

WARHAMMER
40,000

HAND OF DARKNESS

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HAND OF DARKNESS (2017)

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List of characters:

- * Yvraine - emissary for the newly awakened Eldar God Ynnead;
- * The Visarch - Eldar known as the Sword of Ynnead;
- * Varro Tigurius - Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines (as a shadow);
- * Sylandri Veilwalker - Harlequin Shadowseer of the Masque of the Veiled Path;
- * Meliniel - former Autarch of the Eldar;
- * Ruisafoneth - Eldar White Seer.

PART 1

Roboute Guilliman: "I have need of allies, Eldrad".

Yvraine went as straight as a rod at the presence of the Primarch even carried by the crude psychic broadcast of the humans and the filter of Eldrad Ulthran's runes. The nascent majesty of Roboute Guilliman pulsed across the etheric connection bringing with it another sensation, the cold of death, the stillness of graves. The former Seer knew well the touch of Ynnead - her master, the Aeldari god of the dead and patron of her growing kindred - the Ynnari.

From her time upon the path of the Seer she understood the complexity and power of Eldrad's communion. Though it was his mind that directed the power, he acted only as a focus drawing on the psychic abilities of several other Seers: Edayi and Yemshonil Fjoray, Edolay Coppermane, Zoelias the Wise and Hijerock the Blind. Their thoughts bound through his will, Eldrad tapped into the webway and from that star spanning network into the eternal matrix. The Seer's minds leapt forth into the faltering stream and rebounding echoes of the psychic beacon the humans called the Astronomicon. By such means were the thoughts and fears and dreams of the human psykers fed by the words and will of Guilliman and there rendered into something passing for physical communication.

Eldrad Ulthran: "We received your call and I stand present to address such concerns, as does Yvraine".

Roboute Guilliman: "My realm has been plagued literally by the machinations of my former brothers. Mortarion, devoted of death and decay, has sought to bring ruin to Ultramar by means both physical and immaterial".

Eldrad Ulthran: "I have sensed his sorceries at work, corrupting scheme".

Yvraine: "Not kindly does Ynnead look upon the works of this Demon Prince. He would steal the souls of the dead and from them make seeds of damnation for the living ones. Long steeped in the poison of Chaos Mortarion would see a wasteland of our world long before we can raise Ynnead to his glory on a throne of our spirits".

Roboute Guilliman: "Yes, of course. I have witnessed firsthand this devastation, an attack beyond even his means without assistance. You were right, Eldrad, that Mortarion has claimed some artifact to increase his sorcerous potency. The Hand of Darkness you called it, gifted him by Abaddon to assist in the creation of the Great Rift and the destruction of the Imperium".

Eldrad Ulthran: "Long has the Hand of Darkness plucked the strings of the scheme to terrible effect".

Yvraine: "Also long has it eluded those that would hunt such things and put them beyond use by the forces of the dark powers. Harlequins and White Seers alike have failed to recover this ill-omened claw".

Roboute Guilliman: "As have agents of the Emperor despite terrible sacrifice and great effort. However, theory becomes practice, I think, if you are willing to assist. For the moment Mortarion's efforts are spat, though his forces continue to beset the 500 worlds".

Eldrad Ulthran: "The spider has returned to his lair upon the Plague Planet to spin fresh webs of corruption and death".

Roboute Guilliman: "Indeed. I believe that he does not have the Hand of Darkness with him".

Yvraine: "How would you come by such knowledge?"

Roboute Guilliman: "The Aeldari are not the only warriors capable of treading the paths of fate, nor are your rangers and Harlequins alone in their daring of the Eye of Terror. There are those who serve the Emperor that have far longer experience of that stronghold of Chaos than any other mortal being".

Eldrad Ulthran: "Of course, Primarch Guilliman, it was not doubt being voiced".

Roboute Guilliman: "My librarians have prepared... I would not know how to name such a thing... A guide? A vision? A map? They assured me that none of these words are accurate".

Yvraine: "Oh... The Imperial tongue is severely deficient for such discussions, that is certain. Your perspectives and tenses are so narrow. One wonders how you cope at all with the grandeur, age and size of the universe".

Eldrad Ulthran: "Do not forget that we fight a common foe".

Yvraine: "It was for reason such as this that we brought you back, lord Guilliman, so that we may overcome our differences, deep as they are, and fight Chaos together. Apologies if I offended".

Eldrad Ulthran: "Primarch Guilliman, please instruct your librarians to share this information and we shall attempt our best to decode it".

Roboute Guilliman: "It shall be done. I wish you speed and safe journeys on this mission. If you can rob our foes of this weapon, it will be a severe blow against their future plans".

(Yvraine breathing hard)

Breaking the connection was almost like a physical blow, disorientating Yvraine for several moments. She took a step back to steady herself even as she steadied her thoughts, a pang of absence in her chest. Eldrad held up a hand, his runes turning about the splayed digits, gleaming with golden energy. He turned his gaze towards Yvraine, the same light burning in his eyes.

Yvraine: "I have it... The location of the Hand of Darkness".

He stepped towards her, lowering his staff to Yvraine. Gently he pressed its tip against her forehead.

* * *

(Eldrad and Yvraine walking across the hall)

It seemed so peculiar and alien to see Eldrad in this place. The cold grey walls of lifeless stone, the broken rock underfoot, dismal creeping plants covered much of the abandoned fortress. The ancient Farseer seemed to be a figment⁷ of pure color and energy against this drab⁸ backdrop⁹. From their roost on guano-spattered walls black birds took flight leaving the two Seers alone in the psychically created citadel.

Yvraine: "What is this place?"

Eldrad Ulthran: "The literalism¹⁰ of humans. They raised walls about their secrets to protect them from prying¹¹ minds".

Yvraine cast her gaze about the forlorn courtyard.

Yvraine: "What are we seeking?"

Eldrad pointed towards the forbidden windowless structure of a central keep.

Yvraine: "I see no door".

The Seer nodded making it clear that Yvraine was stating the obvious.

Eldrad Ulthran: "It is just as where that Roboute Guilliman gifted me this".

The Seer reached into the voluminous¹² sleeve of his robe and pulled forth a star of white fire. He held it up between his fingers and it transformed into a silver key.

Eldrad approached the wall of the keep, Yvraine at his shoulder. As they neared the bricks shimmered, forming a portcullis¹³ of thick bars before them. Eldrad opened his hand and the key drifted into a lock set into the wall beside the gate. It turned thrice and then vanished and as it did so the portcullis fell into a cascade of golden sparks to open the way.

Eldrad Ulthran: "Let us see what the humans have discovered".

The two of them passed into the shadow. They found themselves in another opened space, the cloister¹⁴ of a monastery. The sun was shining casting short shadows and upon a wide bench in the middle of the lawn sat a burly¹⁵ figure swathed in a blue robe. A Space Marine. He turned his head, his face coming into the sunlight to reveal flattish¹⁶ features much lined with age, with a broad nose, clean shaven cheeks, chin and scalp. Upon the breast of the robe was embroidered a silver horned skull and on its forehead marked in red the symbol of the Ultramarines Chapter. A nimbus of gold formed a shimmering halo behind his head. A psyker.

Eldrad Ulthran: "The shadow memory of chief Librarian Varro Tigurius".

Varro Tigurius: "Welcome to the fortress of my thoughts, Eldrad, Yvraine. I am not in communion, to do such would be incredibly dangerous in these times. Into this dreamscape I have placed a particle of my consciousness so that I might share what I have witnessed in my visions".

Yvraine: "This particle... It can answer our questions?"

Varro Tigurius: "It is only barely conscious of you, but enough to attend to basic enquiries. But first let me speak of what I have seen".

As the chief Librarian continued the sky above the open cloister wavered¹⁷, grey clouds forming, sketching out shapes and movement in the heavens, matching the descriptions of Tigurius.

Varro Tigurius: "Two hands seek to throttle¹⁸ the life from Macragge, closing about the worlds of Ultramar. One, the claw of Mortarion. The other, the Hand of

Darkness. Pestilential¹⁹ flies spill from their cupped²⁰ palms (snarling). The swarm grows thicker and thicker blotting²¹ out suns, destroying all life. From the decay springs fresh growth of beetles and centipedes and other loath²² things that crawl. Maggots feed on the dead and from their splitting bodies emerge a legion of demons, cyclopean and horned (snarling). A plague unlike any other, felling human, Eldar, ork and all other living creatures it touches. The mounds of the dead become pedestals for totems of the lord of decay, upon which his champions will set their thrones”.

Eldrad Ulthran: “Fanciful²³”.

Yvraine (confused): “Where? Where is the Hand?”

The vision projection in the sky became a figure, shrouded in blackness, skeletal fingers grasping a scythe. A vision of death itself, that resolved into a terrifying armored figure cloaked in fume²⁴ and flies.

Varro Tigurius: “In the dungeon of the Whispering Tower. The Plague Planet, Mortarion’s world”.

(storm erupting over the Seers with thunder and lightning)

Yvraine: “Garrisoned by Chaos traitors of the ancient Space Marine Legions. It is no wonder that the human Primarch wishes to expend the Eldar lives retrieving this artifact. Costly as any expedition into the Eye of Terror. Beyond their ability to endure is the price we would pay to attack such a stronghold”.

Eldrad lifted a hand and the scene froze. The silver key shimmered in his fingers once more just for an instant and then the cloister, Tigurius and the sky visions melted into the pale floor and walls of the Dome of Seers.

Eldrad Ulthran: “Then we shall not attack. Remember that we serve the god of the dead, not death himself. The custodian of our spirits, the shepherd of our salvation, not the reaper that severs the mortal tie”.

Yvraine: “You know of some way to reach the Plague Planet by stealth?”

Eldrad Ulthran: “No”.

Yvraine: “Oh... Then what are we to do?”

Eldrad Ulthran: “Ask for help, of course. From those that will know of a way, once more steeped than any others in the lore of the dark powers and their servants”.

He started to walk heading for the high archway that led from the dome paying no heed to the other Seers around them. Yvraine followed, annoyed at being treated as some member of the Farseer’s entourage rather than the opener of the seventh way. A catlike creature, her Gyrinx familiar, sat close to the portal and twitched its tail in response to her agitation.

(Gyrinx meowing)

He padded across the floor to join her rubbing his head against her leg in an effort to comfort. She felt its purring not only as sound but as stroking upon her troubled spirit.

Eldrad Ulthran: “The Harlequins can lead us to those we need”.

Yvraine realized to whom the Seer referred. Even though she had seen much in her life, before and after her apotheosis²⁵ as the favored of Ynnead, an equal mix of anticipation and dread made her shimmer.

Yvraine: “The guardians of the Black Library”.

* * *

(battle raging around the Black Library)

The avenues and bridges of the dead city of Ain Rash shook beneath the assault of demons and turncoat human warriors. Beneath the sky as smooth as black velvet a teeming horde of demons and blue-clad traitor Space Marines raged between the ruins, accompanied by clanking war engines and grotesque half-demonic machineries. In the air above with tricking undulating²⁶ predatory creatures while sorcerers and demonic heralds soared²⁷ upon the backs of barbed disks. Serpent-bodied dragons coiled and flailed²⁸, tormented by flights of Void Weaver and Sky Weaver jet bikes, decorated in the garish²⁹ colors of the harlequins of the Laughing God.

(Harlequins laughing while passing by on their jet bikes)

Troubadour warriors from a dozen troops fought alongside the gravtanks and wraith machines from four craftworlds. Into the maelstrom of battle descended the Ynnari upon Starship and Void Fighter craftworld Wave Serpent and Viper, Commorraghan Raider and Reaver jet bike.

Yvraine watched this through the semi-transparent projection on the viewing gallery of the 'Lively Argument', temporary command vessel of her fleet. She turned to her companion, the great Harlequin Sylandri Veilwalker.

Yvraine: "You failed to mention that the Black Library was under siege".

Sylandri Veilwalker: "As it ever was. The enemy knocks loud upon the door seeking our downfall. Ahriman the vile, hunter of our truth, knocks all the more fierce in these darkened times".

Yvraine: "Oh... It is to avoid catastrophic battle that we seek the knowledge of the Black Library".

Sylandri Veilwalker: "And so it shall be, maiden of the dead. Worry overly and fall to despair. See hence a light breaks to guide us safely to our waiting fate".

From the heart of Ain Rash sprang forth a white column of flame whose light banished every dim it fell upon. Like the shockwave of a terrifying explosion the light of the beam passed out turning dozens of the demonic allies of Ahriman to glittering clouds.

Sylandri Veilwalker: "All is not yet won, my dearest Yvraine. Go, lead your army, shatter the siege now".

While grand Starship weapons spewed destruction into the Thousand Sons, Ahriman's warriors at Fate's end, Yvraine and the army of Ynnead attacked from above.

(Aeldari charging the Thousand Sons)

A host of gravtanks and dropships wrought blade and gun to bear upon a small part of the enemy army like a sword thrust to pierce the heart of the besieging force. In Yvraine's hand Kha-vir, the Sword of Sorrows, was an ever moving shard of ice. One of five mystical blades known as the Keys the Dead and the Fate Shards. Against a demon the Crone sword's touch turned an immaterial body to splintering crystal. Against the Thousand Sons the sword's piercing blows did not render them into ash as it would mortal foes, as their bodies were already dust within Rubric cursed armor. Soul stuff streamed like vapor from the rents upon their war plate dissipating into the psychically charged air of the webway before being absorbed by the Crone sword. Yvraine's Gyrinx wove in and out of the legs of her foes distracting and hissing, its senses like a second sight to her, heightening her already

preternatural reactions. Explosive bolts and crackling force blades all missed her as she ducked and twirled³⁰ striking and kicking in the ceaseless deadly ballet. Her companion – the red-armored warrior known as the Visarch – was no less deadly. He wielded a twin weapon to Yvraine's, the Sword of Silent Screams Asuvar. Its cold edge cleaved immaterial form and ancient power armor with precise blows, slaying or crippling as the Visarch advanced relentlessly after his leader. With them came the Ynnari, drawn from across the craftworlds, from the cabals and arenas of Commorragh, Harlequin bands and sprinted kindreds from even further afield. The followers of Yvraine were the riot of color to match the kaleidoscopic army of demons.

Sylandri Veilwalker (laughing): "Ahahaha! Never a dancer so lovely as you, my dearest Yvraine, daughter of the dead, but the fun must end. We draw near our goal".

The Visarch: "Do not count victory yet. I cannot even see a gate of the Black Library".

Sylandri Veilwalker: "Ah, the Visarch speaks. Yet what dreariness³¹... a gate to ask for... Why be so humble?"

The great Harlequin threw out a hand with a flourish³². From her fingertips flew something small and golden, which resolved into a tiny bird. The artifact creature circled above the clashing armies, the spark of las and plume of detonation reflecting on its exquisitely crafted metal feathers. Reaching a considerable height the bird spiraled ever tighter about itself and started to leave a trail of glittering dust. As the golden dust fell, it formed an immense spiral stairway like snow settling on a structure that had been there unseen. The gleam continued to expand so that it seemed the stair dropped far below the ground itself and into the heavens.

Sylandri Veilwalker: "The neverending stair..."

Veilwalker ducked the chainsword of the Thousand Son, locked off the warrior's head with her blue-sheathed blade and in the same movement gave an elaborate bow. Yvraine at their head the army of the Ynnari poured onto the neverending stair. As the last of them passed onto its broad steps, the city of Ain Rash seemed to vanish. They had come to the Black Library.

PART 2

The neverending stair faded, unraveling³³ from itself to become a vast amphitheater, its curving walls pierced by countless archways, its uncountable levels broken by long flights of zigzagging steps. Above an ink black sky through which rose a red and white moon casting a crimson silver twilight over the broad space. Underfoot was a vast mosaic. From the perspective of those that entered it was impossible to discern any sense from the millions of small tiles, yet it left one with a feeling that there was a pattern to be discerned. Even in the sanctuary the assault without could be felt. Not only the occasional vibrations and more tangible³⁴ sounds of attack, but also a pervasive³⁵ sense of tension and hostility.

A solitary figure waited in the vast expanse which swallowed up the host of the Ynnari without difficulty. Dressed in a pale silken robe, face hidden behind a featureless mask, the White Seer lifted a hand in greeting to Yvraine.

(Gyrinx meowing)

Her Gyrinx scampered³⁶ forwards and started playfully batting at the dangling end of the long belt that bound his robe. The Seer did not seem to mind.

(Gyrinx meowing)

White Seer: "Welcome, wanderer of the cold road! I am Ruisafoneth, curator of the hidden sphere. Many have been your journeys upon the sevenfold path before your steps brought you here. Too many, we think".

Yvraine: "Had I known that you were in need of such assistance, sooner my steps would have brought me".

White Seer: "All are in need, daughter of Ynnead. Nowhere has avoided the tempest that has swept the realms of gods and mortals".

Yvraine: "I come for a favor. It would be remiss³⁷ not offer our blades in return".

White Seer: "The offer is welcomed but twofold³⁸ is the labor to be carried out".

The White Seer extended his left hand as though reaching for something close at hand. When Yvraine turned her eye, she saw that the amphitheater had distorted so that one of the archways was only a dozen paces away. The space beneath the high sharp archway was filled with a swirling mist of grey and gold. Upon the inside of the arch runes gleamed red, their light caught in the fog to form wavering sigils of warding and sanctuary³⁹.

White Seer: "You come seeking the Hand of Darkness".

Yvraine: "Yes. You foresaw my coming?"

White Seer (smiling): "Such a thing might have been true, but unnecessarily theatric. No, your arrival was not prophesized by the visions or texts. Had we known of Eldrad's plan for Ynnead's ascension we would have endeavored to prevent it. But that cannot be changed. And so here we are. The truth is that Kysaduras sent word, that you would be coming".

Yvraine: "The Anchorite knows you?"

White Seer: "Many were his travels and exile, both physical and spiritual. The Black Library was his abode⁴⁰ for a time. He warned us of your need and had we been able to assist in return, it would have saved you your travels".

The Visarch: "But you cannot help".

White Seer: "It is only by the company you now keep, that you are allowed in the space, destroyer of knowledge".

The Visarch: "Some secrets are better buried".

White Seer: "Even so you are here only under sufferance⁴¹. Do not speak again unless addressed".

The White Seer turned toward the archway and Yvraine felt a psychic nudge⁴² to follow. Her Gyrinx padded back and forth, whiskers⁴³ almost touching the portal before suddenly shying⁴⁴ away behind her with a hiss of fear.

(Gyrinx hissing)

Yvraine: "I have seen runes like this before, upon corrupted webway portals and cast in iron within the gates of Shardome. Something terrible lies beyond".

White Seer: "You are correct. The sanctuary of the Black Library was once inviolate⁴⁵, but no longer. Long have our foes strained to breach our defenses. The physical attack you witnessed on your entry is the least of it. This section of the library fell even as the Great Rift torn apart the galaxy".

Yvraine: "What lies beyond?"

White Seer: "We do not know. We dare not open the portal to find out. But the knowledge you seek, a path to the Plague Planet, Mortarion, lies within I am afraid".

Yvraine: "So I must cleanse this corruption to retrieve what I desire?"

White Seer: "If it could be cleansed, we would have attempted that. The breach is utter⁴⁶, the grounds beyond – lost forever. And I would not take desire into such a place, for it is desire that would be turned against you".

A chilling hand clutched hold of Yvraine's heart.

Yvraine: "The Great Enemy".

The White Seer nodded.

White Seer: "Yes, the lustful prince has claimed it for his own. If you can survive, you might bring back that what you need and we shall interpret its contents for you. Simply follow your will and you shall find it. Such is the way of the Black Library".

Yvraine: "And the second labor?"

White Seer: "We dare not lower the wards for longer than needed by a few score of warriors to pass. The rest must lend their efforts to the battle that still rages beyond".

Yvraine turned and approached the Visarch.

Yvraine: "Choose sixty of our best warriors. You will coordinate the defense".

The Visarch shook his head.

The Visarch: "I tread where you tread, even into domain of the Great Enemy. Others are better suited to command armies".

Yvraine: "Very well. Meliniel?"

The former Autarch of Biel-tan approached at the mention of his name.

Yvraine: "Do all you can to secure the Black Library while we are gone".

Meliniel: "I shall do better than that, daughter of Ynnead. I shall rout⁴⁷ the host of Ahriman entire".

White Seer: "If deeds were as simple as words our people would still rule the galaxy".

Meliniel: "And if others backed their words with deeds as the Ynnari do, a great many tragedies may have been averted".

Yvraine: "Enough".

The others fell silent at Yvraine's bidding⁴⁸. Her eye returned to the sealed portal and her thoughts to the trial that lay beyond. Perhaps the greatest test not of her ability, but her purpose that she had yet faced.

(Seers chanting spells to open the portal)

Two other White Seers lent their psychic strength to Ruisafoneth unwinding the runes they had cast upon the ruptured⁴⁹ portal. One by one the protective sigils flickered and died. Yvraine looked at the Visarch, who stood ready with three score of her best, the veterans from her Blood Brides, cabalites of Commorrhag and Aspect warriors of Biel-tan and Iyanden. All waited in pensive⁵⁰ silence, preparing themselves to what horrors might await them beyond the sundered⁵¹ gate.

(portal opening)

When the last rune died the fog within the portal way billowed out, tinged with pastel shades of purple and blue, smelling of flower blossoms and sweet incense⁵².

White Seer: "Quickly now, child of the tomb!"

The White Seer handed Yvraine a small white oval gem no larger than a thumb tip. As she took it, she felt a pulse of warmth through her cold body and a prickle⁵³ of connection.

White Seer: "This dovestone shall lead the way to your prize and open the portal back. Do not lose it, for if you fall or it should be taken, there will be no return".

The Visarch: "Nothing will harm you while I live".

Yvraine: "My blade is the only defense I need".

White Seer: "Hurry!"

Urged on by the White Seers Yvraine and her warriors advanced beneath the gleaming archway and plunged into the swirling vapor.

* * *

(gulls crying overhead while flying in the cool breeze)

The first sensation was a vertigo. The clearing mists revealed a narrow path no wider than Yvraine's outstretched arms, bounded to each side by a cliff that dropped to a surf-topped green sea far below. Overhead wisps of clouds scudded⁵⁴ against the mauve⁵⁵ sky. No sun could be seen to explain the suffusing⁵⁶ light. Ahead Yvraine could see other pathways branching off from the winding trail, disappearing into the distance from more and more junctions, some sending to towering headlands⁵⁷, others descending and winding down to the churning⁵⁸ water.

The Visarch (surprised): "Not what I was expecting".

Yvraine: "Nor I. The webway contains many nightmares and marvels, and I thought we would encounter the first".

They moved along the path, still wary⁵⁹, weapons in hands and senses straining for the least sign of danger. Overhead ruby winged gulls wheeled and soared drawn by the novelty of the interlopers. Yvraine eyed them sourly.

Yvraine: "Stay on your guard. The demon can take many forms and strike in an instant".

In her hand the dovestone pulsed sending vibrations and warmth up her arm.

(Gyrinx meowing)

Yvraine's Gyrinx mewed and replied soothed⁶⁰ by the undulating sensation. She allowed the stone to guide her step taking a branching track to the right on a wind. It made no difference. The view did not seem to change much. Still they walked upon a narrow ridge beneath the open sky. Yvraine recalled the words of Ruisafoneth and directed a question to the Visarch.

Yvraine: "Why did the White Seer call you a destroyer of knowledge?"

It seemed that the Visarch would not reply but after some consideration he answered.

The Visarch (taking a deep breath): "Before the hand of Ynnead cooled my heart, I was a follower of Khaine and Khaine alone. Hot-blooded, tempestuous⁶¹ and implacable⁶². Many of the deeds I committed then that would earn me censure⁶³ later. But if you trust me now, also trust me that I did what was necessary".

Yvraine: "Trust seems a strange word to come from you, who reveals nothing of himself nor speaks of what came before".

The Visarch: "It is of no consequence and I have asked nothing of anyone else to declare to me. What they chose to offer is their decision alone".

The birds circled closer seeking a morsel⁶⁴ perhaps, though of what in this unreal place, Yvraine was not sure.

(Gyrinx meowing)

From her Gyrinx came twitches and sniffs of chastisement⁶⁵ as it trotted⁶⁶ at her heel.

Voice (telepathically): "He does not trust you".

Yvraine: "You think it wrong of me to want to know what manner of warrior pledges to my cause".

The Visarch: "Your cause? Surely you mean the glory of Ynnead".

Voice (telepathically): "You owe him nothing".

Yvraine: "There would be no Ynnari without me. I am the fulcrum⁶⁷ upon which the movement turns".

The Visarch: "You were a collateral⁶⁸ effect of Eldrad's failed ritual".

The path had widened becoming more of a plateau around which the strange birds dived and climbed, dozens of them now, their voice a constant chorus. Trees lined the cliff edge, pale golden fruit hanging from their branches and the leaves of shining jade. Many of the birds fell upon this bounty pecking at the fruit, dropping it to the ground, where handfuls of gulls swooped down to tear up the flesh revealing seeds of gleaming syllabub⁶⁹ within.

(Gyrinx hissing)

The Gyrinx darted to and fro⁷⁰, tail swishing⁷¹ with agitation, swirling and leaping at the shadows cast by the circling flock.

Voice (telepathically): "The shorter you've lost".

Yvraine: "It was I that led you to that blade you now hold, a gift of Morai-Heg, a boon of Ynnead. Maybe you think that there should be prizes of Khaine".

The Visarch (angrily): "Do not question my allegiance! If you have done anything, it is simply as an instrument of Ynnead's will. Psychic fallout⁷² and nothing more".

Voice (telepathically): "He is going to take the stone from you".

(gulls chirping insanely overhead)

Yvraine gripped the dovestone more tightly and came to a stop, brandishing⁷³ the Sword of Sorrows. Around her the Ynnari halted, their weapons variously pointed at her, the Visarch or each other.

Voice (telepathically): "He is jealous of your power than has he shown".

Yvraine: "There can be only one opener of the seventh way. I see your mind. You would usurp the mantle Ynnead laid about my shoulders, weak and hollow thing. Do not overstate your station".

The Visarch raised his own sword, wisps of steam lifting from its blade in the rapidly cooling air.

Voice (telepathically): "Slay him, before he slays you".

(battle erupting with Aeldari shooting at each other with las and shuriken)

Grievance gave way to violence. All around Yvraine her followers turned on one another with pistol, rifle and blade.

The Visarch swung the Sword of Silent Screams at her head, the attack almost perfect. Almost. The Gyrinx leapt, claws bared, scratching across the face of the crimson-clad warrior. His blow fell wide at the last moment missing Yvraine by the smallest margin. The Visarch flung out an arm tossing aside the snarling feline, exposing himself to a counterattack. Kha-vir twitched in Yvraine's grasp seeking to reply, her instinct to strike hard and straight. She fought the urge turning aside her attack to guide the blade whistling harmlessly past her companion's throat.

(Gyrinx hissing)

The Gyrinx turned its attention to the birds which were now amongst the melee flying low and fast around the heads of the embattled Eldar. With astounding

dexterity and swiftness it bounded from warrior to warrior slashing its claws at the tormenting gulls, swiping, snarling.

Voice (telepathically): "Fool! He will doom you all with his treachery!"

Yvraine: "I hear you true, voice of the serpent!"

Yvraine retreated several steps, ducking and swaying as the Visarch launched a rapid assault. With no thought of counterattack it was surprisingly easy to foresee the path of each swing and move out of its way. Dragging her eyes away from her opponent for a moment she spied the bird that circled her. She turned thinking to set her blade against it.

Voice (telepathically): "He is not worthy of your sacrifice".

Yvraine changed her intent in an instant guided by a revelation. She stepped into the Visarch's next attack allowing the Sword of Silent Screams to graze⁷⁴ along her arm as she lanced her own weapon high. Bitter cold flowed into her arm numbing her fingers, but not before the tip of her blade pierced the breast of the demon bird that had been preying upon the Visarch. The ruby winged gull flopped to the ground, its death cry sending a shiver through Yvraine. The Visarch stumbled almost falling to one knee as he recovered his senses and shifted to pull back the killing blow he had been about to strike.

Together Yvraine and the Visarch turned their ire upon the demon flock, beating high with broad sweeps of their swords to cut down swooping creatures. As more of the whispering birds succumbed⁷⁵, those the Ynnari held in their thrall⁷⁶ regained their senses. Though for nearly a dozen lying dead upon the ground this freedom came too late. Seeing the intent of their leaders the Ynnari turned their weapons upon their former tormentors scouring the sky with las, splinter and shuriken. The flock thwarted⁷⁷, fell to pecking⁷⁸ and scratching at the Eldar, claws becoming razored talons, beaks sharp and strong enough to prize open helms and pierce armor. Across the plateau the Ynnari fought against the raging flock, some stumbling to their doom at the sharp edge surrounded by clouds of harrying⁷⁹ spirit birds.

The dovestone burned in Yvraine's hand reminding her of her purpose in coming to this cursed place. She followed its pulsing beat to one of the trees and while the Visarch guarded her back, sheathed her blade to pluck⁸⁰ one of the fruit from the low branches. It turned into a shimmering mist in her hand but sipped over her wrist and up her arm, clothing it in an auric nimbus. Something settled in her mind nestling⁸¹ among her thoughts safe and comfortable.

The Visarch (taking own one of the demon birds): "Have you got it? Do we go back now".

Yvraine: "I have what we need".

The dovestone had grown cold in her grasp.

Yvraine: "We have always been where we needed to be".

She threw the grey gem into the air above her. Sensing its presence the demon flock turned as one darting to snatch it from the sky. In a fluid⁸² movement Yvraine drew the Sword of Sorrows and slashed it towards the arching stone. As the edge of the blade parted the dovestone, the trail of Kha-vir split the air itself slicing through the barrier between realities. The tear widened in moments peeling away from Yvraine and her followers. The birds flattened against the curling plain as though two-dimensional images.

The pieces of the pocket reality split and split again turning to tatters that fell away to nothing to leave the Ynnari, the fortitude that remained, standing on the mosaic of the arena.

(silence)

Of the portal there was nothing. The Ruisafoneth and his two fellow White Seers stood close at hand just as when Yvraine had left.

White Seer: "I did not think you would return in less than a few heartbeats".

The Visarch: "It felt longer".

Yvraine held a flower in her hand, its petals⁸³ the color of the fruit she had taken, its stigma⁸⁴ a cluster of tiny pearls. She knew already what she had taken and held it up for Ruisafoneth.

Yvraine: "A Rose of Isha, said to grow where the mother goddess walked upon the mortal realm".

White Seer (shocked): "Such has not been seen since the War in Heaven".

The Visarch: "How does a flower help us breach the defenses of the Plague Planet?"

Yvraine held the bloom to her chest and felt the life force in its glow. So at odds with the grave chill that filled her now as the chosen of Ynnead.

Yvraine: "It is a sign, the path of life through death. We shall come upon Mortarion's realm from within through the cursed garden of great Plague Father himself".

PART 3

(Thousand Sons continuing their assault on the Black Library)

The Thousand Sons of Ahriman and their demonic allies had been pushed back from the approach to the Black Library itself. Coordinated strikes from above and from the surface dissected the unnatural army creating pockets of isolated enemies that then were swiftly destroyed by overwhelming force. As Yvraine prepared to join the fray⁸⁵, a Wave Serpent swept down to collect her. The rear door of the gravtransport peeled down to form a ramp and at the top waited the former Autarch Meliniel.

Meliniel: "I wondered how long it would be before you joined us. Sooner than I expected. I hope that does not bode⁸⁶ poorly for our greater goal".

Yvraine: "I would have hoped the battle won by now".

The Visarch: "In fairness our own mission too only moments due to the wavering of warp-skewed time".

Meliniel: "Then I invite you to assist with the final strike. Our Seers report that the Sorcerer attempts to bind a fresh alliance with the demons. If we stop the ritual he will have no option but to quit the webway or risk being trapped and destroyed".

As the Wave Serpent drifted away Yvraine sat. She unfolded her hand revealing the Rose of Isha in her palm. It fluttered⁸⁷ as though in a breeze, though the air within the transport vehicle was as still as death. She felt its impulses like thoughts, conjuring a vision of a petal-strewn pathway in her mind.

Yvraine: "Get me close to Ahriman. I have something even better".

* * *

The Wave Serpents slued to a halt, their remote turrets opening fire of the squads of Rubric Marines that stood sentinel over the inner cabal of Ahriman. Under cover of the transport's fusillade⁸⁸ returned in volleys of the flickering inferno bolts by their

Rubric cursed foes, the Ynnari charged. The gulf⁸⁹ opened by the ritual was almost ready to pierce the veil of the realm of Chaos, formless things awaiting manifestation thrashed and boiled in its depths. Yvraine signaled to the Visarch who came up beside his leader.

Yvraine: "I will be distracted. Defend me".

The Visarch: "As ever, daughter of shades".

While fresh violence broke out around her Yvraine felt inside for the void where she had been raised by Ynnead's touch.

(heart beating, sounds of the battle silencing)

She plunged into the icy pool of her own mind seeking the slender tendril of her god's lingering presence. Like a frozen wire it wove into the hole opened by Ahriman's adepts, trembling and taut⁹⁰. The line did not pass into the warp but into the cold void beyond, neither real nor unreal, nor this came between. The realm of death, the absence, the empty expanse⁹¹. And here she found the cold beat of Ynnead's heart, restless, stirring⁹².

(reverberated echoes of horrible screams of agony and death)

Here the spirits of the slain were drawn, the souls of Eldar gathering like a mist of silver particles. Yvraine snatched up a handful of soul dust and rose like a diver breaching from the chilling depths.

(Yvraine returning from the nether realm)

Yvraine: "Let forth your deadly wrath, guardian of the lost".

The silver dust sparkled as it hit the air becoming an arch of flashing power. Racing from the frozen depths the Yncarne burst free from the chains binding it into the nothingness of the hereafter.

(Yncarne crying while entering the reality)

In its hand blazed white the Vilid-zar incarnated as a long two-headed barbed spear in a grip of Ynnead's avatar.

Yvraine: "Go forth, Aeldari! Let the lament of the foe be a hymn to our god!"

(Aeldari charging the Thousand Sons with screams)

Inspired by the mortal presence of their otherworldly master the Ynnari crashed into the defenders of Ahriman like a rippling tide of white fire. At the forefront the Yncarne, the Visarch and Yvraine carved through the opposition, making headway towards the sorcerous cabal directing the efforts to breach both the Black Library and the Immaterium. At the approach of so deadly a group of foes Ahriman's lackeys fled. They turned their conjuration into a whirling vortex that spirited away the adepts and their Rubric cursed warriors leaving the demonic allies to face the wrath of the Eldar alone.

The howling black and purple maelstrom that had taken the sorcerers shrank quickly, but Yvraine sped on ignoring the enemy in her need. It seemed that she was bent on hurling herself into the raging lightning-wreathed storm to pursue her foes but at the last moment she stopped abruptly. From her fingers span the Rose of Isha cutting the air like a shuriken. It flashed into a portal opened by the cabal of Ahriman and disappeared.

The portal of the Thousand Sons froze becoming a momentary vignette⁹³ of swirling power and light. It started to unravel turning back on itself slowly gathering momentum as the forces within shifted the axis of its energy. The vortex inverted becoming a pillar which opened up into a round arched gate that towered several

stories high over the broken city. Its form was made up of entwined vines⁹⁴ and thorny roses winding about two trees whose bows knotted together to form the head of the arch. As were the gate inside the Black Library, beyond was obscured by a haze.

Yvraine thought she saw large dim expanse dominated by a huge structure beneath a cloud-filled sky of slate⁹⁵ grey. She signaled Meliniel.

Yvraine: "Gather a small force. We must be ready to move at once".

Meliniel: "What of the battle here?"

Yvraine: "You must finish what you have started. The Rose of Isha will open a path into the realm of Chaos itself, onto the garden of decay ruled over by the Plague Father. In that dismal place are linked all of his domains".

The Visarch: "Including the Plague Planet of Mortarion".

Yvraine: "Just so. We cannot achieve our aims through brute strength and so we must use our greater weapon. Subtlety⁹⁶".

Meliniel turned his gaze to the Yncarne. The incarnation of Ynnead was ripping a path through the demons of Tzeentch, forks of white lightning accompanying the strikes of its flashing spear. He raised an eyebrow.

Meliniel: "Subtlety?"

Yvraine: "Well, the Yncarne will stay with you of course".

The Visarch: "Can you be sure that the Rose of Isha will lead us to the Hand of Darkness?"

Yvraine: "No, we can be sure of nothing beyond this moment, this place. Such is the path we walk, into the unknown every time. This is what it means to be the servants of the dead. We walk upon the edge of the final barrier. What lies beyond is not for us to know".

The Visarch: "That is not at all reassuring".

Yvraine: "I was not aware it was meant to be. I have laid no claim to the loyalty of anyone here. It has been freely pledged. If you wish to turn back, you are welcome".

The Visarch: "That was not my intent".

Yvraine: "Then perhaps you should keep to your accustomed silence".

Marshaled by Meliniel the strike force that had pierced the camp of Ahriman, was reassigned to the quest of Yvraine. They were Harlequins for the most part, the rest from Commorrhagh. Meliniel had a simple explanation when asked why he had omitted warriors from the craftworlds. He pointed to the spirit stone upon his chest.

Meliniel: "You pass however briefly into the realm of Chaos itself. I do not know what protection the Rose of Isha will afford you, but I know that our spirit stones are like a beacon to the creatures of the Dark Prince".

On foot they stole into the portal, the Visarch in the lead, Yvraine not far behind.

* * *

They advanced beneath the bows of trees laden with blossoms shaped like skulls. The underfoot was a thick lair of leaves as though freshly dropped. Gnarled⁹⁷ faces leered⁹⁸ at them from the thickly ridged⁹⁹ bark ¹⁰⁰of the trunks around them. Vines seemed to writhe and actively seek to trip them as they walked eliciting the occasional curse from an unwary interloper. Yvraine had long become accustomed to the coldness in her breast that betrayed the ice-like touch of Ynnead on her soul. She was a vessel for the power of the god of the dead, an artifice almost cloaked in the flesh and spirit of the living. Not like the Yncarne, raw power given momentary

form, but a key with which the rise of Ynnead will be brought about. Thus she was known as the opener of the seventh way.

Yet in the garden of Nurgle stepping into the realm of Chaos proper she felt emptiness like nothing before. Here there was no death, though the nature of the place they entered was founded upon endings and the termination of hope. Chaos was eternal and as much as it was self-devouring and self-defeating it was also a font¹⁰¹ of endless power constantly regurgitating¹⁰² itself. This cycle of life was retrial in the dismal gardens where decay and birth went hand in hand. Fungus and maggot, bacteria and scavenger¹⁰³, all thrived on the detritus¹⁰⁴ of the previously living. And it was this circular force that robbed Ynnead of his power.

The Visarch: "If we die here..."

Yvraine: "Yes, a victory of the Plague Father over the Great Enemy. To sneak away the souls of her benighted¹⁰⁵ children for all time. What pretty crimson flowers your spirit would make, I am sure".

What Yvraine had thought of as clouds, were in fact vast banks of smoke issuing from infernal chimneys upon the mountainous manse that cast its cold shadow over the lands. Despite the absence of sunlight, all being swathed in a purple grey post-dusk gloom, the garden was as florid¹⁰⁶ with its fecundity¹⁰⁷ as it was teeming with lower creatures that thrived on the demise of others.

The wind changed bringing fresh drafts of noxious¹⁰⁸ decaying stench. Looking up at the smoke clouds Yvraine saw that their movement was erratic, not at all linked to the swaying of the autumnal trees whose shadows they slung through.

Yvraine: "We cannot remain at our leisure. Our presence here is being noted".

The Visarch: "How so?"

(a swarm of pestilential flies approaching the Ynnari)

Yvraine: "The sky... It is not clouds that swathe¹⁰⁹ the pale sun. They are swarms and see how they turn".

The Visarch: "They are coming for us".

Yvraine (crying): "Run! Do not let these bale¹¹⁰ flies catch us!"

(Ynnari running away at full speed)

At her command the small strike force sped on, no longer giving thought to stealth. Above them the thick blackness descended growing darker and darker with each passing moment.

The Visarch: "How far? Where do we run?"

Yvraine was not sure. She cast about for some sign to guide her, the heavily armored, slowest members of the expedition lagging behind. The leading edge of the undulating swarm engulfed the last runner.

(male Ynnari screaming)

One moment he was visible, the next he disappeared into what seemed to be solid blackness. Yvraine's last sight of him was ascending into the heavens, impossibly born up by the millions of insects.

(female Ynnari screaming)

The swarm pressed on engulfing another unfortunate, dragging her away to the unkind attention of the Plague Father's minions. Ahead Yvraine spied a flash of red, startling¹¹¹ and intense. It drew her eyes to an old shack¹¹² made of mildew¹¹³ slick pods leaning haphazardly¹¹⁴ against the bowl of the massive tree, itself punctured by wormholes and knots¹¹⁵, large enough for a mortal to climb within.

Yvraine (crying): "With me! Faster!"

They sped over the tangled¹¹⁶ grass and weeds unable to stop for those two slow. Yvraine reached the door and wrenched it open. She almost fell unbalanced upon a broad stone stairwell that led down into the darkness. With the others pressing towards the door she had no option and flung herself down the step into the unknown dark.

* * *

The steps took them into a dank¹¹⁷ dungeon, the crumbling stonewalls lit by patches of glowing moss and fungi. Underfoot the flags¹¹⁸ were slick, the air tainted with the stench of effluent¹¹⁹. They advanced along narrow corridors past great doors of mildewed¹²⁰ wood bound with rusted iron. Barred windows were set into the great portals beyond the reach of the Eldar. Had she been able to look through, Yvraine would have declined. The smells and sound emanating from beyond the doors spoke of filth and beasts she had no desire to lay eyes upon, if their assault on her nose and ears was any indication.

The Visarch: "What if these beasts protect the Hand of Darkness?"

In reply Yvraine brandished Kha-vir, its bright light suddenly harsh and blinding in the gloom of the subterranean corridor. The passage eventually brought them into a broader space, the ceiling even more gigantic above.

Yvraine: "A fortress built for giants".

The Visarch: "Even the traitor Primarch is not so monstrously proportioned to make use of such a space".

The answer to this was swiftly revealed as they came upon a massive figure reclining¹²¹ in a throne-like chair at the end of the vast hall.

(giant snoring in his restless sleep)

It was lit by a great brazier that burned green flames, the fume from the skull-shaped coals stinging in the eyes and coating the throat with its acrid¹²² touch. The creature on the throne breathed in drafts of the poisonous smoke through slit nostrils, expelling them slowly from its opened needle-fanged mouth. The seated figure was four, perhaps, five times the height of Yvraine, almost skeletal in its thinness. Its skin was grey and leathery, marked by boil¹²³ and wart¹²⁴, at least what could be seen on hands and face, for the rest was clad in serrated¹²⁵ plates of battle armor etched with gold. That face was a nightmare, the slit nose, the mouth set beneath a cluster of eyes like those of a fly, though for the time being closed with dozens of feathery membranes. Beside its legs propped¹²⁶ against the arm of the throne was a curved scimitar as tall as Yvraine. The blade caught the light of Kha-vir in a strange fashion breaking it into the colors of a bruise as if the sword was made of contused¹²⁷ flesh.

The Visarch: "It sleeps".

Yvraine: "A poor guardian. See, on the stand before it. The Hand of Darkness".

What Yvraine had described as a stand was far more. It was a construction of moldering¹²⁸ bones held by twists of rusted wire and tarnished¹²⁹ copper bands. Of a figure twice Yvraine's height down on one knee, head bowed in supplication¹³⁰. It had one hand held to its chest cradling a smaller figure, the bones of a child similarly arranged. The other was held up with a palm outward as though to ward away a blow. Yet this hand was not bone, but a thing of dark flesh

and sinew¹³¹, globules¹³² of thick ichor flowing from its severed wrist onto the bone mannequin that held it.

The Visarch: "You claim the prize and I shall dispatch the foul sentry".

Yvraine nodded her assent and they signaled for the others to wait while they crossed the final massive stones of a hall. The Visarch was a dozen paces from the huge guard when Yvraine reached the Hand of Darkness. She sheathed her blade and in the light from the begrimed¹³³ windows high above reached up to pluck her prize from its resting place. It flexed¹³⁴ and bucked¹³⁵ within her grip and she stepped back pulling hard to wrench the cursed thing from the skeleton upon which it had been bound.

(construction unleashing a high-pitch scream)

The skeleton pulled back its head, mouth gaping wide.

Alerted the guard upon the throne roused immediately, its dozens of eyes flashing open with a pale moon glimmer. They fixed upon the Visarch as it reached a seven-fingered hand down to the hilt of its immense blade. The Visarch threw himself at the creature, the Sword of Silent Screams held with both hands. He struck at the leg as the massive creature rose from its chair, the mighty blow severing the bones between knee and ankle.

The writhing Hand of Darkness in her grip Yvraine drew her own blade and leapt to her companion's aid as splinter rifle fire and shuriken sang past, striking the face and chest of the monster. She ducked beneath the swing of the scimitar, holding her breath as the poisonous fumes swirled around its cutting edge. Unbalanced it toppled¹³⁶ as its wounded bones broke under another strike from the Visarch severing the limb completely.

(monster roaring from pain)

Yvraine rolled aside just in time to avoid the fall of the monstrous guardian, its outstretched sword hand crashing onto the flags beside her. As quick as lightning she struck, thrice lashing her blade against the exposed wrist, the final blow parting ligament¹³⁷ and thick flesh.

(monster collapsing to the ground)

A tumult¹³⁸ echoed from a great doorway beyond the throne and flickering lights shone on the walls past the portal. Immense shadows moved across the opening.

Yvraine: "Leave it! It is not vengeance to be taken by these brutes".

The Visarch looked for a moment as though he would disobey, drawing back the Sword of Silent Screams for another attack.

Yvraine: "We have the Hand. It is time to go".

Her words cut through the fog of Khaine that had gripped the Visarch. He shook his head, retreated a step and then turned signaling his acquiescence¹³⁹ with the blade pointed toward the route by which they had come. Needing no further urging the Ynnari withdrew with their prize.

(Ynnari leaving the subterranean hall)