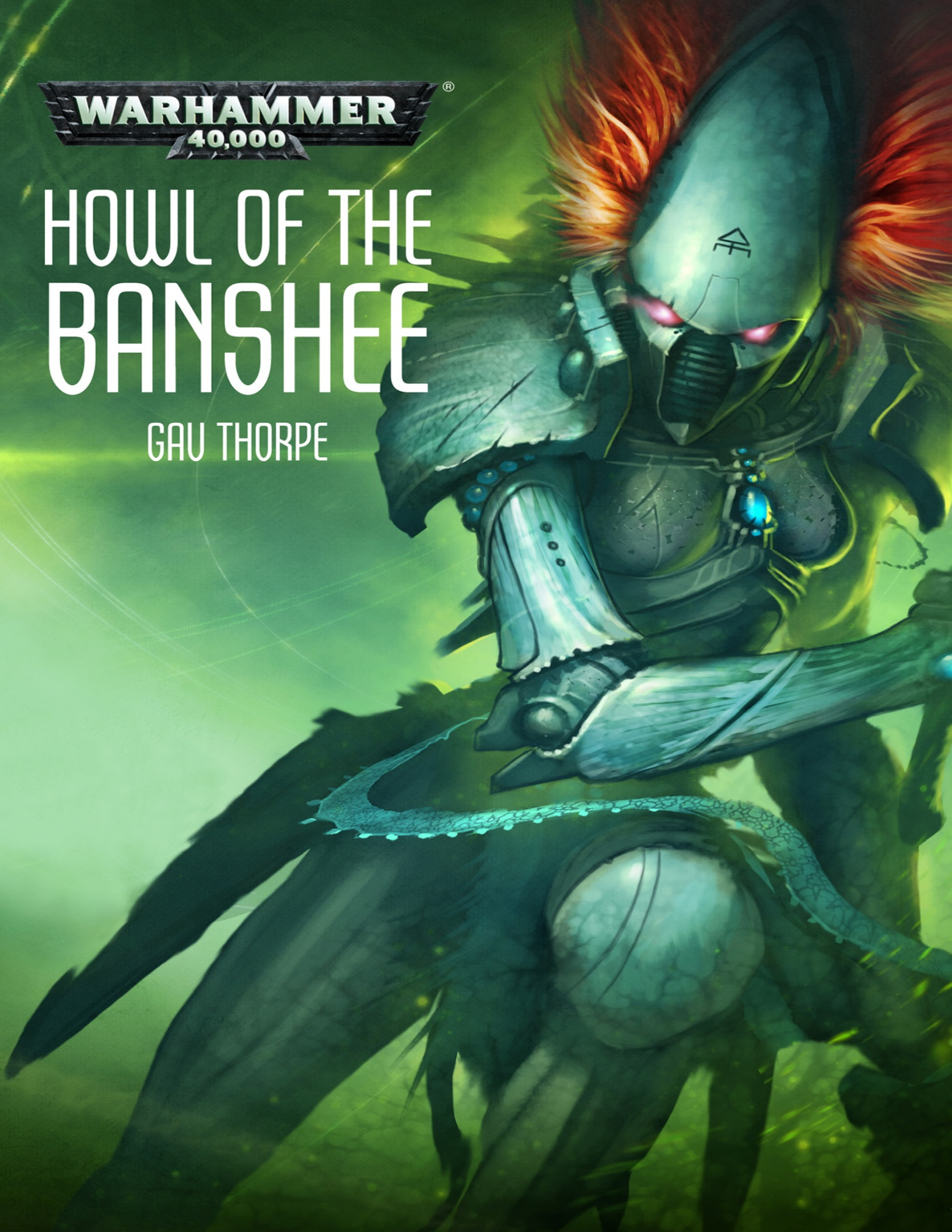


WARHAMMER
40,000

HOWL OF THE BANSHEE

GAU THORPE



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A single candle guttered atop a slender pedestal at the centre of the chamber. Its light barely touched the five female eldar kneeling in a circle around it, catching them between the warm glow and the chill gloom beyond. They were each clad in tight armour the colour of bone, their red-tassled helms held in their laps, heads bowed in contemplation.

All was silent.

A sixth figure entered, her boots clicking on the marble-like floor as she passed into the ring. Exarch of the Shrine of the Deathly Wail, Clyona.

Like the others, her head was bare, helmet carried beneath her left arm. Her head was shaved and around her eyes was tattooed black, her lips a blood-red. In her right hand she carried a long-handled glaive with a crystalline blade. Her chosen weapon, the executioner.

With dark eyes she looked at each of her charges briefly before speaking. The circle of warriors fixed her with their stares, already beginning the mental preparations that would bring up their war masks and wash away all sense of guilt or regret.

‘We are come, gathered here together, to wage war,’ she told them.

There was no reply from the others. They had felt the call from the shrine. They knew their purpose. Only one reacted, a sharp intake of breath from Kailleach, who had not yet shed blood in battle. When Clyona spoke next, the exarch stood beside the newest to hear the howl of the banshee.

‘The seers speak, they witness great evil, and we act. A craftworld, silent Lanimayesh, threatens us. Ancient foes, creatures of dark power, seeking us. Gates open, the webway corrupted, Biel-Tan falls.’ The exarch paused and looked in turn at each of the others, to ensure they understood the importance of the threat. ‘We will fight, to purge Lanimayesh, as escort. The gates closed,

Lanimayesh destroyed, Biel-Tan lives.’

Nodding in understanding, the assembled warriors stood as one. Clyona disappeared into the darkness for a moment and returned with a silver bowl, its exterior etched with swirling shapes that made screaming half-faces and glaring eyes. Within was the blood of the shrine members, still warm, freely given when they had entered.

Dipping her fingers into the blood, Clyona walked the circle, starting with Kailleach, and drew upon the forehead of each warrior the rune of the banshee, the name of Bloody-handed Khaine in his aspect of the Foretold Doom. As her fingers touched upon Kailleach’s brow, Clyona began the chant.

‘Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.’

As the blood dried on her skin, Kailleach added her voice to the mantra, her voice wavering at first but growing stronger as her war mask pushed away the vestiges of fear and guilt that had no place in the mind of a warrior.

‘Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.’

Next was Fiyanna, her pale eyes already deadened, so swift to assume the mask. The howl of the banshee sang loudly in her mind, but now was not the time to warn of becoming trapped in Khaine’s embrace. Her voice was strident.

‘Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.’

Narimeth, a crooked smile on her lips, glanced up at her exarch as the rune was daubed. When she joined the chorus, the volume increased, each warrior feeding off the emotion of the others. The joy of battle was singing in their hearts, lifting their voices.

‘Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.’

Mytheneth’s voice added another level to the harmony, calm and collected, filled with inner strength. It brought balance to the chant, enriching the minds of her fellow warriors with its placid depth.

‘Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.’

Finally Loronai was wetted with the blood and she shuddered, a sigh escaping parted lips as her war mask consumed her. The chanting became strident, the warriors with teeth bared, eyes wide.

‘Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls!’

Where six individuals had entered, there stood six sisters. Six sisters united in blood. Six sisters who harkened to the shriek of blood calling to be spilt, of dooms to be fulfilled and life-threads to be severed.

Six Howling Banshees, voices as one, let out an ululating cry that reverberated around the chamber, ringing out through the cosmos, echoing back to the dawn

of myths when the deathly wail of Khaine's sirens signalled the destruction of worlds.

A crackle of energy heralded the opening of the webway portal, through which the warriors of the Deathly Wail advanced quickly, power swords and shuriken pistols held at the ready.

Passing from the pulsing background hum into the still of Lanimayesh, the Howling Banshees were joined by others: red-armoured Fire Dragons and two squads of blue-clad Dire Avengers. It did not escape the attention of Loronai that the white coronas of the webway openings were tainted with flickers of dark red flame.

'Already the grip of darkness takes hold, sisters,' she warned.

'All the more reason for swiftness, sisters, replied Kailleach. 'Let us be the point of the dagger that strikes.'

Kailleach ran a few steps further than the others, blade held out beside her, light footsteps echoing in the grand hall the warriors now occupied.

'Caution, sister,' called out Loronai. 'We move as one.'

Loronai caught up with swift strides and glanced back. She could feel the brooding presence that was trying to force its way into the craftworld through its dormant, undefended webway gates.

Clyona brought the rest of the shrine-maidens forward while the other Aspect Warriors moved to secure the two passageways leading from the chamber.

'Feel no haste. There is one to arrive. Wait for now,' said the exarch.

Last to appear in the depths of the abandoned craftworld was Tyleannar, the farseer, leader of the expedition. Garbed in long purple robes, face hidden behind the mask of his gem-studded ghosthelm, the psyker gestured for the warriors to follow as he set across the broad chamber. Passing the Dire Avengers from the Shrine of the Golden Star, he led them into one of the corridors and the small force fell in behind him.

The Howling Banshees moved to a position just behind the Golden Star, ready to spring forward against any foe that survived the Dire Avengers' shuriken catapults. The other squad of Dire Avengers followed close behind, while the Fire Dragons brought up the rear.

The passage was short, but showed further evidence of the encroaching warp-corruption. The pastel-blue walls were darkening in patches as Chaos energy leaked along the crystal matrix of the infinity circuit within. Golden arched doorways were turning to iron and brass. The scent of blood, faint but

unmistakeable, hung in the air.

Narimeth voiced a concern that was not unique to her. 'Perhaps we should have brought greater numbers. The farseers have misjudged the extent of Lanimayesh's vulnerability.'

There was no comment from Tyleannar, so it was Mytheneth that replied.

'Bulk stifles swiftness. A larger force would be more unwieldy, and to tarry too long here will bring its own hazards. Do you not agree, Loronai, my sister?'

'You are correct, sister. The greater our number, the greater the likelihood that our presence is noticed by powers we wish to overlook us.'

'The swift strike, the blow that is unseen, is deadly.'

The exarch's words ended the discussion and they continued without further comment.

At the end of the passageway, Tyleannar paused for a moment. The hall beyond was on the outskirts of the central infinity circuit chambers and the walls glistened with threads of crystal.

Unlike the glittering trails of Biel-Tan's psychic matrix, the circuit of Lanimayesh was dull, unalive. Where the crystal lines joined together as larger node trickles of thick red fluid dribbled down the walls.

The Howling Banshees looked at each other, but it was Fiyanna that was most affected.

'A sign of that which wishes to enter,' she said eagerly. 'Blood. The Skull King desires Lanimayesh. Do you not feel his call, sisters?'

'Heed not the urges of the father of our bastard master,' said Loronai. 'It is not rage that we serve, but a purer war.'

'All war is rage, sister, whether knowing or not,' Fiyanna said dismissively. 'The Lord of the Brass Tower seeks to make a shrine of once-fair Lanimayesh so that his servants can revel in the bloodshed that sowed death upon the people of this place in ancient past.'

Mention of Lanimayesh's doom sent a collective shudder of apprehension and excitement through the other Howling Banshees, save for Clyona, who was standing still, head tilted as if listening intently.

The others heard what had caught her attention a moment later, a distant clattering of sharp footfalls followed by a screech as of a whetstone along a blade.

'They have come. Hear the Blood God's servants. Ready blades!'

Eight daemons came, and eight more and eight again, violent rage given form in

blood-red flesh. In clawed hands they gripped brazen swords and serrated axes. White orb eyes glared from snarling faces. Twisted horns jutted from anger-furrowed brows. By many names did the eldar know Khorne's foot soldiers: the Gore Children, Sons of Rage, Bloodletters.

With them advanced a larger brute, a gleaming axe in each hand. The herald lifted up its blades and from its fanged mouth issued a monstrous bellow, both a challenge for its foes and a call to battle for its followers.

The daemons' shouts were met by the song of the Dire Avengers' shuriken catapults, the air filling with slicing discs. Warp-spawned bodies were shredded and flayed by the fusillade but only a handful of the daemons fell as they broke into a run.

Immaterial forms shuddered and twitched as the Dire Avengers continued with their onslaught, but these creatures were not of mortal flesh and bone and shrugged off their wounds like the bites of flies, forcing the blue-armoured eldar to fall back.

Tyleannar retreated before the daemons, seeking shelter amongst the Fire Dragons as Clyona led her warriors forward.

'To the right, we fall upon their flank. Swiftly now!'

White-hot blasts from the Fire Dragons' thermal guns and their exarch's firepike cut into the approaching daemons, with no greater success than the guns of their fellow warriors. Fiery beams that could melt through the armour of tanks and turn physical flesh to cinders were shrugged off like water splashing from rock and only a few more daemons were destroyed by the volley.

The Howling Banshees circled around the withdrawing aspect warriors and broke into a run.

As they charged, the war sisters of the Deathly Wail let forth their battle screams. Channelled through the psychosonic amplifiers of their helms, the shriek became a surge of power, slamming into the daemons like a gale.

The closest blood-red warriors were thrown from their feet by the peeling cry; others dropped their blades or stumbled back as a wave of psychic fury washed over them.

Kailleach outpaced her sisters, her long strides fuelled by naive enthusiasm. Her pistol spat a volley of shurikens into a daemon as it pushed itself back to its knees, slicing through its face. Her sword, its blade glowing with blue energy, followed a moment later, shearing through the corded muscle and veins of its neck.

'Let us be upon them while they reel!' cried Kailleach.

‘As one, we fight as one. Foe on the left, sister!’

Loronai’s warning came in time.

Kailleach twisted, ducking beneath the sweep of an axe. The point of her sword sank into the gut of the daemon as she pivoted on one heel, the ball of her foot driving into its chin.

Stunned, the Bloodletter stumbled back, to be met by Mytheneth’s sword as she sprinted into the fray.

Fiyanna joined them a heartbeat later, her blade flashing to the left and right, leaving arcs of blue around her.

‘Kailleach’s temper has it right. Slaughter them quickly and rejoice.’

The other Howling Banshees swept into the disorientated daemons like a spear of ivory cleaving into red flesh, their pistols and swords cutting down a dozen of the creatures before they could recover from the onslaught of the banshee scream that had dazed them.

None slew more than Clyona, whose shining glaive cut heads from necks and slashed limbs from bodies in a constant motion, the barks and growls of her foes becoming louder and fiercer as their numbers dwindled and their anger increased in proportion.

Teeth bared, the herald moved through its minions to meet the charge of the eldar, hefting its axes ready for the strike. Overcome by the heat of combat, Kailleach leapt to the attack. Loronai called out in concern.

‘No, sister, you cannot best this beast alone.’

The herald caught Kailleach’s downward swing on one of its curling horns, turning the blow aside. Striking out, it punched her in the face, hurling her backwards with the mask of her helm cracked open.

Clyona acted rather than spoke. She lanced the point of her glaive towards the herald’s throat, but the strike was deflected at the last moment by the haft of an axe. Spinning, Clyona struck again. Crystal blade was met by enchanted bronze as the herald raised its axes in parry to the exarch’s assault.

For several heartbeats the two were locked together, flares of energy crackling between them, sparking from their weapons.

With a triumphant snarl, the herald thrust away Clyona, sending her sprawling from her feet. The Howling Banshees converged on their upended leader, but not swiftly enough. Striking with a speed that outmatched its adversaries, the herald of Khorne brought both axes down upon the stricken exarch.

One blade cleaved Clyona’s helm in two, the other slammed through her breastplate.

Kailleach shrieked as if struck and launched herself afresh at the herald. A step behind her, Loronai snapped out a command.

‘Storm of Blades Rising. Harvest the sorrow of the fallen.’

Acting in concert, the Howling Banshees fell upon the herald in a circle, twirling and lunging, each striking a dozen times in a few moments, opening up long wounds in its crimson flesh. Fiyanna broke from the deadly assault as the herald flailed an axe at her head, ducking beneath its blade.

‘Look to your backs and I will finish the beast,’ Fiyanna said to rest of the shrine-maidens.

The others turned their attention to the bloodletters closing around them, but Mytheneth was caught in the back by a serrated sword edge, her armour giving way under the powerful blow, bronze hacking through vertebrae. She fell with a cry, her last act to lash the tip of her sword into her killer’s face as she dropped.

Possessed by the spirit of Khaine, driven by a rage that matched that of the Blood God’s servants, Fiyanna unleashed a blistering flurry of strikes against the herald, cutting away at its chest and throat, driving it back step by step.

Blood spurted from the wounds, coating the Howling Banshee’s pale armour with gore, but she pressed on as her sisters guarded against attack from behind, their blades singing as they duelled with the surviving bloodletters.

‘Death now,’ spat Fiyanna. ‘Back to the accursed realm that spawned you, vile beast.’

Her next blow severed the herald’s crooked leg at the knee, toppling it to one side. Before it had hit the ground, she pounced, driving her sword through the white orb of its eye. It twitched twice and fell still.

The bloodletters’ numbers thinned by two-thirds, the other aspect warriors joined the Deathly Wail, Tyleannar at their head, the tip of his runestaff a purple flare of psychic energy.

Beset on all sides, the remaining daemons fell quickly, though not before accounting for a handful of the Dire Avengers that had come to the aid of the Howling Banshees.

After the frenzy of combat, the silence of Lanimayesh was the silence of a tomb. There was no grief, not yet. The war masks summoned in the shrine held back all woe. Loronai broke the still.

‘Quickly now, take up their waystones and let us be away from this accursed place.’

The gem upon Mytheneth’s breast glittered brighter than before, her spirit enclosed within the sanctuary of its crystal heart. While the other aspect warriors

attended to their fallen, Loronai plucked Mytheneth's spirit stone from its gilded setting and placed it in a pouch at her waist.

Kailleach had moved to the body of Clyona, but was presented with a problem. The exarch's armour was studded with fifteen waystones, each with a hue and sparkle of its own. Forever lost to Khaine, the spirit of an exarch was not given up to the infinity circuit of Biel-Tan, but resided in the armour to blend with all of those that had come before.

'We cannot take her with us,' said Narimeth. 'Which of us would give their life to carry our sister? Not I.'

'We could remove all of the stones.' Kailleach crouched over the fallen exarch as she spoke. She was answered by Loronai.

'There is not time. The longer we dwell, the more daemons will come.' She paused as she noticed the farseer departing. 'See, Tyleannar moves on already.'

'An easy choice for one that has trodden the path so many times before,' said Narimeth. 'How easy is it, autarch-to-be, to leave behind a fallen sister?'

'Not easy, but necessary.' Loronai spoke quietly, almost to herself. 'Too many are numbered who have died beside me, but if we remain here the tally will increase further.'

There was hesitation amongst the sisters. None were willing to abandon Clyona to a fate worse than death. Trapped within the exarch armour, fifteen eldar spirits would be consigned to damnation when Tyleannar wakened Lanimayesh's infinity core and activated the craftworld's self-destruction.

Loronai conceded to her sisters' unease. 'Very well, we shall return for Clyona before we depart. Her fall will be for nought if we do not commit the shell of Lanimayesh to the warp. Let us see the task done and then we shall carry our dead to safety.'

The others acquiesced to this compromise and followed as Fiyanna ran after their departing companions.

The crystal matrix at the centre of the craftworld pulsed red as Tyleannar ministered to the corrupted infinity circuit. The air was thick with the stench of blood as the daemons of Chaos strove to break through the weakened barrier between the warp and the mortal universe.

In handfuls, bloodletters and monstrous flesh hounds breached the divide, to be greeted with hails of shuriken fire, the discharge of energy weapons and the blades of the Howling Banshees. Though facing no concerted assault, the eldar were hard-pressed, ever-alert for each fresh incursion.

‘How many more?’ asked Kailleach. ‘I can feel the veil weakening with every passing breath. Soon they will come in numbers too great to stop.’

‘It is no speedy task, to bring forth the spirits of a deceased craftworld,’ answered Loronai. ‘For a long time they have been dormant, allowing this corruption to spread.’

‘We fight as long as we need to, until we can fight no more.’ Fiyanna laughed wickedly. ‘Did you think you would grow old as a Howling Banshee, little sister?’

‘I had hoped to see more than one battle.’

‘There is only one battle, Kailleach, with a rare few moments of peace between exchanges. Since the Dark Powers first touched our hearts, we have been doomed to a war we cannot win.’

‘Cannot win?’ Loronai spoke sharply. ‘Or do not wish to win, Fiyanna? Khaine’s touch upon you grows heavier with every foe you fell.’

‘Perhaps I welcome it, sister. Did that not occur to you?’

Narimeth sliced the head from a coalescing bloodletter and spun past her war-sisters, her blade trailing an arc of blood.

‘Clyona is not long dead and you are so soon ready to step into the void she has left?’ she said. ‘Does her bloody lesson teach you nothing? Or is it that desire for Khaine’s curse slowed your hand?’

Before Fiyanna could argue the accusation, the air throbbed with power, echoing with a distant roar. It was as if the floor parted as the lattice of the infinity circuit gleamed crimson, each red line opening up wider and wider, tearing through the gulf between realms.

Bestial, snarling faces pushed through the void-gap as Khorne’s hunters, flesh hounds, forced their scaled bodies into reality, growling and snapping.

Blasts from the Fire Dragons ripped through the oncoming beasts, and a heartbeat later Fiyanna fell upon the half-formed monsters, her blade cleaving deep into a bony crest atop the head of the first hound.

‘It was not I that doomed fey Clyona!’ said Fiyanna. ‘Look to our freshest blood for cause of that.’

Kailleach joined Fiyanna at the warp-breach, her pistol spitting shurikens.

‘You are not wrong, sister. It was my rashness, my need to prove myself, that brought Clyona to her doom. I accept the blood of our exarch as I must accept all blood that is shed while I wear the mask of Khaine.’

The air was so thick now with psychic energy that phantasms danced within it, lit by the ruddy shine of the infinity circuit that now pulsed with new life.

Tyleannar telepathically announced his rituals were complete as he stepped away from the exposed infinity circuit nodes.

With the influx of daemonic energy momentarily stemmed, it was safe now to open the webway in the heart of the damned craftworld. Driving the head of his runestaff into a confluence of blazing crystal threads he opened up an oval portal surrounded by shimmering silver.

As the other aspect warriors fell back to follow the farseer into the opening, Fiyanna stood defiant, blade raised as more bloodletters formed from viscous pools created by trickles of blood running down the walls.

‘We will not abandon Clyona.’ Fiyanna was vehement. ‘We agreed.’

The floor shuddered underfoot, almost toppling the Howling Banshees. Loronai looked at the others departing, feeling the surge of psychic energy of Lanimayesh waking; the long-dead spirits of the craftworld becoming aware of the grotesque beings seeping through from the warp.

Above the webway portal black fire crawled across the domed ceiling, tendrils of dark flame seeking the gap into the eldar webway. Surainan, exarch of the Fire Dragons, the last of the other squads, stood at the opening and beckoned for the Howling Banshees to follow.

Taking a step towards the portal, Narimeth turned her gaze back towards her shrine-sisters.

‘We are too late. We will be consumed with Clyona.’

‘Never!’ shrieked Fiyanna, breaking from the others to run back the way they had entered. Loronai lunged to grasp her as she passed, but missed.

‘What madness grips her?’ asked Kailleach.

‘The madness of Khaine,’ said Loronai. ‘Come, sisters, we cannot let her die alone.’

As the Howling Banshees sprinted from the infinity circuit chamber, more red-skinned daemons burst into existence, a tide of feral creatures baying and bellowing close on the heels of the fleet-footed war-sisters.

‘We are here! Come, test your blades against ours and know that Khaine yet despises his raging father.’

Fiyanna’s defiant shout went almost unheard amongst the tumult of tortured wraithbone and bellowing of bloodthirsty daemons. All around them the fabric of Lanimayesh tore itself apart.

Alerted to the daemon presence, the spirits of the infinity circuit had gathered all of their remaining energy into the great webway gates aft of the craftworld,

slowly engulfing the continent-sized vessel with the power of the warp.

Kailleach and Narimeth fought alongside each other. They attacked any daemonic hound or bloodletter that entered the chamber, where Clyona had fallen, as a pair.

Loronai carried the deceased exarch over one shoulder. She held her power sword in her free hand, but so encumbered she was at the mercy of her sisters' skills as a fresh influx of daemons crowded towards the archway to be met by the blades and pistols of the Howling Banshees.

'Run, sister, run!' Kailleach cut the head from a lunging daemon and darted a look at Loronai. 'The Path of the Autarch and greatness awaits. There is no need for us all to die here – the webway is but a short distance.'

'I would rather die with my sisters than live alone as autarch with the knowledge that I deserted them.' Loronai lowered Clyona's corpse to the floor, noticing rivulets of blood seeping up from the tainted wraith-circuitry beneath her feet. She drew her pistol and joined Fiyanna, attacking low as her sister slashed high.

'Perhaps She Who Thirsts will not claim us,' Fiyanna said gaily. 'The Blood God hungers for our spirits more greatly, I think.'

'Accursed mother and father will destroy each other fighting for my essence, if I have any say.'

'Then together we will fight and fall, and within the womb of the Great Enemy himself we shall continue to cut until he must spit us forth or die of the wounds.'

'A worthy, but empty, sentiment sister. The Prince of Pleasure will delight all the more for the tickling we shall give him.'

Something even larger and more monstrous than the bloodletters stalked into view at the end of the passageway held by the Howling Banshees, larger even than the herald. Its face was thin and drawn, its mouth a gaping hole lined with canine teeth.

In one hand it carried a long-bladed sword, the other fist wrapped in barbed chains of bronze. Blackened, tattered wings half-spread from its back as it advanced. Its body was protected by iron plate, the surface of which writhed with many faces in torment, the souls of those it had slain imprisoned for all eternity.

The gigantic creature's bellow of rage reverberated along the corridor, penetrating even the fear-dampening effect of the Howling Banshees' war masks. Loronai gave voice to the alarm she shared with the others.

'Daemon prince! Corrupted mortal given immortal form. Against such a foe

we cannot hope to prevail, sisters.’

‘And less chance of eluding such a predator,’ added Narimeth. ‘Retreat is no better.’

‘If there can be no retreat, but one option remains.’ Fiyanna relished the prospect of the coming confrontation, wholly consumed by the spirit of Khaine. ‘Let him howl all he likes, he has known nothing until he has heard the Deathly Wail.’

As one the sisterhood of death gathered together, letting flow the fury they had been holding in check. Like water breaking a dam, the despair and rage broke through the barriers of their minds, vented as a war-scream as they broke into a run.

The psychic barrage of pure hate, the blessing of Khaine’s legacy, ripped into the nearest daemons like a storm. Fuelled by the warp energy seething through the doomed craftworld it tore apart their bodies, flinging tattered remnants against the walls.

The daemon prince responded, breaking into a lumbering run towards its prey, scattering the lesser daemons in its path. Fiyanna was swiftest, borne forwards with light strides powered by insane desire, the others close behind.

They had not covered half the distance to the foe when the air ahead started to distort.

A pinprick of blue light hung in the air ahead of the charging aspect warriors. In moments it expanded into a shimmering circle of light while other miniature stars sprang into existence around it.

From the newly-opened portals sprang Tyleannar, flanked by the exarchs of the other aspects.

Surainan’s firepike spat a white beam of pure energy, striking the daemon prince square in the chest. The creature staggered backwards, gravely wounded but not slain. The farseer waved for the war-sisters to enter the webway portals. Loronai did not need any further invitation.

‘Now, sisters! The time of our sacrifice is not yet at hand. Fiyanna!’

The Howling Banshee slowed as her name was called out, shaking her head as if freshly woken from a deep sleep.

‘What of Clyona?’

‘We will take her together, sister.’

Moving quickly, Loronai and Fiyanna returned to the body of their fallen war-priestess and bore her up between them while the others helped throw back the onrushing daemons. Behind the bloodletters, the wounded daemon prince hauled

itself upright and issued its challenge.

As they arrived, so the Deathly Wail departed. Six sisters together, united under Khaine's banner.

As the force disappeared into the safety of the webway, Lanimayesh entered its final death throes.

Forks of psychic energy rippled along the walls as the raw warp and material universe tried to overlap. The titanic energy unleashed pulled the craftworld asunder as it fell into the Realm of Chaos, dragging the daemons back to their infernal home.

A single candle guttered atop a slender pedestal at the centre of the chamber. Its light barely touched the four female eldar kneeling in a circle around it, catching them between the warm glow and the chill gloom beyond. They were each clad in tight armour, the colour of bone, their helms held in their laps, heads bowed in contemplation.

The sound of weeping filled the air as the Deathly Wail, now stripped of their war masks, could finally give in to the pain and grief of their loss.

'As elder sister she was,' said Kailleach. 'From me she pulled forth the sting of my anger, taking its poison into herself.'

'Sister to us all.' Tears flowed down Narimeth's cheeks despite her bitter tone as she glanced back into the shadow of the shrine where the naked body of Clyona lay upon a marble bier. It was an empty shell, her spirit still within the armour that had been placed reverently upon its rack in the adjoining chamber. 'I never heard her laughter, nor saw her smile, and she was incapable of love. Khaine gripped her, but for all that, she was sister-in-war and she gave her life for us.'

There was one who did not cry. She stared at the candle, the flame reflected in her pupils. Her jaw was set, cheeks drawn in tight, stare hard and unyielding. Loronai glanced at near-catatonic Fiyanna, her concern apparent.

'We are free from any burden, sisters. Any debt we feel we owe is just illusion. Clyona was doomed the moment she donned the mantle of exarch. That which she had been was lost from that time forward, yet what she became still remains. Give voice to your despair, sisters, and be grateful that we can, for Clyona could never shed tears for us.'

Fiyanna stirred at last, looking from one sister to the next with a cold, flinty glare. Of the eldar she had been only a vestige remained.

In her expression was hate. Hate not for those she looked at, but a hate at the

core of her being so strong it drove out all other emotion. When she spoke, it was as if another spirit used her lips and tongue.

‘Save your words of condolences for those that can hear them. I cannot. All is silent in my mind, save for the cry that calls me to my doom. Everything is lost.’ Fiyanna paused and her eyes became even more distant. ‘All that remains is the howl of the banshee.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost*, as well as the novellas *Corax: Soulforge*, *Ravenlord* and 'The Lion', which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*. He is particularly well-known for his Dark Angels stories, including the Legacy of Caliban series, and the ever-popular novel *Angels of Darkness*. His Warhammer 40,000 repertoire further includes the Path of the Eldar series, the Horus Heresy audio dramas *Raven's Flight* and *Honour to the Dead*, and a multiplicity of short stories. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. He lives and works in Nottingham.

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