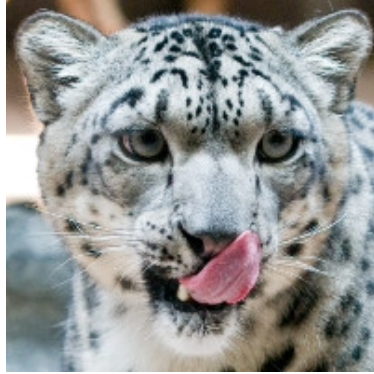


Turn of the Adder



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A Dark Eldar story



‘The reward of treachery is victory.’

Thunderous cheers rolled through the drukhari fleet. Archon K’Shaic stood on the command dais of his battle-barque and held up a hand for silence. On hundreds of sleek-keeled Raiders, the archon’s holographic image – projected from each transport’s command relay or the hand-held unit of a dracon – towered over the kabalite foot-soldiers and gun crews. K’Shaic’s image was repeated so frequently that even the countless hired mercenaries from lower Commorragh, soaring between the Raiders on jetbikes and skyboards, could hear his proclamations.

‘The Dark City stands as an eternal monument to the power of betrayal!’ Another cheer, loud enough to be heard over the screaming jets as the massive fleet barrelled through the webway. ‘But,’ the archon said, holding one interjectory finger aloft, ‘what the Jade Labyrinth has done is no betrayal!’

All the fleet’s members booed as one. They followed the oratory lead of the great archon as surely as they followed the physical lead of his battle-barque. The triple-decked catamaran was larger even than the Razorwing jetfighters roaring overhead. Disintegrators and dark lances bristled along its long black decks. The graceful hull was the colour of oiled gunmetal, the sharp edges of its plates tinged violet, its sails boasting the insignia of the Bladed Lotus, in K’Shaic’s colours of purple on steel. Evaeline, the barque’s experienced pilot, commanded the ship from directly behind the command dais.

‘Had the hekatarii of the Cult of the Jade Labyrinth merely turned upon us, they would be role models, not criminals. No, the Labyrinthae have done something far worse than betraying us – they have chosen subservience. They’ve made themselves willing slaves, whoring themselves for the false promise of a non-existent deity!’

Leaning against a railing on the barque, Naeddre and his brother Qeine watched their father rousing the bloodlust of his

troops. K'Shaic, Archon of the Kabal of the Bladed Lotus, was in rare form. Naeddre didn't know how many slaves had been flayed to give his father such a youthful vigour, but the number had to be in the thousands. He'd never seen K'Shaic so energetic.

'I say, if these Ynnari,' K'Shaic snarled the word with undisguised contempt, 'if these wyches and whatever craftworld scum have lured them astray want to court death so badly, then let's give them exactly what they're asking for!'

The archon keyed his command dais. Across the fleet, his mighty holographic images vanished.

'Inspiring,' said Qeine. Tall and broad of shoulder, Qeine was a peak physical specimen of his kind. He wore ridged ghostplate armour to add to his profile, which made him tower over every warrior on the ship.

'Victory will give us our real inspiration,' said K'Shaic. Even without his holographic enhancements, he was an imposing figure. His own ghostplate armour was exquisite, a custom-built relic, its form the template for the armour of every kabalite soldier in his employ. His long flowing mane of ebony hair normally struck Naeddre as a token of vanity, out of place in his father's aging features. With the full glory of his youth restored, it suited the archon. His alabaster features could have been graven from purest marble, his cheekbones sharp enough to cut flesh. His ancient powerblade, the surgesabre, rested at his hip, silently hungering for murder.

'All the inspiration in the galaxy will do us little good if we're murdered from behind,' said Naeddre. Both his father and older brother fixed him with hateful glares, although he could see Qeine struggling to keep the edges of a smile out of his sneer.

Slender where his brother was muscular, short where Qeine was tall, Naeddre had always been seen as the lesser brother. Nearly everyone with whom they interacted seemed to take his reduced stature as evidence of a reduced character. Qeine boasted

the best equipment, while Naeddre went to war in a studded flight vest befitting a wealthy heliarch. The thin material made it easier to manoeuvre on a skyboard, sacrificing none of the wearer's agility for added protection. In fact, while it looked as flimsy as the wychsuit of any hellion, it had been made by the same craftsmen as Qeine's ghostplate, and could easily deflect a bolt shell or Commorrite splinter shard.

'If you fear the forces at your back, then perhaps you're better suited to guarding the Amaranth Spire,' K'Shaic sneered.

'It's not our own forces that worry me,' said Naeddre. 'They're far more interested in murdering the Jade Labyrinth.' Which was true. When Kysthene and the wyches under her command had fled the Dark City, declaring allegiance to the Ynnari and seizing control of the Port of Widows, they'd done more than just betray their kabalite benefactors. They'd left the Bladed Lotus without their primary means of -psychic sustenance. They'd cut off the kabal's access to the port that provided a great deal of its material wealth. Most importantly, they'd made the Kabal of the Bladed Lotus, and by extension every member of it, look foolish and weak. Their destruction was not only in compliance with Vect's edicts, but also a necessary step if the kabal was going to survive in the wake of Commorragh's recent upheavals.

'The garrisons?' Qeine guessed.

'The garrisons,' Naeddre confirmed.

Their father steepled his fingers, staring at his two sons. They needed no goading to know when he expected them to compete for his favour.

'Ignore them,' said Qeine. 'They're intended to reinforce the port in the event of sustained invasion, but the Port of Widows was never designed to repel invasion from the Commorragh side. We'll overwhelm them, put the Labyrinthae to death and surround whatever forces remain in the garrisons before they have time to

assault our rear lines.' As ever, Qeine's plan was raw, naked aggression, designed to win through bravado and brute force.

'Take them one at a time,' Naeddre countered. 'We first overwhelm one of the rear garrisons, then the other, before moving on to the port itself. Let each enemy bastion that falls increase the terror of the next.'

'If the corsair fleets arrive at the Port of Widows, the wych cult will barter all the goods they've stolen from the kabal for passage away from our reach,' Qeine argued. 'We can't give them the time to escape.' He stood, looming over his brother. Naeddre wondered if his sibling truly believed they needed to act with such urgency, or if he just didn't want to return to the webway fortifications. Whenever K'Shaic wished to remove his sons from the Dark City, either as punishment or to curtail any sudden rises in influence, he often chose to send them to command the garrisons.

'No one's suggesting we do,' Naeddre countered. He dropped his arms to his side and returned his brother's aggressive posture, ignoring their height difference, their chests nearly touching, each close enough to feel the other's angry breath. 'The corsairs aren't due to arrive until tomorrow. By then, there won't even be a lock of wych hair remaining in the port.'

The brothers might have come to blows if Archon K'Shaic hadn't raised his voice.

'Enough,' he said, waving his hand. 'The kabal as a whole will bypass the garrisons entirely and assault the port. You'll each take your personal forces, the kabalites loyal to you and the mercenaries you've hired, and assault one of the garrisons. Naeddre will take the Viscerean Garrison, and Qeine the Weeping Garden. Waste no time in your conquest – once whatever commanders you find have been slain, join me with all due haste. Claim your glory in the main assault.' Their father gestured with his arm, and two of the Raiders flanking the barque drifted

towards the rear. Each carried a trio of incubi, K'Shaic's customary 'gift' to protect his sons as well as to guard against treachery.

Naeddre and Qeine turned as one and stalked towards the aft of the barque. They needed no further instruction. Their father had turned the brothers upon one another, then taken the best part of each of their offerings and left them with only veiled threats. Each second that passed before they reached the Port of Widows would be another that saw their own personal contribution to the legend that K'Shaic was constructing diminish.

The brothers each boarded their own personal craft, Qeine astride the gleaming onyx bike he'd named Razordirge, and Naeddre atop a broad-winged skyboard of his own design.

'Watch your back, brother,' Qeine laughed before fitting his helm. At some point he'd had his teeth extracted and replaced with triangular neoferrium razors, giving him the look of a grinning predatory beast. 'I'd hate for one of your mercenary leaders to slay you for that fine toy of yours.'

Like all archons, each of the brothers was in charge of one of the kabal's commodities. Qeine, as a young officer, had taken troops loyal to him and captured a large chemical manufactory, giving him control of a great supply of quality ammunition for the poisoned weapons of the line in the Dark City. His forces were full of gunboats filled with kabal troops, outfitted with the finest weapons.

It was Naeddre's turn to laugh. 'No need,' he said. 'I've promised the heliarch who brings me the most plundered hekatarii knives a Moonfoe of his very own.' Naeddre's own commodity was more niche. Creating exquisite skyboards and jetbikes was a highly specific task, one that required specialised labour. It took slaves with a discerning enough ear to attune the acoustic crystal lattices as well as the manual dexterity to string them. It was no easy job, but decades of scouring the galaxy for the perfect servants to assist his work had paid off. His creations were

the pride of the wych cults. Entire gangs of hellions would fight to the death, just so the last gang scum standing could receive one of Naeddre's cast-offs.

'Good,' said Qeine. He gunned Razordirge's engine. 'You should be on your guard. This far from Commorragh, and with his pet wyches in open revolt, father is uncharacteristically vulnerable. One of his servants might take such an opportunity to remove him from his position.'

'How good of you to think of K'shaic in his time of need.' Naeddre snapped shut his own ghostplate helm, which was both his connection to the command network and his badge of office. He shivered as micro needles bit into his scalp, locking the helm securely. 'Take care to show the same caution with your own position.'

Qeine laughed, and his bike blazed away, leaving only a flare of pale energy behind him. This attack was what both brothers had been waiting decades for: an opportunity to assassinate their father while most of his forces were otherwise engaged. Which one of them took the mantle of leadership was open to speculation, but both of them would be willing to bleed that particular issue out after K'Shaic's fate had been settled. First, however, Naeddre had to take the garrison.

Following his orders, the soldiers loyal to him peeled away from the bulk of the attack fleet. Qeine had scores of Raiders at his command, enticed by the elder brother's legendary brutality, and flocks of scourges willing to follow him for the promise of his favour. Qeine was the preferred successor, and no small number of kabalites wanted to be able to claim that they had supported the new ruler before his ascension.

Naeddre's own forces were less prestigious. He had support from the kabal, to be sure, but the men and women who followed him did so because he had personally recruited them, because they had seen first hand the rewards of his leadership. Where

Qeine had dozens of gunboats, a single squadron of Ravagers followed Naeddre's own force as they barrelled towards their target. No, Naeddre's forces consisted largely of Commorrhagh's dregs. For every Raider that Qeine could boast, Naeddre had a gang of hellions or pack of Reavers ready to murder at his command. They knew the arenas of the Jade Labyrinth would be inherited by someone, that a new wych cult would find themselves with the Bladed Lotus' patronage. The mass elevation of scores of low-born Commorrites was rare in the extreme, but circumstances had put just such a shining prize within their grasp, and every one of Naeddre's soldiers was determined to prove themselves worthy of such a reward. To show his solidarity with them, he even wielded a helglaive, albeit an exquisitely crafted one that had cost him an entire raid's worth of slaves.

The webway tunnel was massive, large enough to accommodate an entire battleship. The edges were so far away they were lost in the mists that clung to the borders of the passage. There was no wind within its confines, but so intense was their flight that they may as well have been flying into a hurricane gale.

Just as Naeddre finished concentrating on his gauntlet to bring the dark orb of his shadow field into existence, the oiled black metal of the Viscerean Garrison came distantly into view. A gleaming sphere of darkness, curving blades jutting from above and below, the fortress sported three decks, which ringed it like lines of longitude. All were empty. No picket line greeted them, no warning weapons fire harried them. No enemy aircraft hung above the fortification. Naeddre felt his heart begin to sink with the prospect that the enemy had left the stronghold undefended.

But then they began pouring forth. From both above and below, skyboards streamed into the air of the webway, and even at so great a distance, Naeddre could hear the shrieking war cries of the hellion gangs.

All around him, the low-born scum in his employ shrieked and cackled their own cries. Expletives, profanity, promises, curses and simple wordless screams of bloodlust: the desperate flock of murderers filled the air with a hateful chorus. Naeddre couldn't tell who opened fire first; the sound of splinter pods thrumming and the spitting of shards of toxin-laden death seemed to start simultaneously with the zipping hiss of glass needles shooting past. Neither side could hit a specific target, but that hardly mattered. The splinter pod wasn't a weapon of precision; it was intended to strafe, to keep the enemies' heads down long enough to close with agoniser and helglaive.

The cluster of hellions screaming towards them bore the colours of several rival gangs, all painted over with the looping knotwork designs of the Jade Labyrinth. There was no sign of any Ynnari banners or insignias. Naeddre crouched as the packs barrelled towards one another.

'Reavers, now,' said Naeddre. The gangs of jetbikers under his command leapt to obey. With a high-pitched whine of overcharged engines, the razored bikes careened ahead of the hellions and into the knotted mass of the enemy. With a speed that not even the hellions could match, they tore through flesh and skyboard alike.

The Reavers blazed through the masses of bodies, seeking targets with the most intricate skyboards, the greatest trophies dangling from their wychsuits. With grav-talons, envenomed blades and the shearing edges of the bikes themselves, the Reavers shredded the heliarchs where they found them, then shot away before the Labyrinthae could react.

Naeddre howled in joy as the lines smashed together. The hiss and zip of traded splinter fire was gone, replaced by the clang of helglaives ringing from each other, the metallic sound of blade meeting flesh and the frustrated rage-filled shrieks of the dying.

For Naeddre, the battleground was an aerial slaughterhouse. The choking, repressive aura of his shadow field stole the momentum from any who came within its radius, slowing their reflexes and even the engines of their skyboards. His enemies came to him dulled, blinded and lethargic. He roared through the air, deflecting enemy blades aside and gutting foes with wanton abandon. Let Qeine and his father exalt in conquering enemies of equal skill; for Naeddre there was no greater thrill than killing his way, godlike, through an enemy force that stood helpless and weak before him. He was an obsidian cloud, blazing through the foe for his soldiers, casting a rain of riderless skyboards and dismembered body parts in his wake.

The pain of his victims was a wonderful thrill, so exquisite he could nearly taste it, but today something was wrong. Normally, the delightful rush of each victim's agony would be capped by the ultimate moment of fear and despair as they finally slipped away into death, but with each new kill, the climax remained absent. Naeddre frowned as he realised this. He lashed out with his helglaive and lopped the head from one of his own Reavers as the biker shot past. The pain was exquisite, sharp and solid like a pungent, aged funerary wine, but still the Reaver's life force slipped away without the final moment of despair.

'Soul drinkers,' he hissed. The revelation thrilled him and terrified him at the same time. Ever since the last disjunction, the archons and haemonculi had missed no opportunity to tell the populace of Commorragh about the falsehood of Ynnead, that the god did not exist and that his followers were powerless.

Like all drukhari, he felt the pull of She-Who-Thirsts, the devouring addiction that eroded their souls with each passing moment. Each drop of fear and pain he inflicted fed the void of Her hunger by proxy, preserving his own spirit from consumption. However, since the flight of the first Ynnari and the shattering of Khaine's Gate, he had felt a second pull at his soul. Not the

screaming, howling demand of his birthright, but a gentle, insistent call. He sometimes wondered how many other denizens of Commorragh listened to the wordless, whispered entreaty, and like him ignored it, all the while hoping no one would realise they heard the call of a god who wasn't supposed to exist.

Victorious cries echoed over the command net. The mob of hellions that had poured out to meet them were hopelessly outnumbered, their leaders surgically murdered by the arcing paths of the Reavers. The defenders were far from finished, though. The first wave of Labyrinthae was just a lure to bring the bulk of the Commorrites closer and keep them engaged. More hellions were swarming from the upper- and lower-most levels of the Viscerean Garrison now, manoeuvring to hit the attackers from above and below. The Venoms that had been conspicuously absent previously now hovered around from behind the fortress. A flock of scourges soared far overhead. The chatter and screams across the command network in Naeddre's helm announced a dozen new threats.

Naeddre glanced up to see incoming hellions, curling down like the leading edge of a great wave threatening to wash them out to sea. They had repainted the underside of their skyboards, each bearing a single part of a larger image, so that when they flew together, they formed a single picture: a jagged, stylised version of the rune of Ynnead. Even among his own battle-hardened and desperate troops, Naeddre could feel an undercurrent of fear at the sight of the image. He took a moment to savour the peppery spice of the terror rippling across the battlefield before responding.

'Raevij, this would be your moment.'

'Confirmed, your grace.'

The Ravagers that had trailed the attack force, creeping low and slow along the lowest edges of the massive webway tunnel, struck with the potency of a capricious, sadistic god. They rose

from the mists, disintegrator arrays blazing. Coruscating streams of blue-white energy tore into the lower hellion pack. Boards and riders alike fell before the torrent, the superheated energies enough to utterly destroy anything they came into contact with.

‘Reavers, tear their Venoms apart,’ Naeddre commanded. ‘All Raider crews, ignore the defenders. Land the damn troops, and then engage the Labyrinthae out here at will.’ The scourge flock swooped in a great arcing glide, their haywire blasters raining down on the Ravagers below. ‘Crimson Chains, break from orders and kill those winged bastards.’ The Reaver gang swung away from the other bikers and fell into formation, rocketing towards the retreating scourges. ‘As to the hellions, there’s a second Moonfoe skyboard for whoever brings me the most scalps!’

The savages screamed loud enough to be heard over the roar of battle. Naeddre skimmed low beneath the melee in the sky, even as the reinforcements were crashing into them from above. He needed to end this battle quickly; something was out of place. The anguish of the dying was invigorating, but nowhere near as vitalising as it should have been. It was as if the lives of the dying were being extinguished before he and the other Commorrites could truly relish their suffering. If the rumours of the rebels were more than lies, then each death only empowered them, while denying the Commorrites a portion of their psychic spoils.

The first shot nearly tore his head from his shoulders. He had a moment to cast about looking for which direction it had come from before his shadow field collapsed, and only by a crazed drunken lurch was he able to keep his balance and avoid tumbling into the open air of the webway tunnel. Only the maddeningly expensive ghostplate helm kept the impact itself from killing him. The first was not the last, however: several more laser rounds slammed into him in rapid succession.

Righting himself, Naeddre stamped his foot and accelerated towards the garrison. The Moonfoe’s manoeuvring jets screamed

in protest as he cut a juddering, erratic path. Smoke poured from one of the board's jet vents. The laser bolts blazed in around him, close enough for him to feel the heat of their passing. Naeddre didn't need to see the rangers to recognise the product of their elegant weapons.

'Phaerl,' Naeddre signalled to the leader of the incubi his father had sent to accompany him, 'I've selected my breach point.' With one arm, Naeddre pointed his helglaive at the upper platform where the long rifles were being fired from. Let the cowards know he was coming; it made no difference.

'Noted, your grace. We will reinforce directly.'

The garrison loomed large. Naeddre leaned sharply, skimming along the outer wall of the structure. The rangers saw him coming, and unleashed a desperate hail of laser fire to prevent his assault.

Naeddre laughed, no longer trying to avoid the shots. The glancing injuries they could inflict were nothing compared to the vitality he was enjoying from the slaughter going on around him, even with the Ynnari stealing a portion of the suffering. One hit dug into the Moonfoe skyboard, making it waver uncertainly. Another tore into his shoulder, the impact sending waves of agony through his arm. He could think of no more perfect aperitif to the feast that was before him.

With a sadistic cackle, he released the control chain and fell away from the skyboard. He snapped his body with preternatural grace, rolling over in mid-air. With one foot, he kicked off the railing at the edge of the platform, with the other he kicked off the wall, and landed deftly on the walkway. The skyboard slammed into the rangers. The closest managed to duck low enough to avoid its bladed wings, but the two forming the rear rank were less fortunate. One was bisected, his head, neck and left arm severed from the rest of his body. The other took the full impact of the skyboard in his chest. The board, jets still firing, bucked

skyward, rocketing away with enough force to pitch the ranger over the railing. Naeddre ignored it; he could recall the Moonfoe if necessary.

The remaining three rangers struggled to their feet, but Naeddre could feel their despair emanating from them. They stood no chance against him, and they knew it. The walkway was a firing platform, barely wide enough for three people abreast, and Naeddre was between them and the only entry to the garrison proper. Escape was as impossible as victory. Naeddre allowed them a cruel moment to appreciate their doom, then swung his helglaive in a broad spiral.

The blades hit the lead aeldari ranger three times in the first series of loops. Blood sprayed from a slash on his thigh, viscera poured forth from the rend across the youth's abdomen, and his gyrostatic arm soared away, severed completely at the shoulder. The ranger slumped to the ground, overwhelmed with pain. Naeddre stepped past him. The other two retreated, trying to bring their longrifles to bear. They knew that each razored blow could have been lethal if he'd so chosen. If he couldn't enjoy their deaths fully, then he'd just have to keep these poor unfortunate souls around for as long as possible, to maximise their suffering while they lived.

Naeddre lunged forward. The pain in his shoulder was gone, vanished amid the rush of his enemies' fear and pain. He flanked the two of them, smashing first one then the other with the blunt squared ends of his helglaive to drive them apart. He brought the glaive down in an overhead chop, cutting deep into the shoulder of the furthest. The second leaned back, bringing her longrifle up for a desperate shot. Sparing her only a sidelong glance, Naeddre slammed the helglaive backwards, hooked the longrifle and wrenched it from the ranger's grasp with a twisting forward yank.

The other aeldari, too injured to hold his rifle, pulled his shuriken pistol and fired. A monomolecular disc ricocheted off

Naeddre's helm with a high-pitched sping. The ranger levelled his pistol for a second shot, unable to overcome his instinct to aim before firing, and in the moment of hesitation Naeddre struck. He smashed his helglaive's blunt end into the enemy's face, then flourished the same blade down with a curve of his wrist, slitting the Ynnari's throat.

Naeddre turned back to the female ranger. Her comrades still technically lived, their lifeblood pooling on the oily black metal, but she might as well have been alone. She glanced behind her, and Naeddre could see her realising that the entrance to the garrison was now open, if she could reach it before her drukhari attacker could overtake her.

'Run,' said Naeddre. 'Tell those within that I come for them, little herald.'

The ranger turned, her cloak fluttering like a frightened bird, and bolted for the door. Naeddre pulled his blast pistol from his side and shot her in the back. The darklight beam burst through her body, extinguishing her life in an instant. Naeddre flexed his shoulder. Beneath the burned edges of his vest, the flesh was whole and healthy. He holstered his pistol, looking forward to telling Qeine about the panicked battle with the rangers. He paused before heading deeper into the Viscerean Garrison to survey the battle.

The stronghold was too large for the Ynnari to defend properly. All along its platforms similar scenes were playing themselves out, with his attacking forces landing and seeing scattered or no defence. The rebels would be holed up inside, of course, at choke points and strategic nexuses.

Raevij had pulled her Ravagers back and gained altitude. They were beginning to tear into the enemy from above, although one of them appeared to have been damaged, only one of its guns still firing. The Venoms were now the largest threat remaining in the aerial battle, the raking passes of their splinter cannons

scattering and felling the knots of hellions. Several smoking craters in the installation marked the termination of a Reaver's flight, the riders laid low by the toxic fusillade the attack craft could put out.

Acceptable losses, of course. While Naeddre needed to keep enough of his forces intact to contribute to the greater battle at the Port of Widows, he also recognised that each dead Commorrite was one fewer gang scum that he had to pay.

'Phaerl, do you intend to honour me with your presence any time in the near future?' Naeddre could see the Raider flying the banner of the Stalking Fiend Shrine. Two Venoms circled it in close arcs, their Labyrinthae boarding parties locked in combat with the incubi on deck.

'Momentarily, your grace. We've run into a small bit of resistance.'

Naeddre gave a great exaggerated sigh. 'If you're having too much trouble, ask my troops for some pointers. I'm sure you could find some gang scum willing to take you under their wing. Catch up whenever you get the time, Phaerl.'

Ignoring the incubus' hateful hiss, Naeddre held up his arm to stare into the nishariel crystal on his bracer. It took a mighty force of will to create and maintain a shadow field, and the crystal was the key to transforming intent into tangible effect. The moment he focused his attention on it, he felt the energies in the crystal rebel, attempting to scatter and diffuse his thoughts. He laughed arrogantly, allowing the last vestiges of agony from the rangers to buoy his willpower. He focused on the image of Phaerl's sputtering, indignant face, and as his hubris soared, his personal shadow field billowed back to life.

The halls of the garrison were empty, at first. They wound back and forth like a circular maze. There was little ornamentation, save for racks for splinter rifles and additional ammunition. He knew where to go, and the quickest path to get

there. The years of monotonous service at the Viscerean Garrison had given him an intimate knowledge of its turns, paths and secrets. His movements were as sure and confident as a lover's touch.

The upper antechamber was where he would find resistance. It was where the elite soldiers, the commanders and favoured sybarites brought slaves for their cruel enjoyment, one of the only forms of entertainment to be had in the garrison. The room was large enough to amass a meaningful number of soldiers, and was the last such bulwark before reaching the command centre. He paused at the last junction before the antechamber, wondering if he should wait for Phaerl's assistance. His caution made the shadow field fluctuate, and that was all the chastisement he needed to storm around the corner.

The furniture in the antechamber had been formed into a makeshift barricade, torture tables and elegant reclining couches jammed together to form a single shoulder-high wall between the entrance and the archway to the command centre. A perfect firing position for desperate rebels trying to hold off a superior invading force coming through a choke point.

Naeddre was halfway across the room when he saw the grenades arcing over the wall. Half a dozen bronze orbs sailed into the antechamber, already billowing a putrid violet gas into the air. Phantasm grenades had been a smart decision, he admitted to himself. The fearful hallucinogens in the mist were no danger to him and the filter in his helm, but his eyes were no more able to pierce the fog than anyone else's.

The first sign of an attack was the silver of the knives flashing through the smoke. His enemies were like ghosts. They were silent, eerily silent. He'd never heard wyches before that weren't screaming battle cries or jabbering in drug-addled rage. The mute, focused wrath of the hekatarii was unsettling.

He fought back with fury. His helglaive whipped to and fro, tearing rifts through the smoke and cleaving through flesh. The rangers had just been sport. They had been children before an angry ursodon. The wyches had skill. They could strike and withdraw, leaving his counter-blows to slash in the air. In the final tally, however, they were still common rabble. He was the product of thousands of years of noble blood, tempered with the finest training and outfitted with the most masterful equipment that could be crafted, purchased or stolen.

Naeddre swept his helglaive in great arcs, keeping his enemies at as great a distance as possible. Their chemical-laden blood sprayed in broad fans across the walls of the antechamber with each hit. The discipline of the gladiatrixes broke at some point; he began to hear high-pitched screaming coming from all around him. The shadow field robbed the wyches' blows of real power. Still, it was only a matter of time before he felt a jab, a stinging sharpness in the broad meat of his left shoulder. The back of the same damn shoulder the ranger had shot. His arrogant bravado faltered for the briefest of moments, and with it the shadow field collapsed.

Nearly a dozen wyches lay dead at his feet. Phaerl and his compatriots had joined the fight somewhere along the line. In a straight fight, they might have been more evenly matched; both wyches and incubi were the peak of martial skill in the Dark City. The incubi had superior arms and armour, but the wyches had the advantage of speed, agility and numbers. Unfortunately for the Labyrinthae, it had not been a fair fight. Focused on the whirling, spinning form of the archon they'd surrounded, they'd been unprepared for the incubi to hit their line from behind.

Phaerl and his men moved through the carnage of the room, dispatching the wounded with cold, mechanical precision. The lead incubus gave a cry of protest when Naeddre skipped past him towards the command centre, but he ignored his father's lackey.

The command centre was a hollow icosahedron, carved from a single massive crystal, the nexus around which the entire garrison had been built. Floating images projected from each of its faces, showing the progress of the battle outside, which was grinding on towards an eventual victory for the Commorrites. Naeddre had been expecting a hekatrix, perhaps even a syren. The sight of an incubus was one he hadn't prepared for.

The rebel commander could never have been mistaken for one of the Stalking Fiends. Where their armour was the deep, sullen purple of a fresh, brutally swollen bruise, the Ynnari's was a pale, yellowish cream, like sun-dried bones, and trimmed with bright crimson. He wore a long red cape draped from his warsuit, bearing the same jagged sigil of Ynnead the hellions had flown.

'Hold and speak,' he said. 'We are all brothers and sisters here.'

Naeddre might have heard him out, but for Phaerl. At the entreaty to peace, the incubus let out a bellow, as if the Ynnari had personally befouled everything that Phaerl held dear. As one, the three incubi rushed their outcast brother.

'We have each performed this dance so many times,' the rebel commander said. He lashed the blade back and forth faster than a master heliarch could wield a much lighter, slimmer helglaive. It was as if it weighed nothing at all in his hands. 'Has its tune not grown dull to you? Its steps mono-tonous? Can you not hear the call of something different?'

The three incubi circled their quarry like khymerae, but his skill proved more than sufficient to hold their murderous pack at bay.

Naeddre leaned against the wall of the command centre and watched. If his father's bodyguards were so intent on proving themselves that they would attack without command, then they were welcome to do so alone.

‘You can feel the pull,’ the rebel incubus said again. ‘The Shrine of the Slit Throat heard it. You surely hear it, too.’ He slashed his blade in a blinding series of cuts and swipes that drove all three of his attackers back a pace. ‘Here, in this place, you can surely feel the souls of the fallen called to Ynnead’s glory.’

Phaerl made a clicking sound in his throat, high and sharp. His brothers fell in beside him, their blades crossing over one another, forming a barrier of razored death.

‘The Slit Throat are deluded soul drinkers,’ Phaerl snarled. ‘The Shrine of the Stalking Fiend shares neither their weakness, nor the rewards of their treachery.’ He began stalking forward, his blade weaving through the air, over and under those of his brothers. The practised coordination of the blades left no gap, no weakness to exploit. They sacrificed personal glory for the surety of the kill. A tactic unnatural to the drukhari, of course, but utterly lethal when required.

‘That’s a shame,’ said the rebel commander. He nodded.

The incubus at Phaerl’s right hand stopped, his steps faltering. Phaerl spared a single glance towards his brother, whose arms had ceased their synchronised weaving. The hesitating drukhari dropped his klaive with a clatter. A moment later, his head tumbled from his shoulders, blood pumping furiously from the vacant neck stump. The corpse toppled to its knees, revealing the figure that had been hidden behind it.

No matter how many times Naeddre saw the Striking Scorpions in battle, they never ceased to amaze. Their segmented armour was as resilient as the wrist-thick plates of the giant gene-altered mon-keigh, but the brilliant green plates moved over one another silently. Every facet of them boasted of their skill. Bulky armour, rotating chainsword, even a mane of clacking beads streaming from their helms: each should have precluded the possibility of stealth, yet the Aspect Warriors went unheard and unseen, unless they wished otherwise.

To Phaerl's credit, he jerked away from the Striking Scorpion with lightning speed, a reflex that saved him from the flashing, whirring chainblade that slashed past his face a heartbeat later. The rebel incubus pressed the attack from the other side. The Commorrite incubi, on the offensive a moment ago, now found themselves fighting to retreat from the Ynnari.

'If you need some assistance, you had but to ask,' Naeddre said, peeling himself away from the wall. 'Don't fret, Phaerl – I'll rescue you.'

The stolid incubus couldn't contain a grunt of consternation as he desperately defended himself.

Naeddre leapt into the fight, his helglaive flashing. The Striking Scorpion turned on him, deflecting his blows defiantly. The Ynnari traitor swung his off hand to bring his shuriken pistol to bear. Naeddre cartwheeled to the side, letting the discs ping off the floor, trusting his spinning glaive to keep the ravenous teeth of the chainblade at bay.

With the fury of a hurricane, the Aspect Warrior moved from the younger drukhari to cross the room in a single bound and plunge his chainsword into the exposed back of Phaerl's other companion.

Phaerl kicked at the Striking Scorpion, who turned to meet Naeddre's furious rush.

'Shoulder to shoulder?' screamed Phaerl. Naeddre had spent decades taunting the temperamental incubus his father sent to watch him, but had never seen Phaerl so unhinged. Phaerl's klaive rose and fell in brutal, undisciplined hacks, his wrath stoked so greatly it threatened to burn them all. 'You stand shoulder to shoulder with the brood of Karandras? Does your dishonour have no limit?'

'It is you who dishonours yourself,' said the Ynnari incubus.

The Striking Scorpion pressed his assault against Naeddre, forcing the archon to spare his attention from the spectacle of Phaerl's meltdown. He gripped his helglaive close to the middle, closing as tightly as possible and weaving the ends like two separate weapons. Vicious little jolts from the Aspect Warrior's mandiblasters drove him away every time an opening presented itself.

'My friend seems quite perturbed,' Naeddre told the Striking Scorpion.

'That's because he feels the weight of his own shame,' said the craftworlder. 'He hears the call of the Whispering God, but his heart is too filled with fear to heed.'

The aeldari was masterful. His humming chainsword buzzed close enough to breathe across Naeddre's flesh, his pistol spat to hem the archon's movements one moment and blocked the haft of his glaive the next, and the stinging laser spikes of his mandiblasters forced the drukhari into contorting evasive twists and rolls. 'So he beats his breast and proclaims his greatness even as his soul slips away to feed She-Who-Thirsts.'

Naeddre ducked the chainsword and slashed in with a series of staccato hacks and chops, forcing the Striking Scorpion to back further and further away.

'When I win here,' Naeddre said, 'I'm going to drag you back to the Amaranth Spire, to fight over and over until I learn all these marvellous techniques of yours.'

The craftworlder didn't fight like a wych or a hellion; he never retreated. When he moved, it was to gain an advantageous position. When he withdrew, it was to goad his opponent into a mistake. Every one of Naeddre's blows was met not with a dodge or a weave, but with a bone-jarring parry.

'When this battle is concluded,' said the Striking Scorpion, 'you could command an army larger even than your father's.'

Naeddre was shocked, so shocked he faltered. He slashed at his opponent quickly, giving ground to regroup mentally.

‘Kysthene tells us the Labyrinthae have always followed the Bladed Lotus in all things. Would it be less so among the Whispering God’s warhost?’ The Aspect Warrior jabbed at Naeddre again. The archon’s mind reeled, trying to determine the craftworlder’s angle. If the Striking Scorpion had wished, he could have torn Naeddre’s throat open in the moment of his hesitation. He wasn’t just trying to rattle Naeddre. But he couldn’t be serious. Could he?

Behind him, he could hear the two incubi grunting in weary exertion. It seemed likely that they would fight until they died and withered away unless either he or the Aspect Warrior triumphed and came to their ally’s aid.

‘You’ve heard the whisper, haven’t you?’

There was the question, out in the open. K’Shaic had not even dared to ask it of his sons. In the Dark City, no one dared ask. Colleague, compatriot, even brother – no one could tell who had felt the pull of Ynnead, who would be willing to follow his path. Since the disjunction, Naeddre’s greatest fear, the one that squatted in the dark corners of his mind, lurking at the edges of his vision, was that someone would ask him directly if he had considered heeding the summons of the Ynnari.

For all his fear, there was no need. He didn’t even have to answer aloud. The Striking Scorpion’s shoulders relaxed a fraction; his guard remained up, but his blows were half-hearted, for show rather than to kill.

‘If you answer the call, we would follow. We knew K’Shaic would send his sons to these garrisons. Right now your brother is hearing the same message – take up our banner, join our cause and we will follow you. We can fall upon your father like the vengeful storm, crush his forces between our fury and that of the Jade Labyrinth.’ The Aspect Warrior holstered his pistol, holding

his hand up as if to take Naeddre's. 'All you have to do is let go, to give in to the whisper you hear inside.'

The word 'yes' forced its way up Naeddre's throat. It nearly made it past his lips. But the sound choked in his mouth. He couldn't dare to speak it.

'I... cannot,' said Naeddre. 'That pull, that whisper... I've felt a pull all my life. Just as we all have. I have no way of knowing if this whisper is any different from the other.'

'And if you knew? If you knew that the Whispering God was not She-Who-Thirsts, that he would not tear you apart, but instead that he would put you back together?'

Naeddre had no words. He didn't need to speak. His silence was all the Striking Scorpion needed to know the truth, and all Naeddre needed to realise the truth himself: if he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Ynnari spoke true, he would heed the whisper in a heartbeat, without hesitation.

'Then if you will not see, I will show you.' The Striking Scorpion reversed his chainsword, and plunged it through his own breast.

Naeddre felt the surge of agony as the teeth mangled the Aspect Warrior's heart and lungs to shreds. He could feel the pain the Ynnari felt, and for the first time since arriving, could feel the agony in its totality. He could feel the death rush. Then more. The dead aeldari gave his life force, not to Ynnead, but to him.

He reeled, the flood of sensation unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

He was a child, sprinting through the draping keldora ferns, laughing and chasing his cousin. He was too young to fully realise they were refugees, drifting through the stars on a craftworld that was as much their tomb as their home.

He was an aura painter. He stood before the artisans of Yme-Loc, presenting a floating, three-dimensional composition of

photoluminens to the approval and emotional outpouring of his peers.

He was a Guardian, clad in grey-and-orange armour, shuriken catapult clutched to his chest. He stood knee-deep in corpses. For three days the humans in the long grey coats had hurled themselves at the eldar position, dying in droves, but never stopping in their relentless march. He wished beyond anything that he was back in his aura studio.

He was kneeling in the Shrine of the Veiled Threat. The Striking Scorpion Exarch Vakuna stood over him, asking him if he was ready to follow the footsteps and example of Karandras. He felt a great fear in his gut, but he knew that he would soon learn to summon the war mask, and that fear would be a thing of the past.

He was fighting again. Greenskins massing for a war against the aeldari. He stalked through their camps with his shrine brothers at his side. They slaughtered their enemies before they were seen, killed droves without a shot being fired. He still made art, but it was writ in blood and spilled viscera across a hundred warzones. He wasn't even sure he remembered how to paint.

He stood outside his shrine. Without the war mask upon him, he didn't know if he could bear donning the armour once again. Each time he fought the urge to lose himself to the path, each time he banished the war mask, he could feel a tiny piece of himself being cast aside. He had heard the whispered scream, the birth cry of a god, the whispering demand to open himself to it. He let go, not caring if his soul was obliterated. Anything would be better than an eternity of this torture.

He was fighting against a horde of daemons. The servants of Slaanesh swarmed the embattled Ynnari. His shrine brothers were dead. He slipped in a pool of gore, and fell. A squealing daemonette lunged over him, her scissoring claw raised for the killing blow. She vanished, cut down in a spray of ichor. A figure in

a blood-red warsuit, a black cape draped over his shoulders, offered a hand to lift him back to his feet.

He was standing side by side with his long-lost spiritual brother, Jazao of the Shrine of the Slit Throat. They could hear the drukhari beyond the walls, see the Commorrites storming the Viscerean Garrison. The son of K'Shaic would arrive soon. He stepped back to blend into the shadows.

He was dying.

He opened his eyes.

Naeddre staggered, even as the body of the Striking Scorpion fell to the ground. He turned to see Phaerl still battling the other incubus. The two warriors had battled to exhaustion, and their blows had become slow and heavy. Before he could move to intervene, the Commorrite incubus brought his klaive down in a brutal overhand chop. Jazao blocked with his klaive in a two-handed grip, but the blow drove him low. Phaerl brought the sword down again, and then again. Each blow forced the other incubus down lower, first to a crouch, then to his knees.

Jazao caught Naeddre's dazed stare. He nodded, even as Phaerl smashed the klaive from his hands. The victorious incubus wiped the blood from his eyes and hefted his own klaive overhead.

'Gashvat yandun. Only I remain.' With a spat death curse, Phaerl struck Jazao's head from his shoulders.

Naeddre didn't just feel the rush as Jazao slipped away. He could feel the incubus, not snatched away to a warp fiend or a soul prison, but flowing through him to join the greater part of the aeldari people.

'Your father is waiting,' said Phaerl. The incubus had regained his composure for the most part, although Naeddre could see he was still breathing in great heaves.

'Did you hear any of that?' Naeddre asked.

‘You mean the craftworlder wheedling you to join them? What of it?’

‘Are you loyal to me?’

Naeddre’s question went unanswered. The incubus cocked his head for a moment, then arrogantly turned his back to his ward and headed for the door, as if the query weren’t of any merit.

‘I am true to my shrine and my oaths,’ Phaerl said. ‘My loyalty has been paid for, and is unshakeable.’

Naeddre sighed. That’s what he’d thought. He drew his blast pistol and shot Phaerl in the back. The warsuit had withstood wychblade and chainsword with ease, and even mitigated the slashing blows of the enemy klaive, but the lance of anti-light tore through it like it was mere slaveflesh. Naeddre felt the death rush, invigorating him and clearing his head. He paused to pull the red cloak, emblazoned with the drukhari version of Ynnead’s rune, from Jazao’s body. He draped it over his own shoulders, attaching the chain clips to his flight vest.

‘Unfortunately,’ he said as he stepped over Phaerl’s smoking corpse, ‘it was my father who paid you.’

Naeddre whistled as he exited the garrison. Dutifully, his Moonfoe skyboard heeded his call, wrenching itself loose from the wall and skittering to his side.

‘Listen closely,’ he said over the command net. All around him, aeldari tore one another apart, with blades and blasters and poisoned shards of glass. ‘The archons in the highest spires of Commorragh have something in common with every one of you low-born gutterscum – every one of us, every single eldar, has heard the whispered invitation of Ynnead. We’ve just been too afraid to take it. We’ve seen what the birth of an eldar god heralds, and no matter how much we boast otherwise, we are terrified that this new god will finish what the first one started.’

The Moonfoe roared to life, trailing a thin stream of smoke but still capable of flight. The fighting had slowed, as gang leaders and dracons called for fire to be held, and each listened intently, many unable to believe what they were hearing.

‘No more. We are the True Kin. We do not live in fear. If Ynnead draws the souls of the aeldari to himself, then the aeldari will answer. If K’Shaic and Vect and every other terrified old man in High Commorragh want to quaver in fear and ignore the call, then we will leave them behind with the orks and mon-keigh they’ve chosen to emulate.’

He shot through the ranks of troops, those bearing his colours, those in the green and black of the Jade Labyrinth and those daubed with the red of the Ynnari. The cloak fluttered behind him, a rallying banner that advertised the blood that united them and the blood that they would shed.

‘The future belongs to the aeldari!’

He could have boarded a Raider and squeezed a tiny bit more speed from his advance, but there was strength in unity. He needed the hellions, and the full force of Reavers, when he impacted his father’s lines. They swarmed behind him. Venoms and Raiders paused long enough to allow troops to board them, then roared to catch up with the skyboards and jetbikes already speeding to follow their archon.

The trip was brief. The garrisons had been designed to reinforce the port in the event of attack; it needed to be close. There wasn’t even time to focus the nishariel crystal again before the webway artery curved and their destination was in sight.

The Port of Widows utterly dwarfed the garrison. It was huge, a maze of platforms and arched walkways, battlements and bunkers. Across its surface, the battle raged in full. Wyches matched blade with incubi. Hellions soared over clusters of gunmetal-armoured kabalite warriors, exchanging rattling, hissing volleys of splinter shard fire with each other. From a distance, the

two sides couldn't even be discerned. Only a morass of aeldari, all fighting each other.

K'Shaic's battle-barque stood out as they drew closer. It was designed to: a massive banner daring the enemy to strike.

Corpses were strewn across all three decks of the barque, the remains of several assaults intended to decapitate the fleet's leadership. Half of the guns were silent, the gunners dead with no replacements available. Wych bodies had let forth a virtual river of blood, rent asunder by the klaives of K'Shaic's personal guard.

Most of the incubi had already died. Only one of them remained, a sullen, silent figure to whom Naeddre had never been introduced. Centuries of following his father's leadership could not evaporate in an instant. He wondered if he could speak to K'shaic, to convince him to heed the Whispering God.

K'shaic stood at his command dais, issuing instructions to his forces. At the metallic clank of Naeddre's booted feet on the grilled deck, he glanced up. He gave his son a jerk of his head: all the praise and reward he intended to give for Naeddre's performance.

The curt gesture sent cold fire coursing through Naeddre's body. Centuries of sacrificing his very soul upon the altar of his father's own hubris, for nothing more than a snide tilt of the head? His silver words turned to lead in his mouth. All thoughts of convincing his father to turn his banner evaporated. He drew his blast pistol and fired into his father's exposed back, turned to him with the same fatal arrogance Phaerl had shown.

The sole remaining incubus was a credit to his caste. He gave no indication of even looking at Naeddre, but when the blast pistol fired, he had already shoved his liege aside. The darklight instead bored a trough through the bodyguard's chest. He took a faltering step towards Naeddre, determined to protect K'Shaic to the end, but there was no more he could do. The drukhari collapsed.

K'shaic lunged at his son. He hadn't become the leader of one of Commorrhagh's greatest kabals by giving in to shock or sentiment. It was all Naeddre could do to get his helglaive up before his father's sabre gutted him. The surgesabre sent a cascade of sparks ringing off his weapon.

'Here?' his father bellowed, incredulous. 'Now? You couldn't wait?'

The surgesabre was lethally dangerous. It did not radiate energy or absorb light, or any of the fancy tricks that some archons desired in their weapons. It could, however, deliver an electrical charge that would kill a rampaging gnarloc. Naeddre had seen his father plunge the sword into an ork warboss, the furious energies holding the greenskin immobile while the power did its work, the warlord's mighty frame only able to twitch and spasm as its skin blackened and its eyes melted out of its skull. Even a glancing blow would stun him. A solid hit would mean death in an instant. He'd practised subjecting himself to shocks of increasing intensity so that he might one day be able to resist his father's weapon, but he had nowhere near the degree of tolerance he would need to survive a substantial blow from the surgesabre.

'Of course,' said Naeddre. 'How else can I make sure the Jade Labyrinth escapes your assault?'

He heard his words with a slight reverberation in his own helmet. His father's command dais was still on, still transmitting. Every dracon, solarite and klaivex could hear everything that happened on the command barge. Every pilot could see, in holographic miniature, the battle between father and son, playing out before their very eyes.

'The rebels?' K'shaic hissed. He wielded the surgesabre in his left hand, and a ghousteel knife, its grey-green metal inherently toxic to living flesh, in a backhand grip in his right. 'You join with the traitors?'

Naeddre didn't need to respond. The hellions, his hellions, were smashing into the Bladed Lotus forces.

'Why?' K'shaic drove his son backwards with his skill. His blades moved faster than any Naeddre had ever faced.

'For a better future,' Naeddre replied.

'Fantasies? You trade a seat at the right hand of greatness, the chance to steal the throne yourself, for a child's fairy tale?'

'A child's fairy tale?' It was Naeddre's turn to be furious. He'd never felt this sort of anger. 'Like the supremacy of Commorragh? How the galaxy lights torches because it is we who have made them fear the darkness?' His staccato back-and-forth attack pattern brought both blades to bear simultaneously, forcing his father to defend from both ends.

'We are supreme!' Never had the sentiment sounded so desperate before. Naeddre knew the truth now: his father spoke to convince himself. 'We take what we wish! We fear nothing, not even the Ancestral Enemy that the craftworlders shake and imprison their souls to avoid!'

Naeddre laughed in his father's face. The dam had broken, and he had centuries of disrespect built up.

'We are Her slaves!' he yelled. 'And She eats away at us, little by little.'

'And you think to break the cycle?' K'shaic sneered. 'Will you preach to me like one of the dirt-worshipping Exodites? Do you ignore the blood on your hands, Naeddre? The deeds you've committed?'

His father tried to vault off the command dais, but Naeddre's helglaive hooked the old archon's leg, tripping him. Before Naeddre could swing in to end the fight, K'Shaic had rolled to his feet.

‘I did it all!’ Naeddre laughed. His blows hammered away at K’Shaic, who was desperately defending himself from his son’s ruthless onslaught. ‘I slaughtered, and I killed. Millions wept. But I did what I did because there wasn’t another option. I am a true son of Commorrhagh – if damnation is all that remains to me, I will drape it about myself like a cloak of regency, I will drink and savour it like a fine wine. But to choose damnation when salvation is not just an option, but freely offered? That’s nothing more than the terrified cowardice of an old man too afraid of the future to un mire himself from a past that’s eating him alive.’ He stopped, allowing his father to gain a handful of steps between them.

‘Go back to your Dark City,’ Naeddre spat. ‘Crawl back to your Overlord. You can clutch each other together and cower in the darkness like frightened children.’

The battle was lit by a colossal explosion. Both combatants recoiled from a shock wave overhead, uncomfortably close. One of the Reapers that was the pride of K’Shaic’s fleet burned in mid-air, its anti-gravity engines struggling to keep it aloft even as cobalt-blue flames engulfed its decks. Fighting had broken out between the crews, with the Reapers turning their massive vortex projectors on members of their own squadron.

‘The future belongs to the aeldari!’ The cry came over the command network. An unknown dracon, commanding his own men to turn on the loyalists. Throughout the fleet, those who had heard the whispered entreaty tugging at their hearts for weeks finally committed to its call.

For a moment, father and son stared at one another across the deck. The forces of the Bladed Lotus were in turmoil. Half of them floundered, unsure whether to attack Naeddre’s forces or continue assaulting the Ynnari, not realising the two were now the same. A few dracons, believing a coordinated coup was underway, had chosen to support one of the sons rather than the father, and had struck K’Shaic’s banner in favour of Naeddre or Qeine’s

colours instead. The Ynnari shared a much greater unity of purpose. The Commorrites who flew Naeddre's banner they largely left alone, turning their fury on those still bearing the purple-on-steel pennant of K'Shaic's Bladed Lotus.

The ancient archon crossed the dais in an instant, his blades scissoring at his son's neck. Naeddre gave ground, unable to do anything but defend against the feral attacks of his father. K'shaic's strength and savagery was born of desperation; he knew as well as Naeddre that whoever won their duel would win the loyalty of the majority of the kabal, and would carry the day.

Naeddre turned and ran straight for the prow of the barque, as though to hurl himself from the side. His father pursued, his wrath stoked to full blaze. Naeddre leapt, kicked off the highest point of the railing, and flipped backwards over his father's headlong charge. All it would take was a single kick to send his father tumbling into a fatal fall. As he flipped overhead, the surgesabre clipped his shoulder, slicing a slight nick in his flesh.

Naeddre crashed to the deck, skidding to the opposite rail. His limbs wouldn't work. All he could do was shake; every joint tried to clench and unclench at the same time. He could taste blood, ground his jaw hard enough to hear his teeth crack beneath the strain.

K'shaic stalked towards his son, pointing the blade at his wayward child. Naeddre's head, held aloft for all to see, would put the challenge of the Ynnari to rest with unambiguous finality.

The archon's chest burst apart, as a lance of black energy tore through him. K'shaic stared down in wrathful ignorance. Steaming, charred flesh ringed the wound. The archon turned to see Evaeline standing at the foot of the forecastle. She held Naeddre's blast pistol in a two-handed grip.

'The future belongs to the aeldari,' she said.

She didn't pause to help Naeddre up, returning instead to the pilot's console. Naeddre staggered to his feet and -stumbled to the command dais. His limbs still twitched from the electrical fury the sabre had unleashed on him, but he fought through the tics and tremors with sheer willpower.

'The fortress belongs to the Ynnari,' he rasped, his voice harsh. Even his throat had suffered the ravages of K'shaic's sabre.

The proclamation was unnecessary. Many of the purple-on-steel banners were cut down, replaced by the pink-on-black of Naeddre's own banner. The Raiders, Venoms and Ravagers that had not struck the colours of K'Shaic's Bladed Lotus still fought, but for escape, not for victory. All that remained was to consolidate his forces.

Naeddre tapped the controls of the command dais, then stared in confusion. Qeine's forces were moving in the opposite direction. As if in answer to his confusion, his brother's voice cut over the communication network.

'K'Shaic is dead,' his brother said. 'Long live Archon Qeine, ruler of the Amaranth Spire and leader of the Kabal of the Bladed Lotus!'

'Damn it,' said Naeddre, restricting the communication to Qeine alone. 'Brother, listen to me - there's a chance for something better. We don't have to do this.' No answer came back. Over the open network, he could still hear Qeine posturing and issuing orders.

'Excellency, what do we do?' Evaeline had brought the barque to a hovering halt.

"Your grace" will still suffice,' Naeddre said.

'What do we do?' The barque pilot repeated. Long years of service to his father before him had taught Evaeline to be task-oriented and unfazed by threats, sarcasm or torrents of gunfire.

‘We regroup,’ said Naeddre. ‘The corsairs of the Blackblood Nebula will be here tomorrow. We trade the goods in the port’s holds to secure passage out of here.’ He’d need to coordinate with Kysthene, if she still lived, to get the most out of the Labyrinthae. Eventually, he’d need a long-term plan. Raiding for supplies would be good, finding the bulk of the Ynnari would be better. Crusading to liberate more aeldari willing to fight for the future of their race, that seemed the most enticing.

Naeddre stood on the command dais, unmoving. The cowards who had fled for the Dark City were gone. The warriors, the Ynnari under his command, were rounding up the Commorrite loyalists they’d managed to capture. Many of the damaged ships could be repaired. Those who survived had their pick of equipment that could be scavenged from the dead. The hellion gangs were already scouring the wreckage far below, looking for weapons and other commodities to be bartered.

‘Are you injured, your grace?’

‘No,’ said Naeddre, ‘it’s just quieter than I expected.’

Evaeline said nothing. Naeddre knew she’d piloted the barque for decades, and had witnessed the raucous aftermath of the Bladed Lotus’ battles. She’d seen Naeddre and his brother boasting and threatening one another, laughing and lying as each recounted their own personal glories from the fight they’d just survived. They always claimed they were vying for K’Shaic’s favour, but their braggadocious stories often continued long after the old archon had lost interest.

Naeddre gripped the railing, his legs still unsteady after the surgesabre’s assault. There was an emptiness inside him. Not a devouring hole like the call of She-Who-Thirsts, or the gentle whisper of Ynnead. Just an emptiness. A pit where something had been lost, something that could never be replaced.

Still, it was the silence that hurt the worst.

