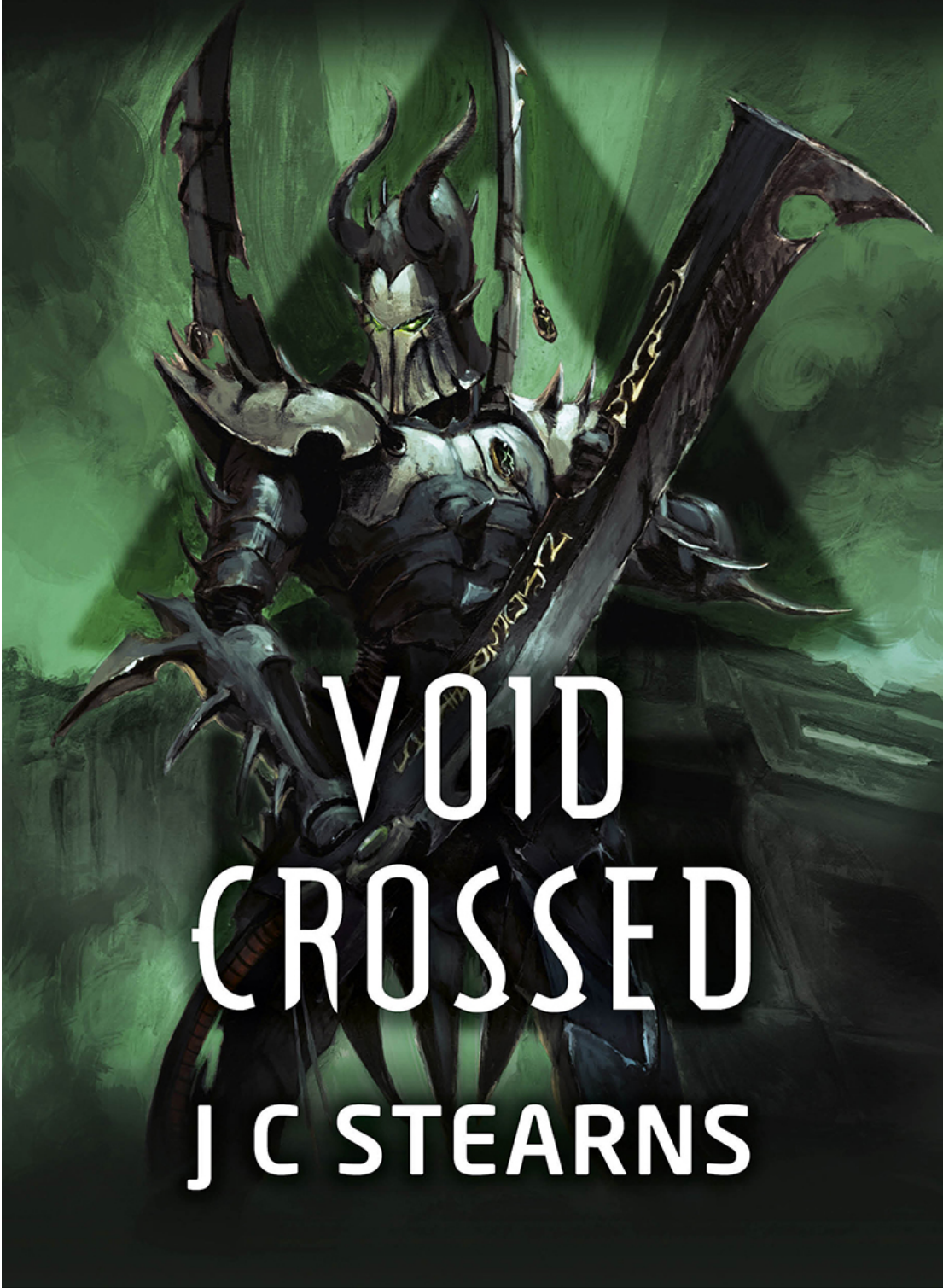


WARHAMMER
40,000



**VOID
CROSSED
J C STEARNS**

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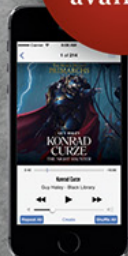
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An Extract from ‘Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior’

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VOID CROSSED

J C Stearns

Archon Melandyr strode across the battlefield, kicking a severed arm from his path. There were many among the drukhari who disdained setting foot on the ground. Xevrik Tayne, the haemonculus who had been paid to accompany him, went into battle borne aloft by microthrusters, hovering an arm's length above the ground like a malevolent spectre. He was far from the only one; Melandyr had frequently collaborated with the hekatarii of the Scarring Barb, who waged war almost exclusively from jetbikes and skyboards. Even the Harlequins he occasionally worked with belonged to the Soaring Spite, who took pride in leaping through the battlefield in an endless series of acrobatics, feet rarely touching the ground.

Not so for Archon Melandyr, lord of the Emerald Talon. For him, grinding his boots into the dirt of yet another world was a mark of pride. What was another spatter of blood or gore across his armour compared to the very flesh of a planet itself? Each boot print was a scar upon another celestial body, marking his conquests, his mud-streaked greaves a testament to the injuries he'd brought upon the very earth.

The world of Dunwiddian already had its share of scars, of course. The few aeldari outcasts who had lived there guarding the ancient Dunwiddian Gate had been no match for the mon-keigh colonists who had come to wrest it from them. The departing rangers had felt no need to warn the Imperium of the ork raids in the sector, however, and the humans had spent centuries combatting the greenskin pirates. When the humans were finally overrun, the orks had stripped their colonies for whatever they

could scavenge, then turned to warring with themselves. Finally they had departed, leaving the planet alone. With the Dunwiddian Gate unguarded for the first time in years, the aeldari had come to reclaim their prize.

Across the expanse of the Plains of Isha'nne, knots of craftworld Guardians exchanged volleys of fire with kabalite warriors. Grav-tanks and Raiders zoomed across the battlefield, perilously low to the ground, as graceful fighter craft dominated the skies, trading missiles and lances of energy with one another.

Once again, Dunwiddian had become a warzone. Melandyr's interests largely lay in other sectors, and he'd initially had no interest in the webway gate, but when he had heard that the craftworld of Tir-Val had dispatched forces to claim it, he had seized the right to lead the drukhari in opposition.

Archon Melandyr spied a group of kabalites in the glossy black of the Emerald Talon, their armour edged in fluorescent green, routed from their position and fleeing from a huge wraith construct. The wraithlord swung its sword, cleaving a dracon in twain, and unleashed a gout of flame from a wrist-mount. The long limbs of the deadwalker were the same purple hue as the armour of the Guardians, the dark purple of a livid bruise, trimmed in golden yellow. The banner that hung from its back proclaimed the spirit within as Venzaynthe of House Cruiran.

Pausing for a moment, the archon lifted his hand, signalling to the trio of Ravagers that drifted above him. The incubi who dogged his footsteps flanked him as Melandyr indicated the rampaging wraithlord. The Ravagers, crewed by bloodthirsty gunners he had selected personally, were the second portion of Melandyr's personal guard. Their dark lances allowed him to extend his reach across entire battlefields, and they protected him from above as his incubi protected him from threats below.

There was a colossal whine as the Ravagers fired in unison. Nine beams of concentrated dark matter particles lanced across the battlefield, transfixing the awesome form of Venzaynthe. The undead scion of House Cruiran vanished, his wraithbone shell blown apart in an instant, vaporised by the potent celestial forces employed against him.

Archon Melandyr howled in laughter as the drukhari rallied, charging over the smoking remnants where Venzaynthe had stood. He took off again, racing deeper into the fray. There had been battle lines when the

bloodshed had begun, but they had long since dissolved. For the aeldari, they meant very little anyway. When their forces could redeploy at an instant in gravity-defying Wave Serpents and nimble Raiders, or soar over enemy entrenchments on wings wrought of psychoplastic or haemonculus fleshcraft, deployments soon became hopelessly enmeshed.

The grass had been trampled, the gentle slopes reduced to fields of muddy gore. Hundreds had been slain in the hours since the first shot had been fired, and hundreds more would die before one side yielded. Archon Melandyr had waited patiently for his quarry to appear, but he could wait no longer. He ran across the killing fields, seeking his victim. The Dark City might wish to see the gate reclaimed for their use, and his allies might have been enticed into battle by the promise of valuable craftworld playthings, but Melandyr had crossed the stars with an entire army at his side to kill but a single person.

Ciorstah was here. He just needed to find her.

The deck of the freighter was covered in scorch marks, the rounded beige walls marred by low-yield plasma rounds and studded with errant shuriken. The few remaining t'au cowered in terror, waiting for their captors to shackle them and take them away. Their defenders had been slain to the last, leaving the crew at the mercy of the Corsairs that had boarded. The aeldari pirates moved through the hold, inspecting the cargo and roughly handling their new prisoners.

Melandyr spied the woman he was looking for, and weaved his way around his fellow Corsairs, bearing down on her with the stealthy grace of a jungle predator. Springing from behind, he grabbed her by the waist and spun her in a giddy circle. Her helmet removed after the crew had surrendered, Ciorstah's long black braids fanned out around her in a raven halo, and she laughed with him.

'What's the final tally, levressa?' Melandyr asked, releasing her. Like him, she was clad in the orange armour of Prince Eidear's Nova Blades. Like all the Corsairs in the hold of the t'au freightship, they each bore the red slashes across their shoulders, resembling feline claw marks, that marked them as part of the coterie of Jolaniel the Twice-bladed.

Ciorstah wrapped one arm around Melandyr's waist, drawing him close. She still smelled of baked earth and alkali salts: the scent of t'au blood.

He still bore the tang of ionised air about him, from the engineering compartment he had cleared, battling the t'au crew hand to hand rather than risking weapons fire in the volatile environment.

'We have yet to finish, my shoathé,' she said, drawing close to his ear, 'but we count two full keels of refined solinium. Wezdarciel also found over twenty trusses of gossamine stalk.' He thrilled at the feel of her breath on his neck, but almost as thrilling was the value of their capture: rare commodities and valuable narcotics that could be traded at any port that would receive them.

'How does it feel to have been so thoroughly vindicated?' he asked. Lenfionne and Ardren had argued against attacking the t'au shipping lanes, but Ciorstah, with Melandyr's aid, had persuaded, bullied and intimidated the barons into accepting Jolanial's proposition, a plan their baron and prince both knew had originated with the two lovers.

'It feels justified,' Ciorstah said. Closing her eyes, she spread her arms and walked past him with the slow, stately stride of a regent on procession. 'It feels like fate crowning us with the glory we're due.'

'Speaking of the crowning that we're due,' Melandyr said. 'Jolanial's coterie may have succeeded wildly, but Ardren's people had a much harder time of it.'

'Oh?' Ciorstah turned her face to her lover, arching one delicate eyebrow quizzically.

'Indeed,' he said. 'They were ambushed from behind and routed from the medical bay. They were put to such flight that Prince Eidear himself had to take the bay. Imagine his surprise when he found that an entire coterie had been sent running by nothing but a lone engineer and a flight of those drones the t'au are so fond of.'

'Executed?' Ciorstah's eyes glittered with avarice. They had still not lost the translucent cerulean hue common in young aeldari adults. They would deepen to violet as she aged, but Melandyr loved them as they were, a living, moving reminder that the two of them had not yet been ground down as their elders had. His rounded cheeks, not yet hollowed to the sharpness of full adulthood, were a similar point of fascination for her.

Melandyr nodded. 'Oh, immediately,' he laughed. 'And our dear prince has proclaimed he will give command of their coterie to another, so complete was their failure.' He caught her hand and drew her closer, until

their chests were touching and he was looking down into her eyes. 'And who do you think he will give them to?'

'We shall share them, of course.' She put her palm to his cheek, her hand shaking with excitement. 'What marking shall we have them bear to signify our leadership?'

Melandyr grinned. 'What about the rune of the open hand, placed upon their chest?'

'To show the heart you have taken from me?' she whispered, pulling his face down to hers.

'And you from me,' he replied.

The Dire Avengers leapt from behind a wrecked Falcon, their shuriken catapults setting up a razor storm to impede his progress. Melandyr merely laughed. His incubi charged, covering the short distance to the Aspect Warriors before they could retreat.

The Shrine of the Severed Spine was one of his greatest achievements. Left leaderless and scattered after the humiliating defeat of Archon Xarat, the incubi shrine had been on the verge of extinction when Melandyr had offered them his patronage. With his wealth, he had brought them back from the brink of ruin, and now they served him above all others, their loyalty purchased in perpetuity. Haughty leaders that wouldn't have spat upon the Severed Spine three decades ago now offered priceless treasures or holds full of slaves for the service of a single incubus.

In gunmetal-grey warsuits accented with blood red, the incubi were masters of their craft. Each of them wielded their two-handed klaives as deftly as though the broad-bladed weapons weighed less than a wuch knife. The impact-ablating armour of the Dire Avengers, capable of shrugging off lasers or even explosive bolter shells, offered no more protection than a sheet of parchment. The incubi's klaivex, the leader of their shrine, was a potent warrior named Throvein, whose bladed trophy vanes were festooned with silver service studs prised from the skulls of Adeptus Astartes officers, shattered spirit-stones and the tips of broken honour blades.

The Dire Avengers' exarch commanded the warriors from the centre of their ranks, and it was he that Throvein was making his way towards. The two commanders met, power sabre to klaive, as the Dire Avengers found

themselves unable to give ground fast enough to prevent the murderous attack of the incubi. The exarch was the master of a hundred battlefields, his life given in dedication to the close-range assault warfare his shrine exalted. His fixation allowed him a level of skill most living beings could scarcely conceive, much less aspire to. His very soul was blended with all those who had worn his armour before him, their skills and knowledge melded into the exarch's own considerable repertoire. Throvein killed him in the space of six heartbeats. He deflected the exarch's powerblade, hooked his klaive behind the Dire Avenger's knees, and yanked him forward. Against a fellow incubus, or a heavily armoured Space Marine, the manoeuvre might have toppled the enemy to their back. Against this foe, the blade severed the exarch's legs at the knee. His swing unarrested, Melandyr saw Throvein continue his stroke, arcing his blade up and over, chopping the craftworlder in half at the waist before his body had even hit the ground.

Not every engagement was proving as decisive.

'Onzeisch reports heavy losses,' a voice crackled in Melandyr's ear. The energy discharges in the atmosphere were so intense that they were beginning to cause interference, even in the advanced aeldari communication systems.

'This was anticipated,' Melandyr replied. *'The archite knew what she was getting herself into.'* He had great respect for the venerated *Onzeisch*, champion of the arenas and one-third of the *ynnitach* rulers of the Scarring Barb. The hellion gangs that followed her to war were an invaluable asset, but at the end of the day they were still little better than street scum. *Onzeisch's* only forces of any real value were her personal attendants, a flight of Reavers who flew to war trailing immense garlands of heads taken from enemy commanders, and the archite would not fritter their lives away on petty targets.

'She's threatening to withdraw if she isn't supported, lord.'

Melandyr considered for the briefest of moments. *Onzeisch* was a valuable ally, but she was deployed at the edge of the Plains of Isha'ne, where the Corennan River ran fat and slow, clogged with human and ork pollutants. That was far from the main knot of the battle, where the Tir-Val leadership had been spotted. He began looking for a Raider to signal. It appeared he would have to find Ciorstah another time.

Then he saw it: a flash of blue and violet amid a flood of palest green. He knew who it was, even without confirmation. His command runes showed a squad of kabalites near her position, and they winked out as he watched. He imagined he could hear the mournful wail even over the slicing of razor discs.

‘I will send my Ravagers to reinforce, but I myself cannot relocate,’ he said. He gestured for the Severed Spine to follow and set off at a sprint. ‘If the archite cannot fulfil her commitments, then she’s welcome to return to the Dark City.’

‘We cannot stay,’ Melandyr muttered peevishly.

‘Of course we cannot stay,’ Ciorstah snapped. Both of them knew it. Prince Eidear had grown cold and paranoid. He’d ceased to be a true Corsair ages ago. They hadn’t raided in months, had taken no prisoners, seized no treasures. Increasingly, he had made the Nova Blades into nothing but a large mercenary force for the asuryani. He’d even gone so far as to take to battle allied with their hated rivals, the Insolent Kin under Prince Isbeil. ‘But you cannot seriously think we would go to Commorrhagh?’

‘We’ve sold scores of prisoners in their slave markets!’ Melandyr said. ‘Our reputations as slave-takers are more than sufficient to secure a position for ourselves.’

The baron’s quarters that they shared, so large and spacious in comparison with the coterie racks, had grown small and cramped. Melandyr could barely turn around without bumping into some trinket his partner had tucked away, some memento of rebellion she clung to as though it were a child’s toy.

‘To do what?’ Ciorstah asked. ‘Bathe in gore? Liquify our minds with narcotic cocktails? Fight in the streets like animals?’ She turned away, as though unable to stomach looking at him.

‘As opposed to what?’ he yelled.

‘Tir-Val offers respite,’ she snapped. ‘Will you live as a child your whole life? Do you not feel a call to some form of responsibility, to build something with your existence?’

Melandyr rolled his eyes and threw his hands aloft.

‘Back to the craftworlds?’ he shouted. ‘You would have us run like

whipped beasts, to cower at the heels of our elders? Do you even hear yourself? Your cowardice?’ He pointed an accusing finger at her. ‘I have spent too long, done too much, to throw my name away for the grand and illustrious life of a common labourer or a hand-wringing artist!’

She took a step towards him, face contorted in patronising contempt.

‘You need not abandon your calling,’ she said. ‘There are dozens of paths that honour Khaine, if you truly feel your life’s work amounts to nothing more than bloodshed.’

He stalked towards her, glaring into her eyes, the eyes that had darkened to violet.

‘Do you not see?’ he asked. ‘Bloodshed is what we do. Would you so carelessly throw away the thrill of the hunt, the electric song of the kill? The glory of laying hands on your prize? In Tir-Val, we could be useful,’ he spat, as if the very word offended him, ‘but in Commorrhagh we would be glorious.’

She sneered, staring at him as though he were a stranger.

‘You disgust me,’ she snarled. They stood chest-to-chest. He could feel the tension in that moment. Their pride would never allow either to walk their words back now, but he knew that even a single insult more might bring them to violence.

The alarm chimes blazed through the Corsair ship. They both snapped their heads around. The chimes sounded once, twice, and a third long tone. Orks. They scrambled for their armaments. This argument, like all the others, would have to keep until another time.

The Storm Guardians tried to stand before him, but Archon Melandyr was in no mood for delays. He didn’t even take time to savour the kills, merely ducked and weaved his way through the melee. Shuriken pistols hissed, the shots pinging from his ghostplate armour. The Moebian Edge, the arcane power sword that he had taken from the steaming corpse of Archon Kholanthe, battered the feeble blades of his aggressors aside. The gauntlet on his hand wove delicate wires from his blade down to the pentauric crystalline matrix he wore beneath his plate. With each life his blade reaped, the soul trap fed more and more vitality into his body. It would fade over the course of hours, but he had taken dozens of victims already. The soul trap was a rush when used on lesser life forms, but nothing

compared to the thrill of taking other aeldari. Even the self-denying craftworlders lived longer and more intensely than the oldest of the weaker races, and Melandyr was able to taste the entirety of that experience in but an instant, their every triumph and joy feeding not only his body, but his monstrous ego as well.

He was a master swordsman, but the Storm Guardians required no great skill to dispatch. His hacking chops were swift and brutal, relying on his augmented strength to pound through his enemies' defences, sending sprays of blood up in his wake. The Severed Spine draughted behind him, their own blades cleaving through the asuryani as scythes felling crops. Arms and legs and heads rained down on the ground, the craftworlders dead before their severed limbs had even begun to bleed.

Melandyr could see her escort ahead of him. Just as he had been stalled at the last minute by the knot of Storm Guardians, Ciorstah had been ambushed at the last by a flock of scourges. Her personal retinue, the Shrine of the Woeful Wail, had accompanied her across Dunwiddian, and stood their ground, firing their shuriken pistols at the bat-winged mercenaries that shrieked above them, raking the Aspect Warriors with splinterfire. The Howling Banshees refused to yield, their disciplined shots tracking their enemy even as their spectral green armour was studded with shards of envenomed crystal.

He heard her piercing shriek, saw one of the scourges struck from the sky, and there she was. Her dark purple armour was a masterpiece of aeldari craftsmanship, but it was only the basest fragment of her raiment. Graceful wings, delicately sculpted to the likeness of a bird's, the feathers coloured in rows of vibrant purples and blues, stretched out from her shoulders. The pale green mask over her face, contorted into the visage of a shrieking woman, matched those of the Woeful Wail, right down to the coal-black hair that fanned out from the crown. At her side was a fusion pistol, chased in images of golden flames, and a slim chainsword with a beaded tassel dangling from the hilt; in her hands a spear tipped with a broad crystalline blade. Her weapons, her wings, her armour – even the bladed, force shield-projecting gauntlet she wore on her wrist – each boasted of another facet of warfare that she had mastered without falling victim to the hyper-obsession that would have locked her into her path forever. The crested helm, plumed with fibres of vivid pink, was her

highest achievement, and proclaimed her Ciorstah of House Opalion, autarch of Tir-Val and commander of the Maidenblade Warhost.

He could hear reports from his subordinates ringing in his ears as he launched himself forward. The wyches and hellions of the Scarring Barb had withdrawn, after an ambush from a group of Dark Reapers had blown the bulk of their Reavers from the sky. Xevrik Tayne, his loyalty sorely tested by the extended battle, was demanding a withdrawal. His own dracons, however, reported the support elements that had accompanied the Tir-Val asuryani were fleeing as well. Melandyr didn't bother responding. Their forces were comparable in strength. So long as the hangers-on to the battle were fleeing in equal number, it was no matter. Tir-Val and the Emerald Talon could settle their war without help.

'Why do I care about the Dunwiddian Gate?' Archon Melandyr asked. Lady Stryxe merely smiled, gesturing for one of her slaves to refill her goblet. 'Why should I be the one to claim it?'

Her proposal was interesting, to be sure: with the ork withdrawal, the webway gate would surely profit someone greatly. The Emerald Talon already had access to webway portals, however, as well as safe passage through certain routes in the webway itself. The Dunwiddian Gate did not connect to any territory that Melandyr could consider friendly. It was a valuable resource, to be sure, but not to him.

'Have you not heard, Melandyr? Tir-Val has already proclaimed it as theirs. They have sent the Maidenblade to secure their claim.' His business ally reclined in her seat and waited for his jealous thoughts to work themselves out.

His supremacy had been centuries in the making. He'd served first as a lowly gunner on one of Kholanthe's Raider crews, rising slowly but surely through the ranks until he was one of the Emerald Talon's most trusted dracons, a trust he had betrayed when he drove an envenomed dagger through Kholanthe's heart and seized the kabal for himself.

Melandyr had heard the news of his love's ascendancy as well. At first he had tried to destroy her by proxy, to show her how little she meant to him. He had sent the Soaring Spite to ambush her at the Fletchan Cluster. He had planted false information that had culminated in the Hammers of Dorn routing the Maidenblade on the ice world of Lhynn. Still she thrived. More

than that, she had fought back. After he took the Emerald Talon, a quartet of rangers in her employ had spent months dogging his realspace raids, assassinating his dragons one by one. Acting on advice planted by Tir-Val agents, the t'au of Cha'nel had ambushed his forces on Sancta Rordan Secundus, turning a routine slave raid into a calamitous defeat.

Melandyr seethed. He'd rebuilt his forces. His kabal had never been stronger. His star had never been higher. Only one thorn remained in his side, a splinter in his psyche he had never been able to dislodge.

'I'd be delighted to lead the invasion,' he said, his demeanour the very picture of gracious good humour. It would not do to let Lady Stryxe see his fury, his obsession. 'I trust our allies have already begun preparation?'

His allies had fled. The archon paid it no mind. He could see Harlequins and Corsairs leaving the battlefield in the opposite direction. Ciorstah's forces were no stronger than his own.

She descended on him with a cry of incoherent rage. The Banshee mask she wore amplified her howls of fury, casting her screams into psychic waves. The Woeful Wail followed behind their mistress, their own shrieks adding to the chorus of doom.

The Splintered Spine were too experienced, too disciplined, to be felled completely by the tricks of their asuryani peers, but Ciorstah's wail was something else. Her hate, intense in the way only an aeldari's emotions could be, was too much even for the veteran incubi to bear. Their breath caught in their throats, their limbs suddenly too leaden to move. The Banshees were among them before they could counter-attack.

Melandyr caught Ciorstah's spear with the Moebian Edge. She wrenched his sword to the side. He let her, taking the moment to step in and drive his fist into her face. Her momentum was unarrestable. He felt a grinding web of pain shooting up his hand as several bones cracked, but Ciorstah fared far worse. Stunned, her dive became a plummet, and she smashed into the ground of Dunwiddian.

The Severed Spine, freed from the autarch's baleful influence, rallied at the last moment. Klaives came up to deflect power swords, and the shrieking gave way to the clash of blades. One of the Woeful Wail diverted towards Melandyr, foolishly believing she could strike down her mistress' foe before he realised she was upon him. He met her charge. His sword

cast one of her blades to the side, the other he caught on his shoulder guard. With his free hand he grabbed her by her mane of ebony hair, and smashed her face against his knee.

Augmented by the soul trap, his strength was titanic. Her helm cracked and caved. Blood spurted through the maze of cracks, and the Banshee was thrown to the ground. Archon Melandyr moved to take her head, but before the stroke could fall, he saw the blur of colour as Ciorstah rose from the muck, and he was forced to turn and defend against her assault.

‘Soul-drinking for power?’ Autarch Ciorstah’s voice was raspy and metallic through the mask. ‘Pathetic.’ The spear jabbed at him, forcing Melandyr to give ground before the asuryani. Her movements were practised and rapid, too swift to catch the blade and wrest it from her grasp.

‘Your hypocrisy is thick enough to deflect gunfire,’ laughed Melandyr. ‘How many trinkets do you have doing your work for you? Still collecting toys, little levressa?’ The use of his old pet name for her had the desired effect: she roared in rage and swung her spear in a brutal chop. Rather than move to meet her, he took the time as she swung to scramble back and clear some distance between them.

He dropped to one knee, pulled his pistol, and fired a hail of crystal splinters in her direction. The spinning spear deflected more than he would have thought possible, the rest pinging harmlessly from her masterful armour. That was fine; he had never intended to kill her with the pistol. The Severed Spine saw him take the knee, and they knew their signal. One of the incubi broke away from the Howling Banshee he was duelling with and lunged at Ciorstah from behind.

As swiftly as she had deflected his shots, Ciorstah spun on her heel, hearing the approach of the incubus before he had closed enough distance to strike her. Her spear thrust took him through the gut, and with a strength Melandyr had not known she possessed, she bore the drukhari foe aloft, bellowing in anger and triumph.

Melandyr was already lunging for the autarch. Realising her mistake, Ciorstah tried to pull her spear from the body of the incubus she had impaled, but he bowled into her. The spear fell from her hands as the two of them fell into the mud of Dunwiddian.

They rolled down the shallow slope they were fighting on, separating and

struggling to their feet. The muck which stained their armour was as much blood as it was dirt and water; the battlefield had become a killing ground that Khaine himself would have been proud of. The dead numbered in the hundreds, perhaps even the thousands. Scores of fighter craft and personnel transports lay about the hillsides, twisted into ruins. With their allies fully fled, the troops of Tir-Val and the Emerald Talon were outnumbered by the corpses.

'Lord,' said the voice in his helmet, barely audible over the crackling interference, *'we have incoming... have a mix of... aeldari craft... look to be Corsairs.'*

All around them their escorts continued to fight unabated. Throvein and the Howling Banshee exarch were locked in a duel, mirror swords flickering against klaive strokes in an unmatched test of skill. Even Melandyr and Ciorstah could not boast such prowess with their weapons. Melandyr's gaze snapped to Ciorstah, but his fury at her intervention turned to elation when he saw that her head was also cocked to the side, listening to a transmission.

'They aren't hers, either,' he growled. If the pirates had been her allies, she wouldn't have needed to stop and respond to the news. He raced towards her, determined to strike her down before she could return to the fray. As he passed, a Howling Banshee somersaulted over the shoulder of one of his incubi, plunging her power sword through the warrior's back. Melandyr lashed out with the Moebian Edge, severing her leg at the knee, but that was all the thought he could spare for her before he was upon Ciorstah.

'Calling pirates in at the last, my shoathé?' she howled as he approached. She'd seen him coming the moment he'd began moving, her scorpion chainsword drawn and ready. *'Your old friend Prince Eidear, no doubt. Your reward for years of continued service.'*

The chainblade smashed into his helm. The curved ghostplate deflected the worst of the attack, but some part of his communication lattice failed, and the distortion turned to a high-pitched shriek. Melandyr tore the ruined helmet from his head before his former lover could capitalise on his distraction. In the middle of such a killing field, his visage was at the peak of vitality. His skin shone like alabaster. His ashen hair cascaded down the back of his armour. His eyes, once soulful and deep, were now

the purest of black.

He managed to raise his power sword in time to ward off her renewed attack. She was laughing as she rained strikes down on him. The chainsword was a far less intimidating weapon, but she wielded it with greater precision than she had the pike.

‘Your mind has been addled by your chanting and meditation,’ he sneered. ‘I left Eidear’s service the very day that you did.’ Their blades clashed together, their footwork forgotten. A competent swordsman could have slain either of them in their state, but they were both lost in the throes of their hatred.

‘Too cowardly to ply the stars alone?’ she said. Behind her, one of Melandyr’s incubi had circled around the Howling Banshee exarch that Throvein was fighting. Throvein fainted and the exarch committed, and when she did the second incubus struck her head from her shoulders. His victory was short-lived: a shuriken round sliced straight through the incubus’ warsuit, cleaving through his throat in a gout of blood. The asuryani whose face Melandyr had smashed earlier laughed, circling the melee with her pistol still outstretched.

‘Ha!’ Melandyr’s blade slammed into the chainsword. She pulled her fusion pistol but he grabbed her by the wrist with his free hand, pinning her hand to her side. They ground their blades into one another, weapons locked. His stolen vitality was beginning to fail him, and he struggled to maintain his stance. ‘I only stayed as long as I did to keep you alive,’ he said. ‘Once you left there was nothing to hold me back any longer.’

Melandyr couldn’t keep the deadlock going forever. His strength nearly depleted, he snapped his head forward, bashing her mask with his forehead. She reeled, her fusion pistol flying from her hand, and he threw himself backwards, delivering a brutal kick to her chest.

He rolled back, pushing himself to his feet before she could set on him with the chainsword. To his relief, she was struggling to pull her own helm from her face. She cast it aside and shook her head. Blood flew from her nose. Time had hardened her features, ground away the soft edges and left her as unyielding as marble. A pair of brutal, winding scars ran in parallel from above her left eye to the bottom of her right jaw, where a clawed hand had clearly tried to tear her face off at some point. Her own hair had been shorn completely away. There was no part of her now which was

devoted to anything but discipline and efficiency.

Ciorstah stared down at her chest in shock. The pale blue spirit-stone set into her armour had been shattered by his kick, exactly as Melandyr intended. It had taken the last iota of energy his soul trap had reaped during the course of the battle, but the look of horror on her face made it worth the cost.

‘Have you forgotten what it meant to dance on the blade’s edge?’ Melandyr said, taunting her. ‘How long has it been since you’ve been without your little spirit prison?’

Ciorstah spat on the ground. ‘You think to cow me with your threats?’ she hissed. ‘You’re as mortal as I, now.’ She held one hand aloft. ‘Your own kabal is fleeing. The Dark City has abandoned you. Slight chance of your haemonculus allies returning you to life now.’

Melandyr spared a glance to the side, where he could see Raiders and Venoms, glossy black and trimmed in green. His personal pennants were being discarded even as he watched, the treacherous Emerald Talon deserting their commander to his killing field. They were mixed with the bruise-purple craft of Tir-Val, however, which brought a smile to his face.

‘Retreat with your ascetics,’ he said, waving one hand towards her fleeing forces. Only the Woeful Wail and Severed Spine remained with them, although there were barely a handful of each. Throvein was down, a mirror sword jutting up from his shoulder, plunged down through his torso. Melandyr had not seen the deed, and couldn’t say which Banshee had taken up the blade to avenge her leader. ‘Run home to Tir-Val. I’ll even be magnanimous enough to let you use my new webway gate.’

She lunged at him. Their swords clashed together again and they circled each other, striking high and low, seeking an entry. His power sword impaled her hip, but she caught his sword arm in a vicious uppercut. The entire limb went numb and limp.

‘I would sooner bow down and kiss the withered feet of the mon-keigh corpse-god,’ she gasped, ‘than allow you to leave this world alive.’ Her eyes were deep amethyst now. He wondered when she had made the decision to shave her hair. Somehow, impossibly, she was more beautiful now than she had ever been to him before. He closed with her, gripping his sword in his uninjured hand.

An impact nearly drove him to the ground. The contest between the

shrines had been decided. The last incubus lay dead, and the sole surviving Howling Banshee had ploughed into him, her power sword slashing against his ghostplate with the weakened arm of a wearied fighter. Melandyr realised that against all odds the lone survivor was the same asuryani that he had struck at the opening of their engagement. Her blood still pumped from her ruined mask with each laboured exhalation. Regaining his breath, Melandyr braced himself and slammed the sword through her abdomen.

Loyal to the last, the Banshee twisted as she fell, tearing the Moebian Edge from his grasp. She slid away in the gore beneath their feet, and before he could go after her Melandyr felt a slashing sensation in his thigh. He turned back to see the chainsword chewing through his upper leg, Ciorstah grimly bearing down on it with every ounce of her weight.

He screamed wordlessly, dropping to his knees. He drew the blade from his boot and buried it in her chest, her shoulder, her bicep. They were both gone, now. They were on their side in the mud, and she kicked at him with her one working leg, driving her knee into his gut. They both lurched as upright as they could, their screams melding into a chorus of hate. They would each have plucked the beating heart from their own breast if it meant they could bludgeon the other to death with it. Finally, she slashed the chainsword across his torso, driving him away from her.

Melandyr rose to one knee, his breath coming in shallow gasps. His face felt cold. His scalp was going numb. His limbs would barely respond; they couldn't even support his weight to make it to her.

'You never knew when to retreat, levressa,' he rasped. 'In your entire existence, the only thing you've ever managed to leave was me. Even for our kind, obsession is in your blood. It's a wonder you weren't lost upon every path you trod.'

Ciorstah slumped. Her face was unhealthily pale, her blood loss already bordering on fatal. The chainsword tumbled from her grasp. She leaned against the corpse of Throvein.

'It was... was you,' she said, her speech halted by her failing breath. 'Every time I... felt myself becoming lost... lost to a path... I would remember your face. I could never become a – ahh – become an exarch, because that would mean... mean letting go of everything I had been. And nothing could make me forget how much... I hate you.'

Even with his failing vision, Melandyr could see the approaching craft. Raiders and Wave Serpents soared closer. The flags and pennants were slashed and torn, as if they had been through many battles, but as they drew closer he could make them out. The Sable Sword. The Hegrian Banshees. The Jade Labyrinth. The pink-on-black of the Bladed Lotus.

‘You want to complain about real soul drinkers?’ Melandyr mumbled, his speech slurred by blood. ‘You... about to get your chance.’ He lifted one finger with the last of his strength. ‘Not Corsairs... Ynnari.’

‘Let them take me, shoathé,’ she said, lifting her face in a haughty sneer. ‘If it means I first see you devoured by She Who Thirsts.’

Melandyr hacked a half-cough, half-laugh, spitting a gout of blood down his chest.

‘Let the Dark Prince have me,’ he wheezed, ‘if it means I live long enough to see your own spirit eaten by the Young God and his bloodthirsty followers.’

Their shoulders slumped, and they locked eyes. There were no more words to be had; every breath was a literal life-or-death struggle now. They had led armies, met blade to blade, and now their battle to end one another had been reduced to a contest of who could draw the next breath. Melandyr’s head weaved back and forth, fighting to stay aloft, as Ciorstah did likewise. They fought to triumph over one another, knowing their battle would last to death and beyond. No matter if the Ynnari arrived in time to add their souls to the Young God’s growing spiritual collective, or if their essence was torn from their frames and devoured by Slaanesh, they would die as they lived, with each fixated on nothing but the other. It didn’t matter which god took them, for neither had a claim upon them: she was his, and he hers, forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J C Stearns is a writer who lives in a swamp in Illinois with his wife and son, as well as more animals than is reasonable. He started writing for Black Library in 2016 and is the author of the short story 'Wraithbound', as well as 'Turn of the Adder', included in the anthology *Inferno! Volume 2* and 'The Marauder Lives', in the Horror anthology *Maledictions*. He plays Salamanders, Dark Eldar, Sylvaneth, and as soon as he figures out how to paint lightning bolts, Night Lords.

An extract from *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*.



Never trust a god.

You can be certain of one thing, if anything. Gods order the universe to their design and nothing else, and you can be sure that your wants and needs feature little in their agenda. For the aeldari, distrusting gods is in their nature, having been abandoned by one pantheon of godheads and destroyed by the birth scream of a deity forged from their own wanton excess. Such experience breeds caution if not outright contempt.

And of the gods that survived – excepting that ravenous maw of destruction known as She Who Thirsts – they are but a pale shadow of their former status. Khaine, shattered into little pieces of angry metal and scattered through the craftworlds. Cegorach, the supreme trickster, the Laughing God, dancing merrily through the webway just one step ahead of the predatory intent of the Great Enemy, plucking souls from his grasp as and when chance allows.

So imagine the towering hubris of not only serving a god in such times, but trying to create one.

Such accusation cannot be levelled wholly upon the first of our players in this plot, for she was unwittingly brought into the fold of the Ynnari, something of a cosmic side effect. Collateral deification one might call it. The hubris was that of Eldrad Ulthran, but the weight of his mistake – his error being to only partially succeed in bringing about the apotheosis of Ynnead, god of the dead – fell upon the shoulders of Yvraine, formerly the Daughter of Shadows and many other titles before and since.

Far too complex for this retelling are the tales that led to this terrible turn of events and their immediate consequence. They are but a few threads in the tapestry of a galaxy torn asunder by the resurgence of the Dark Powers

and the failures of aeldari and human alike.

But while Eldrad did not bring about the rise of Ynnead, he did succeed in part, for in the wake of his actions came the Ynnari, sworn to find and unite the croneswords of Morai-Heg to bring about the final elevation of the Whispering God.

So they believe.

Myths, like gods, should be treated with some scepticism also. They have a habit of being retold to the benefit of the teller. You would not doubt the advice of this reliable narrator would you?

In pursuing this goal, the Ynnari broke a craftworld – Biel-tan – and brought much grief to the aeldari, but from these ashes arose a new understanding with some of the servants of the Emperor. One was brought forth from the distant past, a true legend from the time when the Emperor of Mankind walked abroad among the mortals, rather than existed as a vampiric husk sustained by the souls of his own servants and technology stolen from the aeldari.

This individual was a primarch, whom humanity foolishly called a man in their ignorance of what their master had truly created. Roboute Guilliman, their finest leader and statesman, a warrior and commander beyond anything their crumbling empire could muster in the previous ten thousand orbits of their homeworld.

Even so, the tide was not stopped, but it was slowed and the dominance of the Realm of Chaos stemmed for a time.

And by roundabout means we come back to the tale of Yvraine, who had dared the heart of vileness known as the Eye of Terror, the storm that swallowed the centre of the old aeldari dominions, on an errand for Guilliman. As part of a grander scheme between aeldari and humans, she had promised to retrieve an artefact of Chaos from the clutches of a renegade primarch, the daemon prince of Nurgle, called Mortarion by the humans.

She is, unexpectedly, in danger. We join her as she flees the castle of the daemon prince with her prize, the Hand of Darkness, passing through the metaphysical Garden of Grandfather Nurgle himself to reach the relative sanctuary of the webway. Her small force was beset by plaguebearers and slobbering beasts of Nurgle, their portal to safety waning in its power.

Rancid matter dripped along the length of the Sword of Sorrows and dribbled over the knuckles of Yvraine's armoured glove. A thick swarm of red-and-black flies closed about the daemon blood, sticking to the gelatinous filth as they supped on escaping warp energy. She fought back her disgust and hewed *Kha-vir* into the next foe, another gangling, pot-bellied plaguebearer with a cyclopean face and protruding horn. It bared razor teeth in an inane grin even as its rusted blade shattered on the runesuit beneath her layers of courtly attire. The psychically-charged armour pulsed with silver light in the other-realm of Nurgle's garden, just as the Sword of Sorrows seemed as much a blade of keening despair as a physical object. She cleaved away the plaguebearer's arm. More ichor spewed, splashing thickly to the mouldering leaves that covered the ground.

Yvraine finished it off with another cut, severing neck and shoulder with a single blow.

Ahead she could see her goal swirling through the canopy of decaying foliage and twisted branches of a dismal forest. The shimmer of the portal ebbed, becoming a little fainter with every heartbeat, the link back to the webway succumbing to the inevitable erosion of Nurgle's power. If it closed...

She did not think any further along those lines. It was impossible to countenance failure. She had been anointed as the emissary of a god, her purpose was far higher than any mortal battle.

Beside her, clad in archaic crimson armour, the Visarch was a blur of constant motion. The corroded blades of Nurgle's tallymen cut swirls through the fly swarm around him but not once did their attacks connect with the superlative warrior, each sword blow parting nothing but small furry bodies and pestilent air. His own blade, legendary cronesword *Asu-var* – Sword of Silent Screams – danced as light as a feather on a breeze, decapitating and dismembering without effort.

Once, he had burned with the fury of Khaine, but no longer. His righteous hatred and rage had been beaten into a far deadlier weapon, his soul taken from the grasp of the Bloody-Handed One to serve Ynnead. He saw everything with crystal clarity, having passed through the inferno of anger into the placid waters beyond.

Like the mistress he had sworn to protect, the Visarch paid no heed to his surroundings other than as it impeded their progress. Coming beneath the trees that surrounded their escape route, he stepped over roots that grasped at his ankles and swayed beneath creepers that flicked like serpent tongues to entangle his arms. Each time Asu-var licked out, it touched not only the immortal body of a daemon but severed the questing tendrils of Nurgle's trees. He ignored the scrape and flutter of leaves on his helm, striking and flailing like lank corpse-fingers on the curves of his armour.

'Any who cannot keep up, we leave,' he told the armoured warriors around him – the Visarch's guard, known as the Coiled Blade. Incubi had been their title in the Dark City, renowned as terror-inspiring and incorruptible mercenaries. What bargain the Visarch had struck with them was not known to any outside their group, but they fought as hard in the service of Yvraine as they had for any master of the kabals. They still bore their *klaives*, double-handed blades that could shear a foe in half with a single well-timed blow, whether mortal or not.

As the Visarch's retainers fought with him, so Yvraine's stayed close to her. Alongside the Coiled Blade at the heart of the Ynnari force were the oldest converts to the cause of the Seventh Way. Lightly clad, lithe and athletic, the Bloodbrides had been Yvraine's sisters in bloodshed since her time in the Crucibael arena of Commorragh. They fought now as they did then – gladiatrices possessed of devastating speed and faultless teamwork, their weapons perfectly complementing each other as they ensnared, slashed and sliced their way into the press of plaguebearers and slithering daemons.

Together with the Coiled Blade they were known as the soulbound, the fierce heart of Yvraine's host.

Beyond this knot of warriors the other Ynnari fought through the daemoniac host, a slender blade of warriors that pierced the undulating mob of lesser daemons and slathering beasts spawned from the formless despair and quashed hopes of mortals. Those that had accompanied Yvraine into the immortal Garden of Nurgle hailed originally from the dark city of Commorragh. Raised without spirit stones, their souls empty but for that which they stole from others, the former wyches and kabalites projected less presence in the Realm of Chaos than their kin of the craftworlds.

Their ancient ties to their kabals and wych cults had been severed, replaced by service to the Opener of the Seventh Way and her god. Many still fought with splinter rifle and serrated blade, the trappings of their former allegiance masked by fresh colours – armour and helms of deep red, blazoned with runes of Ynnead, and decorations of black and white.

And then there were the Harlequins. Among the dreary browns and greens of the decaying lands, the bright suits, gleaming power blades and kaleidoscope holofields of the Harlequins were stark. They moved lightly across the muddied ground and danced between the boles of the trees, laughing and delighting in the running fight with the plaguebearers.

The Visarch was not sure what the followers of the Laughing God sought in return for their aid to Ynnead's chosen, and he did not ask lest the offer be revoked. Likely it was simply the chance to strike back at the hated Dark Powers. If Yvraine succeeded in her ultimate goal of uniting the croneswords and wakening Ynnead, the Great Enemy would be slain and the Harlequins freed as much as any other aeldari.


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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2019.

This eBook edition published in 2019 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Kevin Chin.

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ISBN: 978-1-78999-757-6

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