

WARHAMMER
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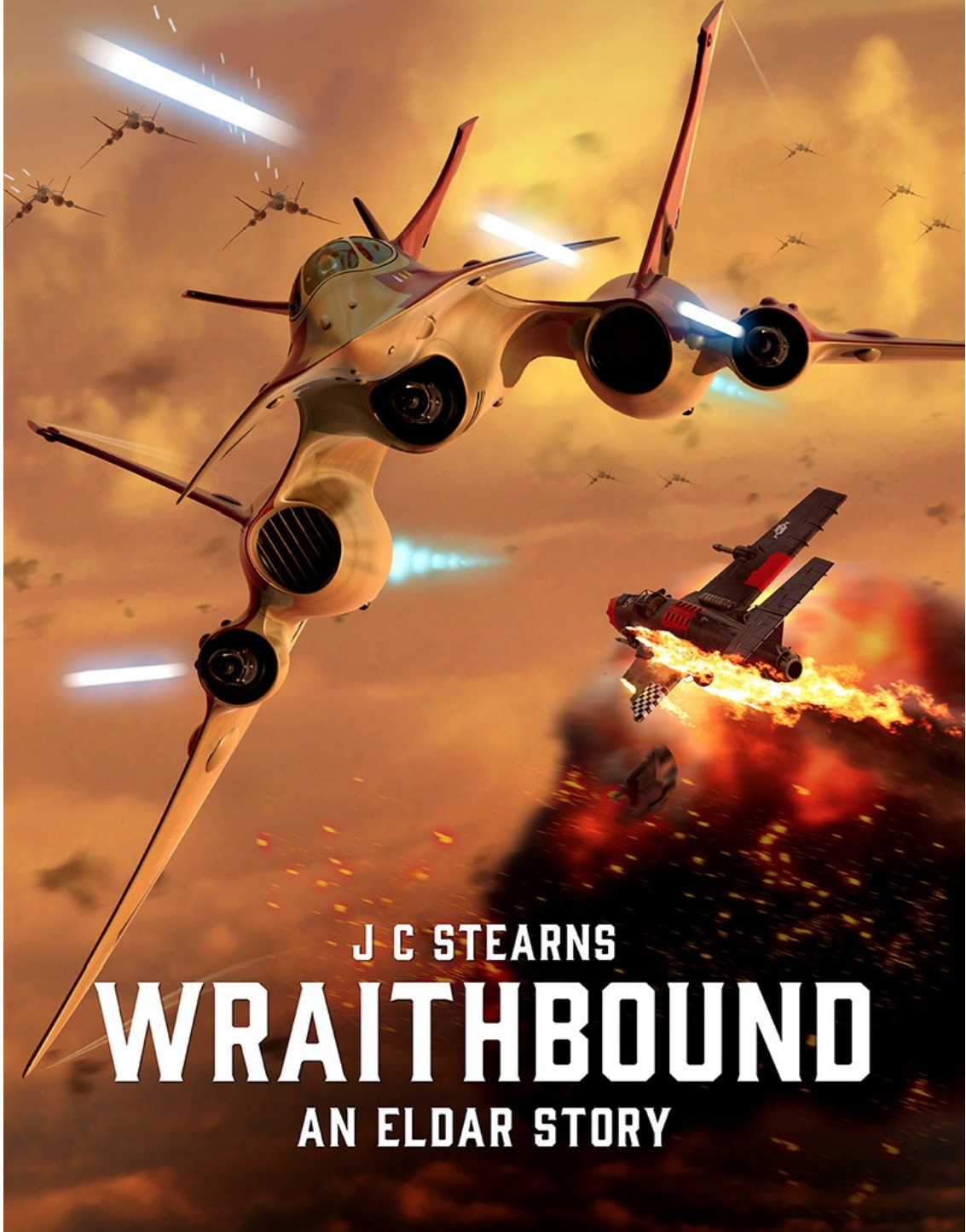
J C STEARNS

WRAITHBOUND

AN ELDAR STORY



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WRAITHBOUND

J C Stearns

‘Prince Eidear has begun his attack run.’ Liosa’s voice echoed in Seoci’s head. Even the crystalline earpiece could not filter out the harsh, aggressive tone. All around them, engines whined hot. Seoci’s fingers tapped, and his interceptor’s voice joined the chorus.

‘Have you ever done this before?’ asked Padruic. There was apprehension in his voice. ‘Do we wait for her to accelerate first?’

Seoci sighed and gazed to his right. He couldn’t see Padruic, of course. The canopy of his companion’s fighter was shrouded from the outside, as was his own. The two of them hovered in the misty expanse of the webway, flanking and slightly trailing Liosa. It was good Padruic was speaking with him privately, for Liosa would have been displeased by the communication. Empathy was an emotion the exarch had left behind long ago.

‘War mask,’ Seoci replied. ‘It is time, brother. Focus yourself. There is time enough for thoughts of worries and fears. Let Khaine’s hot breath stir your blood, and carry such apprehension far away.’ Padruic had only recently come to their shrine after a long and successful walk on the path of the healer, and his relative inexperience still showed. That was the reason he was matched with pilots as experienced as Seoci and Liosa. Outside, in the cerulean fog, the roar of engines grew to a crescendo. They were not the only squadron, nor were the Crimson Hunters alone. Vypers hung in the air, along with clusters of Falcons and Fire Prisms. He could even make out a few Venom attack craft, clad in the vivid purple of Princess Isbeil, amid the sea of Lugganath orange. Around all of them hovered the Windriders in their dozens, motionless, engines straining to tear loose. So loud, the vibrations of the cacophony thrummed against Seoci’s ribs, even within the sound-dampened cockpit. Above it all, as if this section of

the webway had been constructed with a sky, the massive curving keel of Isbeil's personal void barque, its projected gravity anchor the only reason the assembly below did not crash into one another.

It would have been easier if Isbeil and Eidear could work as allies. The intricate carved spars of the portal they swarmed before were titanic in the scope they encompassed, their furthest reaches lost to sight amid the swirling mists of the webway. The Helheart Gate was large enough to accommodate not only the massed throng surrounding it, but the equally large force that was even now beginning its assault from orbit. The two arrogant Corsair leaders had petulantly refused to join battle on the same side, although they had eventually agreed to allow the craftworlders to split their efforts between both avenues of attack and to coordinate that.

'But yes,' said Seoci. 'To answer your question, many times. From the webway and its thoughtless, formless oblivion to a world of screaming sensation the next. It's much like being born, I imagine.'

Padruic's only response was a grunt, and Seoci nodded in approval. The slight of having his turn of phrase snubbed was a small price to pay for the relief of knowing his companion had centred himself.

'One,' said Liosa. Seoci took a breath. It was time for the war mask.

'Two,' the exarch continued. Behind Seoci's eyes, he could feel the change. So much further along the path than Padruic, Seoci could don his war mask as easily as slipping on a glove. The hot wind coursed through his mind, cleansing his thoughts. In the wake of Khaine's breath, there was no room for trivial thoughts like fear, worry, or especially mercy. Replacing them came the memories of all the previous times he had slipped on the mask. Memories of bloodshed and lives extinguished. A parade of experiences that might have broken Seoci if he hadn't forgotten them each time he cast the mask aside.

'Now,' hissed Liosa.

The gravity anchor flickered even as the webway parted before them, the titanic arching spars of the Helheart Gate flaring to life with brilliant violet energy to create a rippling portal, their entry to true space. Liosa howled in their earpieces as the Crimson Hunters burst forth, carrying wispy blue contrails behind them. Padruic howled as well, and Seoci became aware that he was screaming with them.

Florid or not, his description had been apt. If they had not trained for webway insertions just such as this, he might have been lost in confusion. The webway had been dark, but the planet was lit by a harsh white noonday sun, mitigated

somewhat by a cover of toxic smog high in the atmosphere. The mass of eldar craft that had hung suspended around him in the mists of the webway was nothing compared to the clutter of the city they emerged into, with rickety buildings crammed together in cramped lines. Although the municipal square the portal opened onto was large by the standards of a being on foot, the supersonic interceptors could impact the palisade of rusted structures at its far border in less time than it took to blink. Even the ethereal grace and reactions that every eldar possessed would not have been enough to help them make the turn; only the razor-sharp training of the Hunters enabled their squadron to pull up in time, the thunderous force of their sharp ascent buckling the street beneath them.

Targeting sensors and tracking systems registered the enemy before Seoci even saw them. Pinpoint flares projected on the crystal canopy showed him the foe: a handful of slow, filthy orkish aircraft, littering the skies only to compete against one another in pointless death races, or to fire their weapons into the air for the sheer thrill of it.

The white stabs of laser fire from the interceptors tore through the ork planes like tissue paper, the pilots and crew immolated in mid-air before they were even aware of the eldar attackers. Seoci didn't need to hear the words to know that a cry went up among the greenskins below, who scrambled to meet the enemy suddenly upon them.

Liosa banked sharply, scanning the ground for optimal targets. There were many to choose from. It had only been a single orbital cycle since the orks had conquered the planet from the mon-keigh, but they had wasted no time in exploiting what resources it had. The primitive humans had long since stripped away any natural wealth, leaving the planet to serve them solely as a cluster of factory-cities separated by vast dry wastelands, good only for producing the components for their crude aircraft and laughable skimmer technology. Not that the planet had been without resources when the orks arrived; there would have been stockpiles of raw materials brought in from desolate mining worlds or asteroid extraction operations across the sector. Of course, the industrial resources were far more useful to the orks, – the huge cities were filled from edge to edge with billions of machines, which could be disassembled and repurposed for whatever crude vision the orkish mind could concoct.

'Sighted,' said Liosa. Responding to the merest flick of his eye, the secondary visual display projected onto the canopy to show Seoci the ground below. They soared above the rooftops, high enough to avoid collision but still close enough to read the foul orkish graffiti on their banners, if any of them had ever wasted

enough time learning orkish scrawl. Relaying data from Liosa's instructions, the scores of highlighted targets beneath them began showing informative runes, one glowing brightly to command their attention.

Embedded in the top of a squat, square-edged building, the battery of guns was crewed not by full-grown orks but instead by the tiny, squabbling vermin known as gretchin. Seoci sneered in disgust. The enemy might be pitiful, but their guns were not.

'Attend, brother,' said Seoci, calling for Padruic's attention, 'those weapons are a particular danger. We've encountered their like before.' The spitting capacitors attached to the artillery pieces were still building a charge, but once they reached capacity they could direct a powerful magnetic beam, capable of dashing aircraft against the ground with destructive force.

'Confirmed.' Padruic's voice was calm, assured, economically answering both his brother and his exarch with a single word. His pulse laser hit the building first, followed a split second later by his companions' fire. The thrum of their lasers was the rich, deep-throated growl of the great cat, confident and laconic, effortless in their destruction. Before them brick, mortar, and steel vanished amid clouds of fire and superheated dust.

'Confirmed destroyed,' said Seoci, trailing just far enough behind Padruic and Liosa to track the number of enemy casualties. Across their communications network, they heard the mounting casualty reports confirming the destruction of any lingering anti-air support. Their arrival had been clean; in the time it would take to recite a single eight-line *seada* they had removed all non-eldar from the skies, and eliminated any anti-aircraft resistance.

'Engage ground targets at your discretion.' Princess Isbeil's command over the network heralded the next phase of the attack. From the luminescent portal of the Helheart Gate the eldar began to pour: tanks and jetbikes, Vypers and Venoms, filling the air with hissing shuriken and sizzling energy lances.

Seoci smiled to himself. Banking away from his squadron, his eyes flickered across the targeting runes, seeking one that might strike his fancy. His console read the narrowing of his eyes, locking on to the chosen enemy unit and making velocity predictions. Seoci's grin turned feral. He had no need for such projections. He'd walked the path of the hunter long enough to know how far he'd need to lead his shots.

Ahead of him, a squadron of three orkish rotorcraft spluttered and belched thick black smoke, struggling to gain the altitude necessary to make strafing runs on the targets below. Seoci's shots were as precise as surgical incisions, each strike

clipping a rotor shaft away as neatly as shears snipping a flower stem, allowing Seoci to savour the image of the orks: the rolling descent, bellowing faces frozen, arms flailing wildly.

Seoci realised he'd composed a three line *eado* without meaning to. For the millionth time he thanked the gods that he'd been pulled away from the poet's path at the last minute. Gritting his teeth, he surrendered himself to the war mask, banishing thoughts of yesterdays, his feet firmly on the today-path. Below him ork vehicles roared about on clattering wheels and grasping treads, their guns firing at random, trying to get a fix on a target. One mechanical abomination after another, the white columns of laser fire tore them apart, melting rusted plating to slag and vaporising any ork caught in the blast. The interceptor's guns reaped a bloody harvest, the kill-poetry of a moment ago abandoned.

'Bridgehead established,' said Princess Isbeil. 'Final emergence imminent.'

Through the wide streets of the conquered city, the orks fought a losing battle with the eldar. Caught completely by surprise, they were torn apart by the lightning attacks. Many groups of greenskins fled for the sanctuary of the ruined buildings, only to be cut down from behind by waves of razored shuriken, or to have their shelters collapsed by volleys of rocket fire. A few of the larger orks tried to rally their overwhelmed forces, but no sooner did they begin bellowing and posturing to impose order than they were riven apart by laser fire, the screaming figures making easy targets.

Banking to the left, Seoci soared low over one of the thoroughfares, following Liosa's rune to link back up with his squadron. The chaotic fighting below was so thick that a pilot of any other race would have been unable to pick out targets for fear of hitting their own forces. Seoci's weapons fired as fast as his eyes could highlight targets. White beams of laser fire slashed inbetween the darting eldar shapes, sometimes so perilously close as to spray a passing Windrider with the ashen remains spurting from Seoci's latest kill.

The orks in the main square, which had served as the arrival point, saw the white slash of the Helheart Gate begin opening a third time, and surged towards it. Having suffered two blistering waves of attack, the dim-witted brutes were at least intelligent enough to respond to this latest threat, and charged the webway portal in a headlong rush, intent on cutting down this newest attack and turning the tables on the eldar.

The front line of the greenskin horde collapsed without warning, the orks following behind them tripping over the sudden casualties. Soundless, the first of

the wraithguard strode through the portal, hefting their distortion scythes for a second volley. More of the orks collapsed, each of them going from a frothing knot of unthinking fury to a lifeless slab of refuse in the space of a blink. The advance of the wraithbone warriors was the stuff of nightmares: a long line of expressionless killers who gazed upon their targets without sight, fought without sound and killed with no wounds. Their unyielding bodies and chilling coordination might give the impression of automata, but there was always a subtle sign, from a curious pan of the head to gaze at a cowering foe to a cautious step around the body of a fallen ally, that spoke of a living mind and the unmistakable presence of a soul. The long orange limbs of the wraithguard carried them through the horde, heedless of the living orks that had tripped over their own dead, still thrashing to gain their feet. The second line of wraith constructs emerged from the open portal to solve the problem for them, ghostblades rising and falling in silent, brutal, relentless butchery.

Seoci could remember the dread such constructs instilled in him when he shed his war mask, and felt disgust. He beheld the smooth, silent killers, bemused by the horror such a spectacle would have been to him during his poet days. But as he closed in on the portal, he could hear the low psychic droning at the edge of his mind, the war chants of the dead warriors sending a chill up his spine that even the discipline of his war mask could not fully quell.

A column of energy nearly tore him apart. He saw the beam, as wide as his cockpit, smash to his left. Banking hard, Seoci ground his teeth and pushed his interceptor into a tight roll. The pillar of coruscating magnetic force swept after him like a spotlight, lurching drunkenly in a vain attempt to hit him. Seoci swept his plane in a tight turn around what was once a large manufacturing facility, and pitched sharply skywards.

‘We have sky guns,’ he snapped. With a whine his engines burst into overdrive, and he yanked the interceptor into a bone-crushing turn.

One of the gun batteries, the same ones they had targeted on their way in, was operational again, streams of energy scouring the skies for the nimble eldar attackers. One of the fingers of energy caught a Windrider, the magnetic force yanking the warrior from his bike and crushing him to a pulp.

At the apex of his trajectory, Seoci turned and fired at the building, but no sooner did his wild shots impact the masonry than one of the beams swept for his new position, sending him into a screaming dive. Forcing every bit of speed out of his engines, he angled towards the guns, hoping to rake them with close range fire as he passed. In response to his intent gaze, his cockpit view zoomed

closer, to the gleeful mob of screaming gretchin tilting their guns this way and that. He pulled his fighter up to fire, even as one of them pointed in his direction and started to swing the magnetic projector around.

The psychic thrum passed close enough to his fighter to tug at the edge of his psyche. Outside there was no sound as the wretched greenskins fell, flopping to the ground like discarded rags. But Seoci was close enough to hear the wail of the warp unleashed, and the agonised screams as the gretchins' souls were wrenched from their bodies in an instant. Seoci's secondary viewer displayed the sky behind him and confirmed what he already knew: a small knot of wraithfighters soared over the city, the portal closing behind them.

+Fear not, water len,+ said a familiar voice, eschewing the communication network to speak directly into his mind, +I would not let them harm you.+

Seoci's mouth went dry, his whole body numb, even as he obeyed Liosa's command to form up. Their planes punched forwards, leaving the cleansing of the city to the methodical ruthlessness of the wraith warriors.

Ailios? Could it be? There was no mistaking the sound of the dusky feminine voice, or the thin aroma of night-blooming aofemint. His secondary viewer scanned the shaded canopies of the wraithfighters, wondering which one was hers. The cold pressure in his gut wasn't fear but a kind of unbelieving surprise, the closest his war mask would let him come to the anguish he would feel when Seoci the poet learned this.

He shook his head and ground his teeth. Terror, anguish, these emotions had been scoured away by the hot wind of Khaine. Rage, however – that he could relish to his heart's content. His eyes scanned for a target. The roadways below were largely deserted, save for scattered outcroppings of ork activity. It occurred to Seoci that they had seen no sign of any of the former human occupants, save for the bleached skulls decorating the ork flagpoles. He banished the thought just as quickly. The fate of the mon-keigh was irrelevant. Whether they had been driven into the wasteland to die, been ground to dust as slave labour for their greenskin conquerors, or butchered for the larders of the ork commanders made no difference. They were gone now, with only their body lice to mourn them.

The invasion had become a headlong drive, as swift as an onrushing storm, towards the planet's former capital. The gravity-defying tanks and jetbikes of the eldar screamed forth like lightning, the jets above them providing escort, along with Isbeil's wing of Corsair fighters. Prince Eidear, leading the combined might of the Corsair fleets allied to his cause, as well as whatever mercenary elements he had been able to persuade or hire from the seamy depths of the webway,

rushed to meet them from the other side. Synchronised in their assault, the eldar forces would fall upon the horde of orks united underneath the warlord-engineer Gorkog Chrometeef in an unstoppable flood.

Gorkog Chrometeef. Even the very sound of the name disgusted him. Seoci had been there when Tearlan had foreseen the rise of the ork warlord. So had Alios, of course; the two of them had walked the path of the seer together, and the path of service before that, their centuries entwined since she had saved him from himself so long ago. When Tearlan emerged from his trance and began casting runes, demanding the lesser seers confirm his findings, Alios had been the one to take Seoci's hand in hers, calming his fear with her presence. There had been much reason to fear, of course: the farseer had been correct. His prophecy verified, he had shared his vision with the rest of the seers, the most senior among them weighing the best course of action.

The destruction had been... unbelievable. Although more than a decade in the future, Seoci could taste the ash on the wind of the planets that Chrometeef would burn, and feel the tremors in his bones as the ground beneath his feet broke apart, as Lugganath tore itself asunder. For years a thorn in the side of shipping in the Rassemi Divide, the ork was part engineer and part pirate, but was considered a great threat by no one. Tearlan's vision, however, told a different story. Although the closer the vision pressed to the origin of Gorkog's rise the more obscure it became, devolving into a mass of tortured wails, the outcome was clear: he would become a menace to every world within his reach, and billions of humans would die at his hand. In the end, his wanton destruction would provoke a violent reaction from the corpse-worshipping mon-keigh: an anti-xenos crusade which would sweep through three sectors of space, culminating in Lugganath's defiant last stand against the horde of filthy pink apes.

A target rune flickered to life on Seoci's canopy. The host of aircraft that screamed around him, and the clouds of Windriders beneath them, zipped over the heads of scattered groups of orks, largely ignoring the lesser mobs of the brutes, at best peppering them with passing fire as they continued their fevered rush to where Gorkog had dug himself in. The only targets of any priority were the ramshackle ork vehicles that might have enabled the greenskin hordes to reinforce the city before the eldar had finished dealing with their leader. Seoci fired, his bright lance shot vaporizing the driver's side wheel on the truck below. The vehicle jerked to the side and flipped into a violent roll, its crushed crew no longer a concern.

‘Fighters.’ Liosa’s voice drew his attention to the horizon, where a distant smattering of pinpricks marked an encroaching enemy squadron. Seoci banked right with his squadron, their three interceptors breaking away from the other hunters without any further word. Seoci counted twelve enemy contacts. The eldar pilots could have flown on and easily outpaced the orkish planes, but if not dealt with, the greenskins would just vent their rage on the lower, ground-skimming targets.

One of the wraithfighters drifted away from the main charge to follow them, falling into formation with the Crimson Hunter squadron as if it were just another of their brethren. A slight chill at the back of Seoci’s skull reminded him that in all likelihood this was precisely the case: the dead eldar hero whose tormented spirit animated the craft had probably been an exemplary pilot in life, possibly even a traveller on the path of the Crimson Hunter. Seoci’s secondary display shifted to the wraithfighter, and he wondered if the ghost within realised it was no longer flesh and blood, or if the exhilaration of the chase, enemies in sight, fellow hunters soaring by its side, was enough to impart the illusion of life, if only for a time.

+The former.+ The rich feminine voice in his mind answered his thought the moment it was formed, just as she had so many times before. Seoci regarded the wraithfighter, unsure of how to respond. +My ward was a pilot, but he walked the path of the mariner, not the hunter.+

Liosa’s fighter began a sharp ascent, and Seoci followed dutifully. He had so many questions he wanted to ask Alios, but conversation would have to wait. The interceptors vanished amid the thick, high altitude clouds of smoke and polluted gas, well before the orks caught sight of them. Away through the smog, Seoci could see the cloud of orkish targets closing, so far beneath them.

Alios’ wraithfighter shimmered, blending in with the dirty grey background. Seoci caught the odour of night-blooming aofemint, and knew she was in his mind again. He could feel a faint sense of amusement from her, and realised she’d found it easier to affect him than the dead soul in her plane. Seoci’s plane faded and dimmed as well, hidden from sight. A few moments later Padruic’s and Liosa’s interceptors followed suit. The squadron began accelerating, a gliding flock of raptors just waiting for their prey to move into position.

Liosa dived first, the others following closely behind. Below them the ork planes chugged along, eager to reach the line of charging eldar. The first volley of fire tore three of the planes to shreds before the orks knew what was upon them. The orkish pilots were far quicker to react than their land-walking kin at

the Helheart Gate had been, and scrambled to evade the attack even as the squadron opened fire again.

The interceptors barrelled through the cloud of orks, as debris from two more casualties rained down onto the wasteland below. Padruic's second target rolled at the last moment, evading the laser shots and sending a hail of rattling gunfire after the enemy planes, still visible only as blurry grey streaks. Seoci angled up sharply, sharper than any ork craft was capable of, and gutted another one of the ramshackle planes from below.

A melodic chime sounded, warning Seoci of enemy fire in close proximity. Automatically, his secondary view swung around to show him one of the ork jetfighters above and to his rear. The scrambling plane had managed to secure a prime position to strike at the eldar fighter, and the banks of guns along its wings were chattering away, throwing a blistering stream of fire at the interceptor. Only the cloaking effect of Ailios' psychic invocation kept the shots from finding their mark. Seoci sighed and dived. Several of the shots pinged off the side of his plane as he sped away.

Above him, in the secondary viewer, Seoci could see the other members of his squad wheeling through the group of orks, evading the undisciplined shots with ease, waiting to line up their own killing blows. Even the primitive ork planes were too fast for the wraithfighter's distortion scythes to lock on to, leaving Ailios to weave and dodge, concentrating on keeping all of her companions in range of psychic communion.

Liosa swept in behind an ork bomber, her lasers blasting away, such frequent use changing their rich purr to a harsh growl. The ork jerked and weaved, diving in wild arcing loops, but the exarch followed behind him as if attached with a tether. The greenskin pulled into a steep dive, plunging towards the ground at an alarming angle.

'Anr-hyded!' Padruic's yell went ignored. 'Pull up!'

Seoci had known Liosa long enough to know it was futile. The ork plane juddered and rolled, finally levelling out as the greenskin pilot frantically tried to pull up before his clumsy plane smashed belly-first into the ground. The moment he broadened his profile, Liosa fired. Her interceptor barrelled through the fireball, pulling up just in time to streak away along the ground, low enough to send great clouds of dust up behind her. Although their skill and reactions were extreme even for eldar, Seoci knew the truth: it was not skill which had preserved Liosa. As close as she had cut it, a variable as minute as a wind current or piece of errant debris could have spelled the difference between life

and death. Only good fortune had kept her from pursuing her obsession unto her own death.

Seoci shook his head. That's what it meant to be exarch. As the last rune vanished from the overhead portion of his canopy, indicating clear skies above, he realised he'd reached the same conclusion in the depths of his war mask that he'd come to without it. The same thing wouldn't happen to him.

The interceptor's hyperjets engaged with a hostile shriek. Even the gravity-stabilised cockpit struggled to mitigate the force slamming into him as the plane burst forward. Seoci grimaced and yanked the plane into a hard ascent, rolling even as he cut the hyperjets to allow the plane to flip, only to engage them a moment later and race back towards the ork jet still firing at him.

Seoci had a moment to behold the ork's face, frozen in shock. In the space it took him to drop his jaw in surprise, Seoci had gone from fleeing prey to vengeful predator. The eldar waited a touch longer than he absolutely had to, letting the reality of the situation sink in before his laser fire bored through the gaping maw of the jet, burning it out from tip to tail. Seoci dipped one wing, allowing the smoking wreck to pass beneath him as he soared back into the chaos of aerial combat.

Liosa had downed another plane and was sweeping wide to evade the roaring gunfire of the jet pursuing her. Padruic had swept above and behind a fat bomber, and raked it with a burst from his pulse laser. One wing burst into flames, and the plane began rolling to one side. Padruic's fighter veered away as the ork craft plummeted towards the ground. The younger pilot had no desire to re-enact Liosa's reckless pursuit. Seoci tried to cry out and warn him, but it was too late.

The lurching bomber righted itself, the turret-mounted guns blazing away at Padruic's underbelly. Seoci winced at the psychic squeal as the heavy calibre fire shredded Padruic's cockpit, the moment of sorrow cut off by the war mask, replaced only by a cold rage in his heart.

Seoci banked towards the ork bomber, unsure if the enraged scream was only in his mind, or if he actually vocalised it. The only thing he was sure of were the lances of laser fire ripping into the cockpit of the ork vehicle, punching through like a trio of vengeful furies. The pinpoint intensity was so great that the ork pilot burst into flames, his blazing corpse a fitting match for the plane's incendiary paint scheme.

His interceptor pulled a tight turn. The two remaining ork pilots had seen enough. They'd disengaged from the aerial battle and turned towards their

original target, their afterburners sending up great funnels of black smoke behind them.

There was no communication, because there was no need. He and Liosa dived and accelerated, synchronised in their ruthless intent. The ork planes had drawn eldar blood, and mere death would no longer satisfy for them. This was the culmination of a shrine's life together, of months or years of training: a concord of thought that transcended directions or orders.

Their pulse lasers lit up the first fleeing plane, each of them clipping the outmost edge of the fighter's wings. Buffeted by the supersonic impact of the air itself, the majority of the damaged airfoils wrenched free. The plane fell away in a slow, unstoppable plummet. The other jet spun and dipped in a desperate attempt to foil his attackers with a corkscrewing dive. The hunters' bright lances fired again, shearing away his tail stabilisers. Alios reached out to show them the second ork's final thoughts: a brief sense of visceral triumph at having evaded the superior eldar fighters, and a sudden, dire panic when he realised he couldn't pull up.

Gallafweldeic Tyofanhyn, or the Long Death: the sadistic and deliberate end reserved for those who had earned the Crimson Hunters' ire. They had halfway caught up with the remainder of the force before Seoci felt Alios' amusement. Just as she could enter his mind as easily as slipping on a glove, she could scarcely keep her own thoughts private from him, not when they were joined. She was rolling his obsession of a moment ago over in her mind, the anger so profound he'd been able to taste blood, and thinking of the first time she had seen him weeping, reciting his compassionate *daedo* 'Tears for the Fallen,' mourning the enemies their race was forced to slay in order to preserve their own existence.

We walked a different path then, he thought.

+We walk a different path now,+ she replied.

How had it come to this? When he'd left the Fane of Prophecy, they'd both agreed to join the Searing Zephyrs, to walk the path of the Crimson Hunter together. Linked this close to her mind, the question was no sooner formed than it was answered. He saw as she remembered, the pitched battle that had taken place after he had left, dozens of spirit stones returning to Lugganath in the hands of the survivors. He could see how each soul had to be comforted, incorporated into the spirit matrix with care and respect. The seers assisting out of necessity. All but one of them turning away, the task of speaking with the dead too great a burden to bear. He could recall her memories as if they were his

own, how she promised herself each time she picked up a stone that this time would be the last, until there was no longer a question of leaving, the songs of the departed echoing too deep in her psyche to ever leave again. When his acceptance and training had concluded, he'd looked for her, but the other seers had told him his love was gone, and their cruel double meaning had never before occurred to him.

Lost on the path. Even in the throes of the war mask, there was enough of Seoci left to find the idea abhorrent. When the mask was no longer necessary he would feel sympathy for Ailios, mourn for her even, but in the heat of battle all he could feel was revulsion. Feeling her thoughts, experiencing her own memories of loss, only strengthened his decision: this was his last mission. When they returned after Gorkog Chrometeef's demise, he would exit his interceptor for the last time. There was no longer any question of whether he would wait one battle more. The only uncertainty that remained was what path he would travel down next.

'In the name of Vaul, what is that thing?'

The horrified cry from Princess Isbeil, coordinating her forces from her void barque, wrenched him from the memories. The interceptors could go no faster, but Seoci's neck craned forward, scanning for the faintest signs of what might have drawn such a response from the Corsair commander.

'We are inbound,' said Liosa. 'What is happening?'

'Chrometeef,' spat a voice Seoci didn't recognise, which meant a Corsair. 'He's... he's making the city itself take off!'

'Clarify,' said Seoci. He frowned, at a loss as to what the pilot meant.

'Explain, you hyperbolic child!' Liosa's rage spilled through the communication line, her patience for the undisciplined Corsairs now officially at an end. Nothing greeted their demands but a cacophony of screams and weapons fire.

The squadron blazed overhead, reaching the edge of the capital. The eldar ground forces below had crashed into the orks, and for the first time the greenskins had enough numbers to counter the superior eldar mobility. Seoci and Liosa raked the ork lines with their lasers, but with no time to pause and line up their shots, they had little tactical effect.

The wail came without warning. A wave of agony swept down from above, smashing into the orks from Ailios' wraithfighter. Every moment of physical pain, emotional torment, or psychic agony experienced by ghost or pilot, all bound into one. Whole clots of orks pitched themselves to the ground, dying

from phantom wounds that ripped open on their bodies, falling victim to torturous seizures that left them to their enemies' mercy, or tearing at their own flesh as they wept tears of blood. The eldar were protected from the psychic wrath, but in such close proximity, they could not help but feel the edges of it. The mariner whose soul animated the craft had perished in a plasma fire, and Seoci could taste the harsh tang of the fire that had licked down his throat in his final seconds. In a moment of pure sorrow that even penetrated his war mask, he felt the instant that Alios had realised she had lost herself, and would never join him on the next path.

+Carry on, water len,+ said Alios. Her fighter broke formation and rolled away down the ork line, joining the other wraithfighters flying in grim circles above the enemy throng. Now too far away for the spiritual wailing to lap at the edge of his mind, he saw another mob of greenskins fall beneath her shadow.

'Farewell, sorrowrose.' He felt none of the heartache her leaving would bring when his war mask was gone. Instead, there was just a dull sense of loss upon hearing the pet names spoken aloud again, and the knowledge that she was right. The harvest she could reap among the ground forces was of far more use to their cause than the benefit she could provide their squadron in the air. He dispelled his secondary view, and fixed his gaze ahead.

The buildings of the capital told of a once-thriving metropolis, of steel and glass fingers scraping against the sky, before the industrialisation of the world covered everything in corrosive dust and soot, the population dwindling until the whole planet could be conquered by a single greenskin pirate and the horde he had gathered. It was hard to believe the orks had caused so much destruction, and so much vile creation, in but a single orbital cycle. Great collages of sheet metal had been welded together between buildings, the colossal leering faces they depicted meant as primitive homage to the foul greenskin deities. The buildings were missing vast portions of themselves, the raw material stolen away to be used by the orkish engineers in their mad creations.

As a leader who had risen from the ranks of the deranged ork engineers, it only made sense that Gorkog Chrometeef would attract more likeminded followers, and their influence could be seen as well. Wires and cables had been strung haphazardly throughout, diverting power from one part of the city to another in no discernible pattern, each insane artisan working with no coordination with the others. Cannons, energy emitters, and electrified coils littered the rooftops.

The fighting had reached the city. Ork planes careened above the spires, firing indiscriminately into the battle below. Eldar grav tanks weaved through the

streets, throwing spears of energy like the mythical heroes of old. Orks surged across the ground, fighting and dying by the hundreds. They lined the windows everywhere, their raucous gunfire falling like a deadly rain. As Seoci and Liosa swooped to rise above a bank of power generation facilities, a burning ork bomber sailed past them, and Seoci caught a surreal glimpse of one of the gretchin turret gunners abandoning his post, racing along the wing of the doomed craft with a stolen parasol tucked under one arm before leaping away, abandoning himself to the mercy of the sky.

‘Great blood-father,’ swore Liosa. ‘There it is.’

The city itself had not taken flight, but Seoci could see how the Corsair might have reached that conclusion. The craft, Chrometeef’s masterwork, was enormous. A dozen city blocks, large enough to rival small starships, were rising slowly from the ground, taking a huge portion of the city’s substrata with them as foundation for a single massive aircraft. Throughout the streets, weaving through walls and out of windows, the glowing blue lines showed Gorkog’s psychotic vision: hundreds, thousands, of skimmer units, linked together in a single mad choir of anti-gravitic force.

As the sky-monstrosity gained altitude, cresting the spires of the city that had birthed it, the true purpose of its bulk became clear. From the streets and lots of the surface, and the train tunnels and sewers beneath, planes began to pour out, sailing beneath great arcing streams of lightning as the power generators continued to build strength. Gorkog Chrometeef’s masterpiece was nothing short of an enormous and insanely armed aircraft carrier, capable of transporting an unprecedented number of attack craft across an entire planet. Seoci rolled his plane into a slithering, winding roll as the storm of fire stabbed at him from all sides.

‘What is this?’ Liosa’s interceptor barrelled through a squadron of ork fighters, blasting a pair of them as she passed, rolling gracefully to avoid the wrecks. ‘Where is the rest of our force?’

‘Prince Eidear has been delayed,’ snapped another voice on the net. ‘The ork forces along his run were thicker than foreseen.’

The communication network for the squadron devolved into a mass of ear-scorching profanity as the enraged hunters gave voice to their ire. The arrogance of the Corsairs had turned to bite them all.

‘If Prince Eidear cannot follow a battle plan, then we hold,’ said Liosa, rallying their attention with a snarl. ‘Now, clear these skies.’

The word of an exarch had power. Seoci’s fingers danced, his interceptor firing

at targets as fast as he could lock them. The Crimson Hunters fought with a teamwork the orks rarely employed; Seoci would bait a fighter into pursuing him, leading the jet closer to an unengaged interceptor before pulling up, allowing the other hunter to vaporise the ork when he rose to follow. He eschewed the enemy targets locked on to him in favour of those locked on to other pilots. Each hunter did likewise, trusting the overlapping fire of his companions to be his defence. Still, the ork numbers were inexhaustible. For each plane they shot down, another launched from the skyship, its spires blasting out huge columns of sparks as massive amounts of power coursed through it.

‘There’re too many.’ Seoci rolled beneath a missile as it soared past, his bright lance hammering the ork plane from the sky in retaliation.

‘The ones that run out of ammunition are landing,’ said the Corsair pilot, the same one Seoci had heard earlier. ‘They have to be rearming and refuelling.’

A line of bullets chattered against the nose of Seoci’s interceptor, scarring the surface but doing no damage. Chrometeef’s creation had to be destroyed, and they couldn’t wait for Prince Eidear’s reinforcements to do it. He scanned the runes on his canopy, looking for Liosa. He swooped in behind her. There was no need to communicate; she was already angled towards the massive skyship.

They swerved through clouds of ork fighters. As they closed in on the vessel, still ascending, Seoci could see hundreds of canvas sheets crudely sewn together into a single massive flag, so that the skull and curved horns of Gorkog Chrometeef’s clan could proudly stare from beneath jagged ork scrawl that spelled out the creation’s name, or some greenskin battle motto. Seoci unleashed a hail of laser fire at the ridiculous banner. To his surprise, the laser fire never connected, dissipating instead against an oily iridescence that flickered into being in midair. Liosa’s volley tore through the flag with no difficulty as the shimmering field vanished, only to appear again a moment later.

‘By the red hands,’ said Seoci, ‘he’s got void shields. They’re intermittent, but if he gets them working, he’ll be able to leave the atmosphere.’ This was the answer to the seers’ question, the method by which Gorkog Chrometeef would go from a planetary nuisance to become a threat to three subsectors. Unless he was stopped.

If the gunfire from the city had seemed intense, it was nothing compared to the firepower coming from the fortress of the warlord’s chosen followers. The fury of the ork weapons was rivalled only by their variety. Blistering streams of bullets spewed from barking ork gatling weapons. Huge spiralling blaster weapons re-created the power of the sun, hurling streams of incandescent energy

skywards. Seoci saw a Corsair fighter enveloped in a spherical field of force, only to have the field collapse, crumpling the plane as easily as a dry leaf.

Seoci skirted the edges of the city, blasting at the glowing lines of the skimmer relays. There was no way to focus in on them before whole gangs of ork pilots swept by in their roaring fighters, forcing him away again. Trying to destroy all of the skimmer arrays before the void shields became fully operational was fruitless, but he could think of no alternative. He pulled away, looking for a better way in.

The bolt of blue-white energy smashed into his fuselage with enough force to overcome his inertial stabilisers. His head slammed into the canopy, bone crunching beneath the impact. Seoci pulled into a tight dive, struggling to clear his vision. Blood flowed down over his right eye, but he swiped it away. His runes showed heavy damage; the energy relays for his right bright lance had been destroyed. The impact had also buckled his fuselage and torn away one of the links to his restraint webbing. Cursing, he pulled up to rejoin the fight.

Liosa danced around the squadron that had shot him. The dual-boom jets harried her with energy weapon fire, the orks showing more cooperation than most greenskin pilots did. Executing a tumbling roll, she jerked around and fired at one of them. Seoci grimaced when her shot impacted a wall of static. His own laser fire punched straight through the crude ork forcefield, burning through the ork's cockpit with far greater accuracy than the ork had shown.

The remaining two dived sharply for the city. Liosa's interceptor turned nose down, following them with the same wrathful intensity that had overcome both of them when Padruic had been hit.

'You are needed here, anr-hyded,' yelled Seoci, knowing it was pointless. He had no choice but to follow.

Liosa closed the distance to the pair of fighters, the turrets swivelling to fire ineffectively at her. Unable to drive her off, the two jets split up as they reached ground level, going in opposite directions around a massive, squat building. From his vantage point so high above, Seoci could see what would happen, but his scream over the communication net went unheeded. Liosa's obsession would not let her hear as she pursued one of the jets, chasing ever closer as if she intended to reach out and tear it from the sky with her hands. The jet banked around one corner, but before it could clear the next, her pulse laser shredded its tail. Even as it flipped and rolled, out of control, her bright lances tore it to pieces.

The other jet, coming in the opposite direction, roared through the fiery

wreckage of its squadmate, energy blaster blazing. The explosive force rent one wing from her interceptor entirely, leaving the main body to plough into the ground. Seoci's plane clicked automatically, runes transmitting to the rest of the eldar force the location of the exarch's remains. The ork pilot's victory was short-lived, however. Struggling to pull itself out of the reckless banking manoeuvre, it hit the side of a building in an explosion of glass and steel shrapnel.

Seoci felt a wail of sorrow building within him, but the war mask clamped down on the thought, filling him up with the now familiar rage instead. A glimmer of inspiration came to him, and he struggled against the mask to pull the idea from the murky distortion of anger.

'All fighters form up,' he said. 'Reform squadrons.' He started to climb back towards the carrier, which the chattering communication net was already calling the *Beastmother*, but a rattling string of gunfire banged against his canopy. He jerked his interceptor to the side, a squadron of four jets swooping in pursuit. He cursed again. The interceptors were too far away. There was little chance of returning to them.

The smell of blood and failure faded, replaced with the cool, powerful aroma of night-blooming aofemint. He could feel his interceptor fading from view.

'Right behind you, water len.'

Seoci soared upwards again, leaving the mystified pilots behind him to chase shadows. The remaining Crimson Hunters above had reformed into squadrons, none complete. Their casualties had been heavy, and none of the friendly runes bore the extra ornamentation of an exarch.

'Into the city,' he said. 'As close as possible. Find their power generators, and silence them.' Throttling forward, he led the charge into the guns of the *Beastmother*.

The gouts of white-hot blaster fire, and the waves of bullets from the myriad ork guns kept them from firing, instead intent only on their dancing, weaving flight patterns. Once through the initial defenders, they found themselves soaring through the streets of the former capital, screaming along the runways of the ork monstrosity. In the air, the ork fighters might have been nimble enough to evade some of the eldar firepower, but the fighters refuelling on the ground were not so lucky. Seoci couldn't kill the stationary planes fast enough as he flew over, pulling one blazing right angle turn after another.

The destruction couldn't go unanswered, and the orks who were already airborne followed their enemy into the tight confines of the avenues between

buildings, desperate to stop the eldar before they destroyed too many of the orks' toys. The hunters split apart, dashing through the streets with a grace the orks could never hope to match.

Seoci let out a cruel laugh when the first enemy rune vanished with no accompanying weapons fire. He focused his gaze outside of his canopy in time to see another ork jet fail to execute the same turn its quarry had and plough into the side of a building, the fireball smashing clear through and out the other side. A proximity rune chimed and he dipped to the side, as the ork bomber diving towards him barrelled into the street, its payload detonating a second later and vaporising the surrounding rockcrete.

The hunters' laser fire flitted across the city, setting off explosions of superheated metal, but the damage they inflicted was minimal. The pilots themselves were doing the work, their bombs blasting holes in the carrier's foundation, their clumsy vehicles smashing through buildings and exploding with even greater force.

The first building to collapse destroyed one of the interceptors as it fell, but the others began to use that new danger to their advantage. Laser fire was aimed at exposed and damaged girders instead of the too-numerous lines of the skimmer arrays. As the *Beastmother*'s ascent began to slow, finally grinding to a halt, the orks on the streets panicked. Seoci smiled. He remembered well the vision of his world's destruction, and the sensation of the ground breaking apart beneath him. How fitting that Gorkog Chrometeef's reward should be the very fate he would have brought down upon Lugganath.

'All forces away!' Seoci yelled over the communication net. 'The mother of beasts perishes. Impact imminent.'

The eldar forces below scrambled to comply. Jetbikes flared into life, screaming for the horizon. Corsairs leaped aboard Venoms and clung desperately to the rails as the vessels shot away. In all directions the eldar fled, concerned only with escaping the blast zone of the coming destruction.

On the ground, the greenskins remaining in the city bellowed in triumph, firing their weapons in the air or doggedly trying to run the retreating eldar down on foot. Aboard the *Beastmother*, orkish pilots dashed for their aircraft, desperately trying to gun the engines of the surviving planes to life before the doomed craft returned to the surface. Panic turned to desperation as the ground began to list, sending mobs of orks in a terrifying tumble along doomed streets and over the edge of a yawning abyss. Many of the greenskins in the remaining buildings tried to leap onto a passing plane, friendly or otherwise. More than a few of them

even made it, only to have the supersonic impact rend them asunder in a spray of viscera.

The fall of the *Beastmother* was increasing in speed, and Seoci pulled away, having no desire to be caught if the ungainly aberration tumbled in midair. The other eldar pilots soared free as well, leaving the cityscape to plummet away.

The impact was catastrophic. The ground bucked and heaved beneath the force of the *Beastmother's* fall, the waves of seismic reaction smashing the rest of the city to the ground as easily as a child kicking over a castle of blocks. The cloud of dust boiled out like an ocean wave rolling ashore, swallowing the ground for miles, enveloping even the fast retreating forces of the eldar.

In the sky, the orks still held the advantage of numbers. They had no leader and no place to return to, but that did nothing to disperse their bloodlust. Seoci found himself focusing entirely on staying alive, rolling wildly through spins and loops, looking for any opportunity for retreat. Three more interceptors went down, one after another, unable to find their way through the labyrinth of overlapping lanes of ork fire.

The wraithfighters that had been engaging ground targets rejoined them, and their psychic concealment afforded the hunters the edge they needed to stay alive. Gunfire was answered with lasers, and the air became a churning mass of weapons fire. Overuse had begun to tax the focusing chamber of the hunters' lasers, which had gone from a great feline growl to an anguished shriek, the sound of an animal fighting for its life. At last, Seoci saw the friendly runes appearing from the far direction, heralding the arrival of Prince Eidear and his fleet. The prince's vampire raiders led the charge, barrelling towards them like the heroes of myth, a host of aerial cavalry riding to the craftworlders' salvation.

Seoci angled for the edge of the aerial battle. The orks had spotted the approaching reinforcements, and many turned away from the hazy blurs they were struggling to hit in order to engage the new arrivals. His weaving path nearly clear of the enemy, Seoci dipped his interceptor to pass beneath a fat bomber without losing any speed. He had a brief sense of direst foreboding, but it was too late to manoeuvre. A bright lance fired up from beneath, striking the bomber directly in the wing. The plane detonated along with its remaining ordnance, engulfing Seoci in a wall of fire.

His life became a series of still images. First, white-hot fire, heat everywhere, the sky gone. Then a rushing wind, the crystal of his canopy shattered, his arms struggling to pull his interceptor from its lurching dive. Next, forcing the plane as level as possible, the last of the interceptor's energy failing, its power core

ruptured, desperately aiming towards a relatively flat expanse of the wasteland between cities. Finally, jarring force as the inertial stabilisers failed, the interceptor slamming into the ground on its belly, skidding sidelong, throwing Seoci from one side of the cockpit to the other like a clapper in a bell. Then, blackness.

Seoci opened his eye, the only eye that would respond. He had no way to know how much time had passed; his instruments were dead. Reaching to remove his helmet, Seoci found that it was already gone, shattered or ripped away in the crash. Where his fingers touched, they found his skull pliant and yielding, as if the bone beneath had been ground to meal. Blood coursed down the side of his face. Seoci coughed. With his restraint webbing only partially secured, the impact had injured him grievously. He placed his hand on his chest, feeling the call of the Tear of the Mother he wore there.

He dropped his hand, fighting the pull. If he were to die, it would be as a feeling, thinking being and not the cold, ruthless killer the war mask forced him to be. He struggled to discard it, but it was like trying to remove a ring from a finger that had grown too thick for it. Each time the war mask had been harder to remove, and for a moment he began to think he didn't have the strength to do so again. Finally however, it occurred to him that this would be the last time he ever had to make this struggle, and with that thought the war mask slipped away as easily as shrugging off smoke.

The hateful wind of Khaine dispelled from his mind, Seoci took a ragged breath. He couldn't remember the killing, the rage, the hate that must have consumed him to be able to go to war as he had. Unlike every other time he had discarded the war mask, he could see fragments, certain pieces. The joy of dancing upon the wind. The thrill of moving in concert with his fellow hunters. The smell of night-blooming aofemint.

Alios. A sudden terror gripped Seoci. He had led the fight, rallied the fighters against... something. They would call him a hero, he knew that much. He fingered the Tear upon his chest. They would want to call him back. The wraithfighters could not be flown with a pilot alone; the ships of the damned needed a captain, a dead soul interred within their frames forever to give them their unlife. He thought of tearing the stone from his chest and smashing it against the cockpit.

He sighed. Closing his eyes, he let his senses slip away from the present. He needed to know what would happen. Seoci had been, at the best of times, a poor

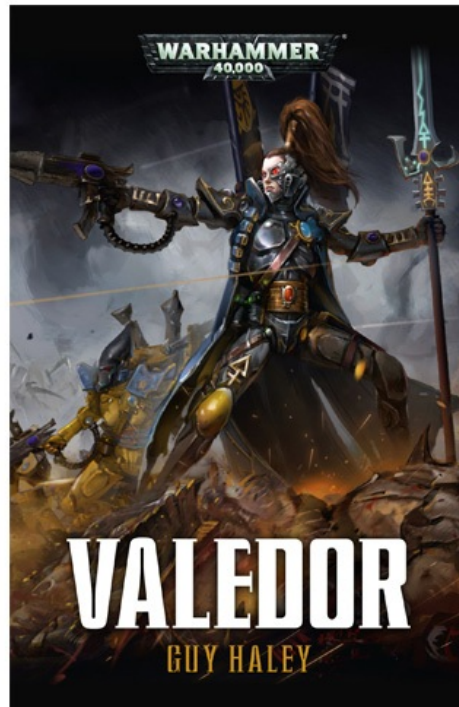
seer, but his desperation lent him clarity. Dimly, as though through a thick fog, he could see his plane lying upon the wasteland. From within the cockpit he stared up from the eyes of his own corpse as a shape leaned in through the broken shards of crystal. The horned helm of a wraithseer stared down on him. Nimble fingers closed over the Tear, and as they pulled his soul gem from his body, he caught the cool smell of night-blooming aofemint.

Seoci closed his eyes, finally surrendering to the insistent pull. Once, when his path had threatened to consume him, she had pulled him away from obsession's abyss. If he could not save her in return, then he could at least stay by her side, on the path that neither one of them could deny.

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