WARHAMMER 40,000



GATHERING STORM

FRACTURE OF BIEL-TAN



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FRACTURE OF BIEL-TAN

BOOK TWO OF THE GATHERING STORM

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

YNNARI

Yvraine
Emissary of Ynnead

The Yncarne
Avatar of Ynnead

The Visarch
Sword of Ynnead

CRAFTWORLDERS

Meliniel
Autarch of Biel-Tan

Prince Yriel
High Admiral of Iyanden

Lathriel
High Farseer of Biel-Tan

Kysaduras the Anchorite
Fabled mystic

Eldrad Ulthran
High Farseer of Ulthwé

Jain Zar
Phoenix Lord of the Howling Banshees

Iyanna Arienal
Spiritseer of Iyanden

DRUKHARI

Asdrubael Vect
Supreme Overlord of Commorragh

Urien Rakarth
Master Haemonculus

Lelith Hesperax
Succubus of the Wych Cult of Strife

HARLEQUINS

Sylandri Veilwalker
Shadowseer of the Veiled Path

AGENTS OF CHAOS

The Masque
Herald of Slaanesh

Skarbrand
Bloodthirster of Khorne

Ahzek Ahriman
Arch-Sorcerer of the Thousand Sons

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AN AGE OF DOOMS TO COME

Inexorable, unstoppable, the Time of Ending tightens its stranglehold upon the twilight years of the 41st Millennium. Amongst those caught in its grip are the Eldar, a race of psychically gifted aliens that once ruled the stars. Brought low by their own pride and blind hedonism, they now skirt the precipice of oblivion. Only through the most desperate ploys can they hope to survive.

Though the Eldar long ago learned how to stave off the awful, soul-sucking attention of She Who Thirsts – known as Slaanesh in the tongues of men – they have not fully escaped the curse of the deity their hubris spawned. The Eldar of the craftworlds seek to avoid disaster through asceticism and self-control, using spirit stones and infinity circuits as a refuge from Slaanesh, whereas the Dark Eldar Commorrites, still given to the excesses that brought their race low, inflict suffering upon others in order to escape their own fate. The enigmatic Harlequins, having pledged their souls to the trickster god Cegorach, slip through Slaanesh's clawed grasp by always staying one step ahead. The Exodites, those puritans first to flee the ancient Eldar worlds, turn their backs on change, instead seeking harmony with the World Spirits of their verdant paradises.

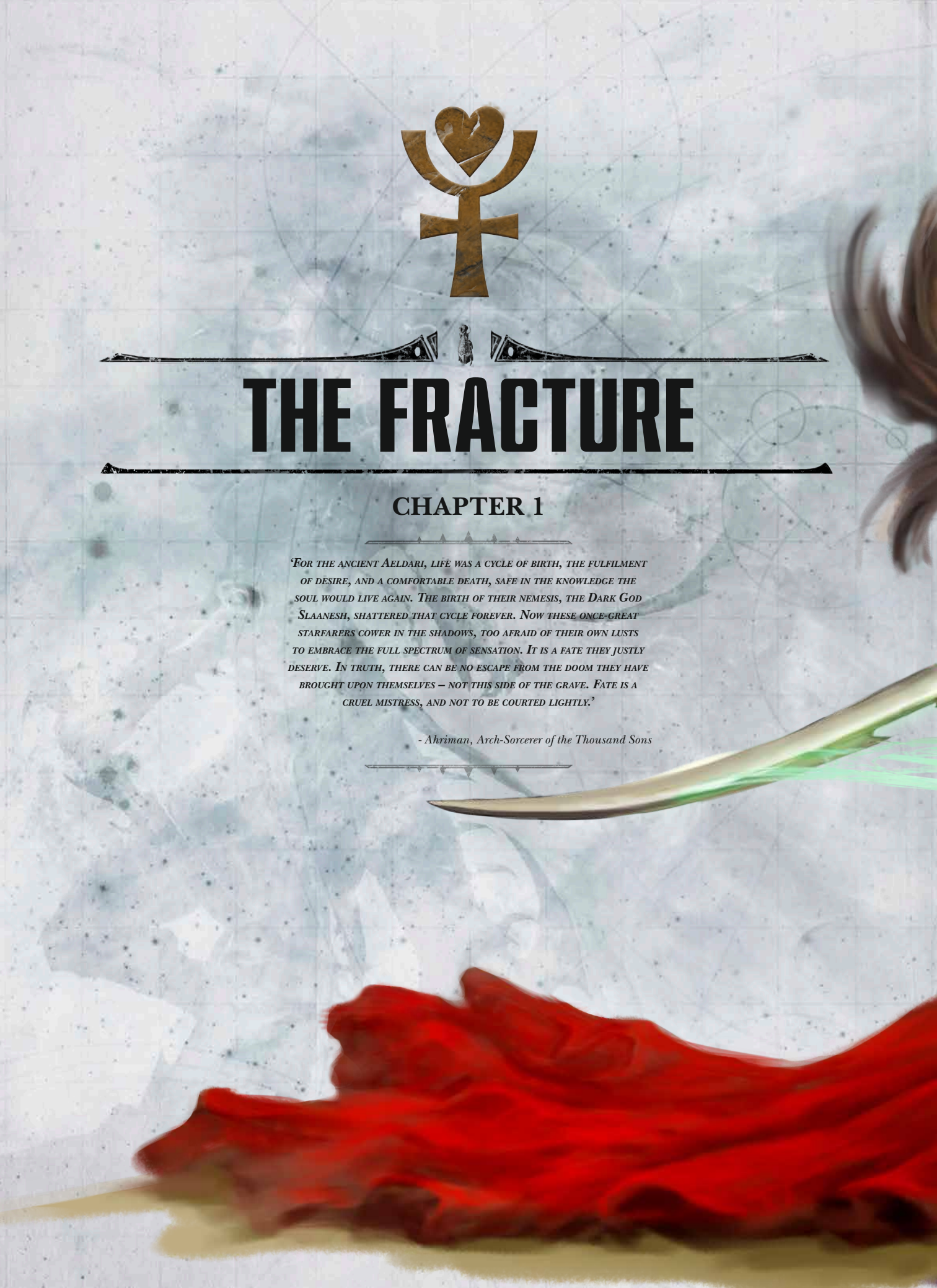
No matter the methods they use to escape the notice of the god that haunts them, all Eldar sacrifice much in the process. None can claim to be the equal of their ancient forebears, the Aeldari – they who married physical excellence with prodigious psychic ability, safe in the knowledge that upon their deaths they would rejoin the endless cycle and be reborn. There are those amongst the Eldar that seek a way back to those halcyon days. Their peers consider them dangerously deluded. To return to the glowing, incandescent existence of aeons past is to attract Slaanesh's gaze, and hence court the worst kind of disaster.

Some Eldar refuse to abandon the glorious dream of building the ancient empire anew, or at least burning bright before the end. First amongst these ambitious few is Eldrad Ulthran, the High Farseer of Craftworld Ulthwé. This arch-manipulator has been plucking at the strings of fate since before the dawn of the Imperium of Man. His prescience is like a diamond blade, sharpened by the intensity of his conviction. By weaving the tangled skeins of destiny, the Farseer guides his people to the most favourable of futures.

Eldrad has long perceived a nascent presence in the infinity circuits of the craftworlds, a distant heartbeat that pulses slow and steady behind the thrum of lost energies. It is comprised not of one life sign, but hundreds of billions – the sum total of every dead Eldar's soul across the galaxy. Though individually these echoes are near insignificant, together they form something so strong that – if it were brought to wakefulness – it could prove potent enough to overcome the Eldar curse entirely. This is Ynnead, the slumbering God of the Dead. The prophecies of the fabled seer Kysaduras tell that when every Eldar has passed from mortal existence, Ynnead will rise up and defeat Slaanesh forever more.

It was Eldrad Ulthran who put into motion a plan to bring forth Ynnead, a ploy of such conceited ambition it could buckle the fabric of space and time. Enlisting the aid of the Harlequin Masque of the Midnight Sorrow, he stole away the fossilised crystal statues of long-dead Farseers from their craftworlds and gathered them upon Coheria, a moon covered in sands of psychoactive crystal. With his crystal council acting as a hyperspatial link to each craftworld, Eldrad channelled the spirits of the infinity circuits onto Coheria. This was to produce a flare of psychic activity bright enough to wake even Ynnead, but the intervention of the xenos-hunting Deathwatch shattered Eldrad's plan at the last. Though Ynnead stirred in his slumber, he did not fully awaken – not yet, at least.





THE FRACTURE

CHAPTER 1

'For the ancient Aeldari, life was a cycle of birth, the fulfilment of desire, and a comfortable death, safe in the knowledge the soul would live again. The birth of their nemesis, the Dark God Slaanesh, shattered that cycle forever. Now these once-great starfarers cower in the shadows, too afraid of their own lusts to embrace the full spectrum of sensation. It is a fate they justly deserve. In truth, there can be no escape from the doom they have brought upon themselves – not this side of the grave. Fate is a cruel mistress, and not to be courted lightly.'

- Ahriman, Arch-Sorcerer of the Thousand Sons



BLADES OF COMMORRAGH

Screams filled the air, some of agony, some of ecstasy. Within the confines of the Crucibael arena, the Dark City's elite had gathered in great number to witness the finest spectacle that the Cult of Strife could muster.

The Commorrite attendees of the mile-wide arena had paid handsomely for the privilege of being allowed through its statue-framed portals. Some had ceded large portions of their territory to secure their seats; others had handed over thousands of slaves. Still more had performed lethal errands on behalf of the arena's owners, or committed even darker atrocities to secure a few hours of precious attendance. It was worth every sacrifice, for they were there not merely to be entertained, but to feast.

The Dark Eldar take their sustenance from suffering. Their souls, long ago condemned by the coming of She Who Thirsts, are constantly drained away, ever so slowly but appreciably nonetheless. Only by witnessing the pain of others can they stave off the aching void that claims their spirits, and the older a Dark Eldar soul becomes, the more grievous the atrocities needed to sustain it.

Because of this unique blend of sadism and parasitism, the arenas in Commorragh's heartlands combine the role of twisted circus and gluttonous feast. The spectacles mounted there are increasingly outlandish; a seemingly endless supply of enslaved warriors and champions of the lesser races are hacked to pieces each night for the edification of the thirsting crowd. In the most prestigious arenas, the death toll rises ever higher as the Wych Cults strive to outdo each other in skill and imagination. Through such loathsome displays, the wealthiest Commorrites are reinvigorated – for a time, at least.

The greatest of all Commorragh's arenas is the Crucibael, domain of the Wych Cult of Strife and sovereign territory of Her Excellence, Lelith Hesperax. This site has played host to countless legendary figures, even being treated to the consummate blade work of the Phoenix Lord Jain Zar, first of the Howling Banshees. With a capacity of well over a million, the nightly spectaculars staged there are stunning in their magnitude and lucrative beyond measure. No small amount of this tithe is given unto Lelith herself, for the Queen of Knives has ruled here for longer than even the longest-lived of her Succubi rivals remember. She feeds on countless souls every night, and would do anything to preserve her beauty.

Since the Cult of Strife's realspace raid upon the world of Valedor, the Crucibael has cultivated some very highly prized battle-fodder indeed. Once known as Dûriel, the planet Valedor had been corrupted by the infestations of Imperial culture. It was driven to the brink of disaster by not one, but two Tyranid hive fleets, and finally tipped into oblivion by an alliance of craftworlders and Dark Eldar using the doomsday device known as the Fireheart. Before Valedor met its fiery end, the Wych Cult of Strife captured whole swarms of Tyranids, later interbreeding them to enliven their arenas.



It was that ravenous brood that Lelith Hesperax unleashed from her stasis prisons on what became known as the Night of Revelations. Even though the Tyranids were famous for being deadly in the extreme, utterly alien and all but impervious to pain, they were not the only attraction that had drawn so large a crowd that night.

There was one amongst the Succubi who had risen from the gutter to high favour under the patronage of the aristocratic Lady Malys. So far had this gladiatrix's fame spread that even a troupe of Harlequins had come to see her and her Bloodbrides fight. Some had touted her as fit to challenge Lelith Hesperax in personal combat. This claim was usually a death sentence for even the most skilled warrior, for Lady Hesperax was so immensely gifted in the art of combat that those who faced her usually died in seconds. Yet there was something special about this fashionable new challenger.

Known in Commorragh as the Daughter of Shades, as Amharoc to the corsairs that once called her mistress, and as Yvraine to the craftworlders that once called her kin, this tall and regal Succubus was a favourite in certain wealthy circles. She was not a true Commorrite, and hence was interestingly controversial, famed for her lightning transformations from stately elegance to a whirlwind of violence. When roused to anger, she would shuck off her courtly regalia to slash open the throats of those who had earned her ire. This gory retribution had happened upon the bridge of the corsair flagship *Lanathrialle*, within the trophy galleries of the Archon Abrahak, and even on the Seer's Bridge of Biel-Tan. Yvraine's mercurial temperament had endeared her to those who respected decisive violence – in essence, the vast majority of the Dark City's inhabitants.

The night Yvraine met Lelith in single combat, the Crucibael had already bared witness to several violent displays. An elite band of Sslyth, the serpentine mercenaries popular in the courts of Dark Eldar society, had shot, gouged and poisoned their way through a troop of Donorian Clawed Fiends amongst a constant barrage of whirring grav-blades. Only the gnarled patrician Sassarassen had survived the process. Three Covens of Haemonculi had then showcased their latest creations, sending their blank-faced horrors against the most agile gladiatrixes in classic pairings of beauty versus beast. Next, a battered combat squad of Space Marines in full power armour had been released from their vex-prisons to fight amongst the carnage. Though the Adeptus Astartes had been given only knives with which to fight, they survived a full three minutes, killing thirteen Wyches before the glaives of swooping Hellions cut them apart. By the evening's climactic finale, the arena was filled with the baying of a crowd that had started the evening feigning nonchalance.

The Tyranids had been released, an alchemical blend of specimens from Hive Fleets Kraken and Leviathan cloned at great cost in the laboratories of the Haemonculi. They darted from hidden tunnels to rampage across the bloody sands. The largest of their number, a blade-limbed Hive Tyrant, came straight for Yvraine with its guard-beasts at its flank. She cast her gossamer skirts aside to reveal a skin-tight wychsuit as her Bloodbride acolytes fanned out around her. Darting in, Yvraine killed three of the creature's hulking escorts in as many seconds – her huskblade whipped in and out, driven with a fencer's precision under the exoskeletons of the creatures to turn them into explosions of scattering ash. The Hive Tyrant stormed in, bladed cranium lowered and scything limbs stabbing. Yvraine bowed as if to a respected opponent before leaping, planting a foot upon one of the creature's sickle-limbs, and springing over its head in a somersault. She landed beyond it, flicking up a fallen Wych's blade with her foot and hook-kicking it into the brain-like sac that protruded over the nape of the Tyranid's neck.

The creature shrieked an alien war cry, spinning with a speed that belied its immense size before storming forward once more. Yvraine ran to meet its charge, sliding underneath the beast at the last moment and stabbing her huskblade up into its midsection. The desiccating curse of the blade went to work, and the Hive Tyrant crumbled away from the groin upwards. Reduced to scattering beige dust, it blew in the wind to land with titillating foulness upon the tongues of the spectators. The roar of approval was so loud it brought the attention of a new foe.

Slashing, maiming and decapitating came Lady Hesperax, the doyenne of the arenas. She danced through the carnage towards Yvraine, a deadly nonchalance in every fresh kill. The crowd sat bolt upright in their seats, some craning forward, others standing with expressions of rapt glee. Yvraine was preoccupied, duelling with a whip-fast Lictor that had crept from a mound of mangled bodies. She was unable to disengage without risking entanglement in the creature's lashing hooks.

Lelith pirouetted between the two combatants, cutting the front half of the Lictor's distended face from its head in a spray of squirting tentacles even as she thrust a blow towards her would-be rival's heart. Yvraine parried the blow, but only just. She stepped back as she did so, putting some space between her and the whirling dervish that even now took the Tyranid's head with a series of slashing blows. Lelith turned to Yvraine and sashayed forward, a contemptuous smile on her lips as she idly flipped a dagger high. Yvraine waved her Bloodbrides back, springing forward before Lelith could catch the blade. She headed right into a riposte, and barely turned it aside.

Back and forth the darting combatants weaved, their blades moving with a precision and economy of effort that was enrapturing for the Dark Eldar – even the Harlequins in the audience stood agog at the sight. Lelith fought with a cold and efficient detachment; she was the more skilled of the two, and both the duellists knew it. Conversely, Yvraine was fired by a focussed fury; her anger gave her blows surety and strength.



On went the fight, faster and faster, a blur of thrusts and parries, flips and feints, pushes, dodges and kicks. Now and then an artful slap or jab into a nerve cluster showed that Lelith was playing with her opponent. Many felt their hearts sink as the close match they had hoped for was revealed as a sham – and then Yvraine's knife slashed across Lelith's forearm.

The crowd screamed in approval, but as with much of Dark Eldar society, this too was duplicity. Lady Hesperax had purposefully left an opening and allowed her adversary's blade to land in order to draw the audience further in. Lelith was in no hurry to end the duel, for it would not do to disappoint her patron, Asdrubael Vect. The Supreme Overlord was watching from his pyramidal fortress floating high above, gracing the arena with a portion of his attention.

The death shriek of a Tyranid giant echoed around the gladiatorial field. Reading her opponent's next blow, Lelith spared a proprietary glance to the wider battle. In a flash, Yvraine reversed her thrust and landed a hard punch right in her adversary's stomach. Lelith took two involuntary steps back, her eyes wide and her superior smile souring into a grimace of anger. The duel stepped up in speed and intensity once more, the chime of dagger upon huskblade and bladefan upon knife ringing loud. Yvraine soon found herself wrong footed, and Lelith stamped hard on her instep, the humiliation of the strike bringing her anger to the boil.

Lady Hesperax gave ground as Yvraine rained blows upon her, slowly drawing her adversary towards a pile of twitching Tyranid corpses. Nimble as a cat, Lelith danced from corpse to corpse to gain the high ground. Yvraine climbed the corpse-pile, her anger burning away all caution. Then the fallen Lictor she had duelled earlier spasmed, throwing her off balance. Lelith leapt, and punched a dagger through her foe's sternum.

Judging the irony of Yvraine's undoing a pleasing end to the dance, Lelith vaulted away in search of fresh prey. Yvraine stumbled but did not fall, hiding the deep wound in her chest with her opened bladefan – to show weakness would be to die.

It was her blood that betrayed her. Though she fought on, hacking a path through a stampede of Hormagaunts and leaving clouds of flesh-dust in her wake, a slick of gore soon painted her abdomen and thighs. The sight of the blood, and the occasional falter in Yvraine's guard, drew a mob of opportunistic Hellions from above. The gladiatrix had no intention of falling to such low-life scum. She picked up a fallen splinter pistol and sent three of the Hellions to an agonising death in as many seconds, driving the rest off in a chorus of shrieks. But the youthful predators were not the only enemies drawn by Yvraine's spilt life-blood.

Stalking towards Yvraine came a stick-thin, elegant warrior with long needles in her hands. Her cadaverous body was bound up in a complex net of black silk, the icon of the long-dead crone goddess Morai-Heg emblazoned on her forehead. With a jolt of shock and contempt, Yvraine realised she had seen that ceremonial garb before, in the statue gardens of her native Biel-Tan. Her new challenger wore the raiment of an ancient priestess from before the Eldar empire had fallen.

The needles of the crone-priestess darted out, and for a few seconds, Yvraine was forced onto the defensive. It was as if she were being assailed by the rapiers of two master fencers at once – small wonder this warrior had earned a place in the arena. On any other night, Yvraine could have outclassed the priestess without breaking a sweat. But she was sorely wounded. Dismay took hold within her as she felt her strength draining away, her every blow weaker than the last.

One of the twin needles pierced Yvraine at the wrist, forcing her to drop her bladefan. She stepped in and viciously backhanded the priestess, intending to force her back. It was like striking marble. Her foe's other razored needle whipped in, slicing through Yvraine's other wrist entirely and sending her severed hand, still clutching her huskblade, tumbling into the sands. In desperation, Yvraine lunged,

A perfect holographic replica of the Crucibael shimmered in microcosm within the misty viewing hall of Vect's floating fortress. The tiny doppelganger duellists were no larger than the overlord's manicured fingers, yet the sensations of their agony and bliss were enhanced tenfold by spiral-etched soul relays that ringed the hall's misty vaults. In the midst of the spectacle was Vect himself, a giant amongst pitiful insects. Nearby hovered a creature from a madman's nightmare, the evil made flesh known as Urien Rakarth. The two figures loomed over the arena as gods, the holograms locked in their blade-dance below empowering them with every lethal tribute.

'This is...hhn...quite the...hhn...spectacle,' said Rakarth, his ragged lips taut.

'She is quite interesting, this Yvraine,' agreed Vect, 'and apparently one to watch.'

A rain of diamonds shimmered in the mist in the viewing hall's corners. They coalesced into a female Harlequin in a mirrored mask. 'I spoke only the truth,' said the newcomer. 'She must fall, the better to rise. The Spectre's Echo would not lie.'

'If it is Inriam's Spectre you speak of, Veilwalker,' said Vect, 'he died upon Coheria.'

'And by doing so, joined not with Cegorach, but the Whispering God.'

'Ynnead is a myth,' shrugged Vect. 'Nothing more. Speak no more to me of your delusions. What fool would plan to defeat their enemy by dying forever themselves?'

Rakarth's grin became a pursing of flayed lips. He twitched a finger. In the distance, an Acothyst skittered away. Nearby, one of the silent Incubi slid into the darkness.

'Follow them both,' murmured Vect. Six shadows flowed like ink from his feet and slid soundlessly after the Commorrites as they disappeared into the depths of the pyramid.

open-mouthed, and bit deep into the priestess' face.

Howls of derision and delight mingled in the arena as Yvraine struggled in close, teeth still in her enemy's flesh. She wrapped her arms around the swordswoman's neck in a choke grip, and desperately struggled to suffocate her. Summoning the last of her strength, Yvraine squeezed. Her legs were numb, her wrists masses of hot pain, but as ever, anger and fear gave her strength. The priestess shook and spasmed, but could not break free, her struggles ebbing as her breath abandoned her. Yvraine was on the cusp too; she saw spots of black dance across her eyes, which then grew to obscure her vision entirely. Locked in a mutual death grip, the two combatants shuddered, sighed, and passed the threshold of mortality.

Then, as bright as a captive sun, a tiny star burst upwards from the sands of the arena and consumed them both. Yvraine's eyes flew open, milk-white and glowing. She screamed as she felt a new dimension of awareness blossom in her pain-addled mind, obliterating the petty concerns of her previous life. Something vast had risen from below after the crone warrior's death, pressing into Yvraine's soul with the force of a tidal wave. It would not be denied.

In her mind's eye, Yvraine saw Ynnead. He was a shooting star from a crystal moon, then a shimmering constellation, a trillion points of light that glowed in the outline of a solemn face. The God of the Dead's immense eyes fell upon her, and even though the slitted orbs were all but closed, the thin sliver of awareness that he focussed upon her was excruciating. His merest scrutiny bared her soul, and in that moment she was claimed utterly and forever as his own.

This was a legend made real, the most remote of possibilities wrought in starlight. The apparition was so bright that it seared itself into Yvraine's consciousness forever, making her blind to anything other than his glory.

Then the godly star-mirage breathed a single word – a whisper, yet deafening in its intensity.

'Daughter.'



Bow waves of mystical energy exploded outward from Yvraine's body as she was raised up by an invisible hand. Off-white, they crackled like an electromagnetic pulse across the arena's western quadrant and into the stands of the aghast spectators. Wherever they touched Eldar flesh, the energies took hold of the unfortunate individuals and withered them away, turning the audience into nothing more than a horde of blood-slicked skeletons. The largest Tyranids, slowed but not slain, stormed into the crowd in a series of bloody rampages. Trueborn marksmen opened fire with dark lances and splinter cannons as the violence escalated. Some took shots at the calamitous Succubus that had laid low their masters, but every beam and projectile was deflected from Yvraine's cruciform body. She rose higher, aglow with an aura of unearthly power. Her wounds, alight with white fire, healed over – even her left hand, severed at the wrist, was restored, formed from blinding energy that coalesced into a stylised gauntlet of ancient design.

Lelith Hesperax, leaping with mantis swiftness to catch hold of a swerving Reaver jetbike, veered away high into the night. Her smile was the glint of pearls in the gloom.

THE BANE OF COMMORRAGH

High above the carnage, Asdrubael Vect's gigantic viewing pyramid rose on a thrumming cushion of sound. The bass note of its grav-engines squirmed in the guts of all present as it headed towards the heart of the Corespur district. The tyrant of Commorragh had not ruled over his impossible domain for so long without developing a keen instinct for when to be elsewhere, and did not intend to linger. Instead, he sent his proxies to restore order. Sleek knife-craft peeled away from the titanic fuselage of Vect's pyramid, veering silently towards the arena's heart.

Some sixth sense woke Yvraine from her deathly apotheosis. The ground quaked beneath her feet as she gathered her wits. Though she did not realise it, the metaphysical explosion centred around her had a far graver effect on the Dark City than merely destroying part of the Crucibael. Her surviving Bloodbrides ran to join her as the crackling white energies of her transformation had dispersed. Nearby, armed warriors vaulted over the arena's bladed walls. They were heading directly for the reborn Succubus, guns and voices raised as they took their chance to pounce.

Instinct took over. Quick as a snake, Yvraine leaned out of the path of a volley of poison-tipped needles and cartwheeled one-handed over a searing dark lance beam. She vaulted into the shadow of a lumbering Tyrannofex sending swarms of flesh-eating beetle-creatures into the crowd; the immense creature's iron-hard bulk provided a better defensive position than any of the arena's elegantly appointed balustrades. Eyes darting, she forced her thoughts into focus, and braved a glance past the beast at her attackers.

It did not look good. Her assailants were Kabalite Trueborn, by their insignia, and they had whole shrines of Incubi with them. Those klaive-wielding artisans of murder preferred not to fight in the arena, seeing it as a distasteful display that could only expose their strengths and weaknesses in the long term. Tonight, they were evidently prepared to make an exception.

Yvraine was slowly becoming aware of the extreme danger she was in. Not only had she effectively slain hundreds of the Dark City's finest, she had become possessed by an eldritch force, and judging by the shuddering sands beneath her feet, shaken the entire district to its foundations. The Incubi would be the least of her worries when the Haemonculi moved in. No doubt they planned to dissect her in agonizing, drawn-out detail.

Yvraine's Bloodbrides ran in zigzagging, bounding packs towards the oncoming Incubi, meeting the mercenaries' two-handed klaives with shardnets, razorflails and impalers. Blood flew in graceful arcs as a hurricane of blades erupted. For a while, neither side seemed to be able to gain the upper hand. The sculpted, dense metallofibres of the Incubi's armour protected them from the slashing blades of all but the nimblest Hekatarii, and the Incubi landed few blows in return, for the Bloodbrides moved with preternatural speed.

Then each shrine's Klaivex leader triggered his bloodstone. Waves of pain wracked the Bloodbrides, sending them staggering backwards. The Incubi were close enough to capitalise, their movements so smooth it was obvious that they had practiced this manoeuvre a thousand times. A score of Bloodbrides died in just a few seconds. With the Trueborn moving in to take their choice of kills, the stalemate became a slaughter.

Yvraine felt an intense pressure build up in her head, every fresh death intensifying the feeling. The incredible sensations swelling in her soul threatened to blind her, deafen her, or stun her into a coma. There was so much death, so many souls cut from their bodies, that she could not bear it. The ground itself swelled with power. Yvraine spat out six words that had arrived unbidden to her lips.

The lights of the arena, almost painfully bright so the spectators could see every nuance of the fights, dimmed to low twilight. The bright designs of the Wyches' ritual outfits were leached of all colour. Even the splashes of blood that seemed to arc in slow motion through the air were rendered near black by the sudden illusion of monochrome. Yvraine felt a great gale of pent-up energy escape her, a palpable force that left her feeling as clear-minded and eager as a youth at a rite of passage.

The gladiatrix vaulted from the cover of the Tyrannofex corpse, snatching up her huskblade from its resting place on the sands. The sword, like Yvraine herself, had been transformed. The elegant blade resonated at her touch, and as she held it aloft in her newly gauntleted hand, it was radiant with power. She whipped her head around to find the best route out, and saw a scene from a disturbing dream.

The corpses of several dozen Dark Eldar fanned out from her position, many of her Bloodbrides lying amongst scatterings of Incubi and Trueborn that had fallen dead without a single obvious wound. Yvraine felt her throat tighten at the sight, her eyes hurting with the intensity of the stark spectacle around her. The fairings and balustrades of the arena were still embattled, knots of Tyranids hacking and slicing their way into the city beyond. Yvraine shouted a quick order to her surviving Bloodbrides and ran towards the thinnest area of the crowd, huskblade glowing in her left hand as she retrieved her bladefan with her right.

Slashing, jumping, and darting left and right, Yvraine – and the two dozen Bloodbrides still by her side – broke as fast as they could for the edge of the arena. A wall of Kabalites barred her path, but as a great shout of anger forced itself from her lips, many of them were ripped from their feet as if by invisible ghosts. It was too much for their comrades. The morbid display had seemed too close to the psychic arts, strictly forbidden in Commorragh due to the likelihood of drawing the gaze of Slaanesh and hence dooming the entire city to a catastrophic dysjunction.

Few amongst them realised that dire event was already unfolding, a full-blown daemonic invasion erupting beneath their feet.



As Yvraine ran, a Hellion in the gang colours of the Ghyrebats swooped in, desperate to make a name for himself by capturing or killing the focal point of the carnage. Stepping under the youth's outstretched glaive, Yvraine flicked out her huskblade and impaled him with its tip. The young warrior fell from his skyboard, which came to a smooth halt as its rider fell apart – not into arid dust, as was usual for the huskblade's touch, but in a cascade of tiny, glowing embers.

Somehow, Yvraine heard the howl of the Hellion's soul as it departed its body. Although it dwindled, the scream did not recede altogether. The soul had not been drained, nor stolen away by the sucking pull of She Who Thirsts as with all other Dark Eldar. In an unlikely moment of contrition, Yvraine felt empathy with that dying soul. A heartbeat later, a new voice was in her head, mewling with fear.

Distracted as she was, only the sound of armoured footsteps on the sand saved Yvraine from a swift decapitation. She leaned back, an Incubus' klaive whistling less than a finger's breadth from her nose as another of the weapons came in low. With her own blade, she turned the second klaive aside and upwards, ensuring it crashed into the first hard enough to buy her some space. She levelled a solid kick to the midriff of one of the assailants and a hard elbow to the other, giving her time to recover. Yvraine snarled as she saw that six more Incubi were circling around her, and that her Bloodbrides were similarly beset.

The mercenary killers stepped in close, blades raised in ritualistic battle stances. They would attack as one, a pack of predators rather than a loose gathering of competitors like the Wych Cults. Against such disciplined strength, even a Succubus would find her life expectancy measured in seconds. Yvraine raised her aberrant new huskblade into a guard stance, and curled a finger to beckon them to their deaths – or perhaps to hers.

She saw a flash of crimson armour behind the Incubi, and two of their number were suddenly headless. Horned helms bounced away as another was halved at the waist. With a flash of inspiration, Yvraine jumped sidelong and grabbed the Ghyrebat's hovering skyboard, legs swinging out wide to kick the fourth Incubus in the head with neck-breaking force. She swung onto the delicate machine as if born to it; though she had never so much as touched a skyboard, she was suddenly familiar with every nuance. Triggering its splinter pod, she shot down a fifth Incubus just as the sixth was cut in half from neck to groin by the crimson fighter. The last two shrine-warriors backed away and ran.

Disquieted and angry, Yvraine leapt from the skyboard and pointed her blade towards the newcomer as his own fighters rallied to him. He was armed and armoured in the style of Bel-Anshoc, a genius artisan whose style Yvraine recognised from sculptures and paintings of the Eldar's long-lost past. More than that, his guard stance was familiar. She had witnessed several of his looping blows in the fight, the very same moves she had used to great effect since her days as an Aspect Warrior. This mysterious swordsman was clearly not her enemy.

With their new allies close, Yvraine and her Bloodbrides emerged triumphant from the melee at the arena's heart. Like a flowing river, the clique of warriors moved fluidly to the nearest egress portal. They avoided the skirmishes between Tyranids and Dark Eldar and instead sought the streets of the Dark City proper. Yvraine headed for Sec Maegra, for that district was a teeming sub-metropolis famous for a dizzying variety of ne'er-do-wells – sellswords of far lower repute than Incubi. There, she would find many of her old allies, from corsair princes to disfigured Wyches and other outcasts. Should she stay one step ahead of her pursuers as the Dark City reeled from the night's events, she would in theory be able to reach the docks – and with luck, enlist the corsairs of her former capital ship, *Lanathrialle*, to her cause.

The newcomer saluted, offering his sword as a group of Incubi hurried to stand at his side. The mercenaries too made the sign of the proffered blade, their swords level with the horned helms of their battle armour.

'More sellswords,' spat Yvraine. She shook her head dismissively, striding towards the grand arena's exit; if they were not here to kill her, at least they would not slow her down. The newcomer and his warriors kept pace, padding alongside her like wolves on the hunt. She glanced at their leader irritably as a group of Reavers – Vect's pets, the Flesh Wraiths, by their colours – zoomed in close.

'I do not need the protection of a male,' snarled Yvraine, leaning backward to avoid a slashing bladevane before flicking a stiletto from her bladefan into the back of the rider's neck. He hit the crystalline sands hard, limbs twisted at odd angles.

Nearby, the crimson warrior lunged, lancing his blade's tip into an oncoming Reaver's chest. The jetbike rider spiralled out of control before crashing into the arena's balustrade. The bladesman span on his heel, ducked, and thrust his greatsword upward through another Reaver as he made a pass overhead.

Yvraine frowned. 'You have copied my sword-form well,' she said.

'Quite the contrary, girl,' said the stranger. His tone had the crisp inflection of a noble house. Yvraine felt memory well up within her. Only one soul alive dared address her in that manner.

'You fight well, impostor,' said Yvraine. 'I may let you live. I will take your blade as tribute, in memory of the true Exarch Laarian.'

'Although I have sought quite another since I strode Coheria's crystal sands, this mortal blade I shall not relinquish, not yet. Look to your own sword. It is Kha-vir, *blessed by Ynnead. Just as you are blessed in turn, True Child of the Aeldari.'*

Gritting her teeth, Yvraine plunged the tip of her sword into a swerving Reaver, reducing the rider to embers. 'Ynnead? So it truly was the Whispering God who appeared to me. Who are you, to have such knowledge? Was it Lady Malys that sent you?'

'I am simply called the Visarch, for I cast aside my name long ago,' came the reply, 'but it would be very familiar to you. Yvraine of the Biel-Tani, our paths join once more.'

Yvraine's possession by the macabre god Ynnead had shaken the very fabric of the Dark City. Far away, a miscarried ritual conducted by Eldrad Ulthran on the crystal moon of Coheria had twisted Yvraine's fate – chosen by forces unknown, she had died at the exact moment of the god's ascension. This confluence of Empyrean energy and realspace flesh was so severe it led to a hyperspatial quake known in Commorragh as a dysjunction. Dozens of spires toppled and districts turned in on themselves, skyscraping statues and high towers shivered and fell apart. Millions died, but there were worse fates in store for those who still braved the streets.

Beneath Commorragh there is a sealed portal known as Khaine's Gate. This has existed for time immemorial, bound by arcane means against the Daemon hosts on the other side. Desperate to break in, these hungry fiends have ever grown louder and more insistent, so much so that Vect himself had recently ceded this once-prized territory to his rivals.

As the dysjunction shook the Dark City, the vaulted chambers around Khaine's Gate collapsed, killing the caged psychic nulls that protected it from Warp breach. The gate glowed white hot, and then, with a cracking boom, burst open. Thousands of Daemons poured through, cackling with cruel glee as they sank blades, claws and fangs into any unfortunate enough to cross their paths.

Urgent spates of conflict flowed into one another as Kabals, Wych Cults, and even the Covens of the Haemonculi found themselves attacked by Daemons of every conceivable kind. Vect and his Kabal had already made haste for safe havens long prepared in the shadowy recesses of the webway. Commorragh was truly vast; it would survive even this. Knowing the Daemons would bring disaster, he had left his rivals to suffer the brunt of the invasion. Once they had expended every resource in their struggle against the Daemon invasion, Vect would return to the Dark City and bring it to heel once more.

Yvraine's flight to Sec Maegra saw her fight through acquisitive Wracks, half-real Khymerae and even a blood-spattered cavalcade of Daemonettes, but eventually she reached the spinedock that held her allies' ship. The blade-wielding Visarch and his mercenary escort had intervened a dozen times on Yvraine's behalf, and each time their intervention had tipped the balance in the gladiatrix's favour. She had no time to share more than a few words of thanks with the warrior; for now, she was content that they both fought on the same side.

Though she did not fully comprehend it, Yvraine's fate was the fulcrum upon which the fate of trillions had turned. She had been resurrected in a form far stranger and more powerful than even that of the Haemonculi who sought her. The Daughter of Shades had been Reborn, her journey to demigodhood hastened by a profound bond forged with Ynnead upon the threshold of death. In the process, she had all but doomed the city of Commorragh to daemonic invasion.



THE DANCE OF DESTINY

With Commorragh erupting into bedlam, Yvraine joined forces with the corsairs that had once been hers to command. Their ship did not escape the spined ports unchallenged, however. None escape the Supreme Overlord without paying a high cost.

As the *Lanathrialle*'s sails caught the solar winds of Commorragh's stolen suns, a flotilla of Vect's shard-craft peeled away from the Corespur dock-spars. They came alongside Yvraine's ship as the corsair fleet of those captains she had sought in Sec Maegra shimmered on the false horizon. They were tantalizingly close, but not close enough to intervene.

A communiqué was sent, ordering the corsairs to turn Yvraine over to the Kabal of the Black Heart. The choice was stark – either try to escape and be shot to pieces in the skies above, or hand Yvraine over and risk a return to the chaos below.

The corsairs sought another path. It appeared by their progress they were heading for the arterial webway portal yawning wide over Commorragh, but that route was soon barred by Vect's nimble interceptors. Instead, as they came close to one of the minor portals through which only small frigates could pass, they steered at the harshest angle they could execute.



Though Vect's blockade destroyed many of the fleet's ships with pinpoint fire, they could not halt the momentum of its massive capital ship. The corsairs slammed the *Lanathrialle*'s prow – bridge and all – straight into the portal. The rest of the spacecraft would not even come close to fitting through, however, sticking out like a greatsword shoved into a scabbard made for a dagger. A dozen blinding explosions burst into dazzling profusion across the neck of the great flagship as it ground into the spined crescent of the webway gate. The metaphysical forces unleashed by the collision were so powerful they ravaged the *Lanathrialle* inside and out. Proud corsairs were burned alive or sent flailing from the torn sides of the flagship, tumbling into the eternal night of the Dark City to be blasted to atoms by the disintegrator fire of Vect's hunters. A moment later, the stricken corpse of the *Lanathrialle* was caught in the crossing beams of the Corespur's tractor pincers, slowly hauled from the burning webway gate to be cored, scoured of life as a lesson to those who would defy Vect.

With the Supreme Overlord's city shaking in the grip of a dysjunction, Vect wanted nothing more than to punish the perpetrator of the carnage. He watched from the observation galleries of his floating fortress, but swallowed down a scream of rage and frustration as the prow of the vast ship was drawn backward from the webway portal. It was all but intact, except for a perfectly circular hole cut in the vizier deck of the ship's elegantly tapering bridge. Vect did not need to wait for confirmation from his shadowy agents. Yvraine and her vanguard were gone, already lost in the labyrinth dimension's tunnels – as sure as the rest of the flagship's crew would soon suffer an agonising death in Rakarth's hellish dungeons.

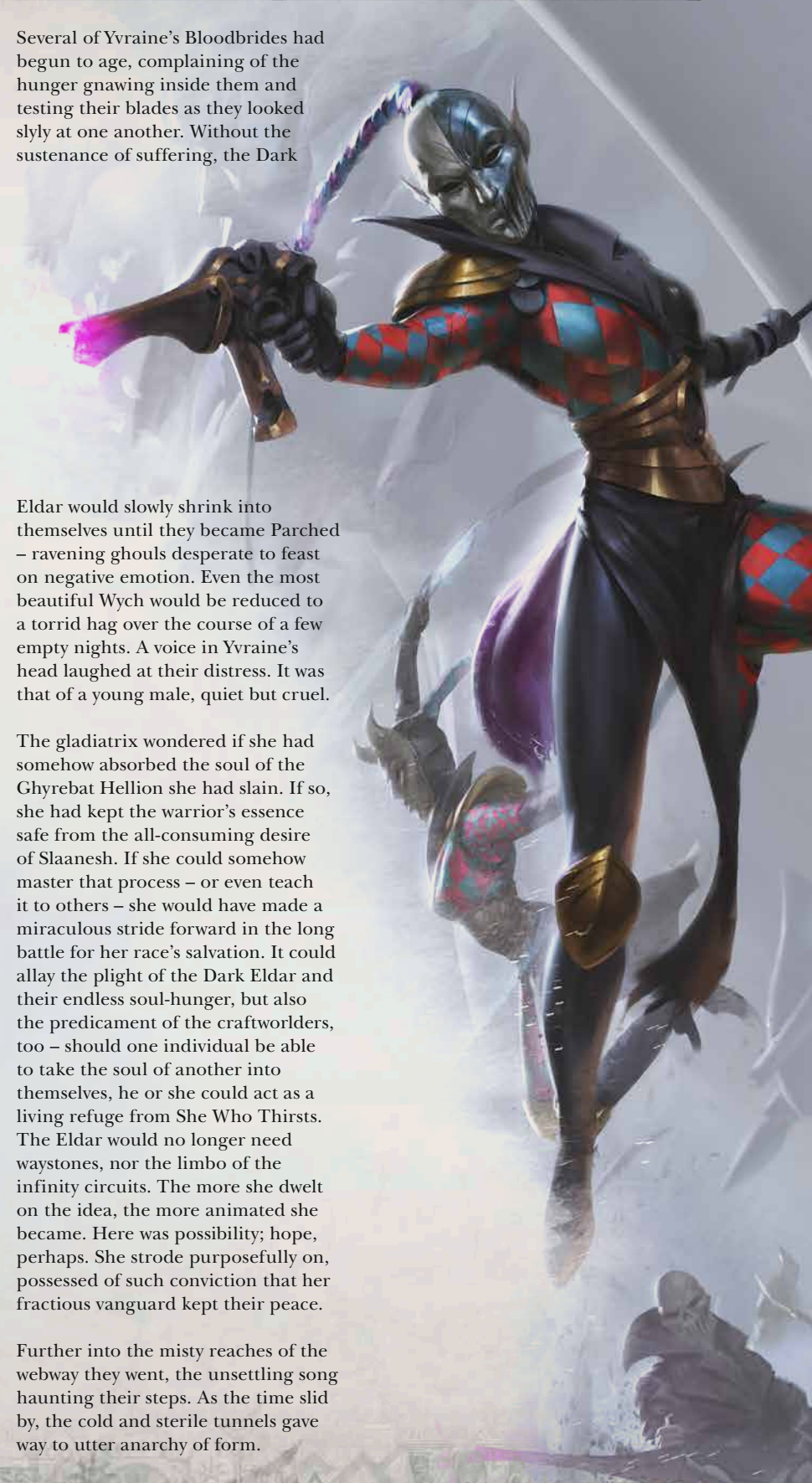
In the webway, translucent passageways stretched before Yvraine as she and her Bloodbrides darted from one vista of impossible architecture to another. The crimson stranger was close behind, his Incubi in tow. With the Daemon invasion ravaging much of Commorragh,

Vect would likely have a hundred contingencies put in motion, but would still be sending his agents to retrieve them. The sacrifice of the corsair flagship had bought them a few critical hours, but that lead would be quickly eroded if their pursuers launched a mounted search party, or used esoteric means to cut them off. They had no option but to head deeper into the webway.

The ribbed tunnels of the labyrinth dimension seemed to draw the trespassers onward, lambent pulses of light gliding alongside them with a hypnotic motion. Yvraine's vanguard, barely fifty strong, moved from wide arterial passageways to winding side passages and capillary tunnels that forced them to go in single file. The tunnels were dazzling and confusing to behold; every unnatural angle and rune-sealed door reminded the trespassers that they did not belong there. All too often they felt eyes upon them, something staring intently at their intrusion, but the source they never found. The travellers were conscious that to stray from the relative safety of the arterial passageways into the long-abandoned capillary tunnels was to invite disaster. Donorian Fiends, emotion-eating Medusae, Khymerae predators and nests of psychneuein infested those forgotten reaches.

When the strains of a bizarre, lilting song floated through the tunnels, its tone mocking and unnatural, Yvraine feared something even worse. Much of the webway had been shattered by the Fall, blasted apart by the devastating energies that had consumed the empire of old. Those broken spars had been largely destroyed by Commorrite cauterisation raids or sealed off by the rune-portals of the craftworlders, for most led to the hellish dimension of the Warp. In theory, the arterial passageways around Commorragh were safe, but since the Fall, the galactic labyrinth had been a ruined mockery of its former grandeur. Only the Laughing God Cegorach – the only one of the original Eldar pantheon to truly survive the rise of Slaanesh – knew which parts were whole, and which led to the domain of the Great Enemy.

Several of Yvraine's Bloodbrides had begun to age, complaining of the hunger gnawing inside them and testing their blades as they looked slyly at one another. Without the sustenance of suffering, the Dark Eldar would slowly shrink into themselves until they became Parched – ravening ghouls desperate to feast on negative emotion. Even the most beautiful Wych would be reduced to a torrid hag over the course of a few empty nights. A voice in Yvraine's head laughed at their distress. It was that of a young male, quiet but cruel.



The gladiatrix wondered if she had somehow absorbed the soul of the Ghyrebat Hellion she had slain. If so, she had kept the warrior's essence safe from the all-consuming desire of Slaanesh. If she could somehow master that process – or even teach it to others – she would have made a miraculous stride forward in the long battle for her race's salvation. It could allay the plight of the Dark Eldar and their endless soul-hunger, but also the predicament of the craftworlders, too – should one individual be able to take the soul of another into themselves, he or she could act as a living refuge from She Who Thirsts. The Eldar would no longer need waystones, nor the limbo of the infinity circuits. The more she dwelt on the idea, the more animated she became. Here was possibility; hope, perhaps. She strode purposefully on, possessed of such conviction that her fractious vanguard kept their peace.

Further into the misty reaches of the webway they went, the unsettling song haunting their steps. As the time slid by, the cold and sterile tunnels gave way to utter anarchy of form.

ADDENDA INQUISITORIA

ASTRAL MISSIVE
(DOOMSDAY GRADE)

<cf. OBERON SECTOR>

<CERBERAX WARS/YMGA MONOLITH>

A new Warp storm near Oberon has been codified Cerberax – appearing as a three-headed hound devouring the sky. It has occluded a trio of star systems since the Night of a Thousand Rifts. The Holy Requisitioners of Mars have brought to light the effects of the Ymga Monolith, for extending around that rune-carved monument is a perfect sphere of order untouched by Cerberax's progress across the stars. The Tech-Priests' last report describes that ancient stone as a Necron phase node of immense potency. Its glow has intensified so much it appears as a bright green oblong in the skies of nearby Atilla. In the last month, the sky-borne pyramids of the Sautekh dynasty have been sighted in the thousands over Atilla's skies, flying in perfect formation to surround the Ymga Monolith like a cage. According to the auto-visions of the Corinthe Mind-Scryers, a silent war fought between winged Daemons and Necron fighters rages in deep space every night. Furthermore, the visionaries insist that every Necron ship coming into direct contact with the Obelisk is not destroyed, but somehow duplicated.

This conflict has spilled out into settled Imperial space. Every world within fourteen hundred standard Terra-Sols has been the site of intense fighting between the Necrons of the Sautekh Dynasty and an enemy force described by the indigenous Astra Militarum as 'legions of red-skinned xenos'. I fear these latter forces are in fact the Daemons of the Blood God (cf. Tigurius). If this is the case, the inbound forces of Ultramarines and Mortifactors may be on a mission of mercy rather than recovery. They will almost certainly enact a string of Exterminatus events should they deem this swathe of space unrecoverable.

Yvraine's ragtag group ventured along spiralling paths that wound around the inside of the tunnels, with the travellers walking on the walls, on ceilings, and on stairs as insubstantial as shadow yet capable of bearing their combined weight. Twisting deltas of passageways opened and narrowed once more, some opaque and humid, others made of crystal so transparent that a cosmos of swirling clouds and distant stars could be seen stretching into the void. The truth of what lay out there, in the twilight between reality and the Warp, was so mind-boggling even an Eldar could not comprehend it. In some places the mind's eye translated the scene into an analogue of the physical galaxy writ in a dizzying profusion of colours and lights. In others, the skyscape was a collage of laughing faces, all blending and flowing one into another to form a grotesque tableau that could forever scar the memory. All the while that strange skirling song haunted their every step.

Yvraine had seen enough to know she was irrevocably lost. With no real destination in mind, she had bent her will to avoiding that which lay behind them, rather than that which was ahead. Her Bloodbrides were now openly quarrelling amongst themselves, their incendiary insults regarding each other's intimate practices giving way to spats of posturing and the rattling of blades. Epherea Naptha launched a tirade of invective concerning Vyllia the Talon's ancestry; so imaginative and surreal were Vyllia's counter-claims that even Yvraine found herself wide-eyed with amused surprise. Still, they were running out of time. With the Dark Eldar desperate to feed, it would not be long before their vicious bickering boiled over into a minor massacre.

About them, the walls of the webway glistened wetly, like the flayed flanks of some living thing. They had come to a dead end. A portal lay at the cul-de-sac's centre, the runes of warding upon its oval circumference smoking as if burned out no more than a matter of minutes ago. The skirling song sounded closer than ever, putting Yvraine's nerves on edge. There was no other way forward. She pushed through the shimmering quicksilver of the gate, her Bloodbrides at her heels.

A demented scene greeted her, an image from some insane artist's nightmare. A hundred Daemonettes were dancing and frolicking with the corpses of Dark Eldar in the colours of Vect's own Kabal. The handmaidens of She Who Thirsts waltzed and span as if at a grand ball, each holding a deceased Kabalite in a lover's embrace. They were accompanied by a maddening flautist's duet, the interweaving melodies played on the thigh bones of Eldar from before the Fall. As they danced, the Daemonettes flayed the flesh from their victims with their razored claws, each gesture a languid caress that left the corpses dripping with gore. At the heart of it all was an elegant dancer holding the masks of tragedy and comedy on a long haft – the Masque of Slaanesh, told of Yvraine's flight by her besotted Sslyth agent, the veteran Sassarassen.

Yvraine's stomach churned, the panicked screaming of the Hellion soul ringing loud in her mind. Outnumbered twice over, she was about to order the retreat when she saw a tall, stately Daemonette amongst the throng dancing ever swifter. Her spiralling pavane was somehow so entrancing Yvraine could not look away. She felt an unsettling peace settle over her, a suffocating blanket of apathy that made her eyelids droop. Around her, Bloodbrides and Incubi were slumping, sitting cross-legged, and lying on the oddly pulsing tunnel floor as they were taken by the unnatural malaise of slumber that washed over them like a wave. Vyllia the Talon gave a small cry of despair, as plaintive as that of a dying swan, before lying down in a heap. Soon they would all become corpse-puppets at a Daemonic revel.

Suddenly, with jubilant cries, troupe after troupe of Harlequin warrior-dancers vaulted down from the tunnel's ceiling, tumbling from clouds of glittering mist one after another in sprays of luminescent diamonds. Yvraine felt a jolt of pure energy wake her from her trance. She had hoped that her vanguard's presence would pique the curiosity of Cegorach's warrior-dancers sooner or later, and their intervention could not have been better timed. She raised her huskblade by way of greeting, then strode forward and took the head from the nearest Daemonette's neck.

The dancing doyenne at the heart of the Daemonette horde pirouetted faster, an expression of pure fury on her grotesque face. She sprang at unnatural speed towards the crimson Incubi nearby, her fellow Daemons crooning and shrieking in her wake. The mercenary bladesmen, the Bloodbrides, and even some of the Harlequins were caught in the grip of her deathly slumber-curse; even the Visarch had succumbed, holding his head as if in the grip of a raging migraine. Yvraine was already fighting hard against the hissing she-fiends. There was no way she could get past to aid her imperilled allies.

As the Masque of Slaanesh dashed over the slumped corpse of an Incubus in the livery of the Kabal of the Black Heart, she found her legs hooked out from under her by the fallen warrior's klaive. The Incubus rose to his feet, laughing hollowly, his form shimmering as if caught in a heat mirage. He sloughed off the illusion altogether to leave a lithe, hooded Harlequin in his place. A Solitaire, walker of the Path of the Damned.

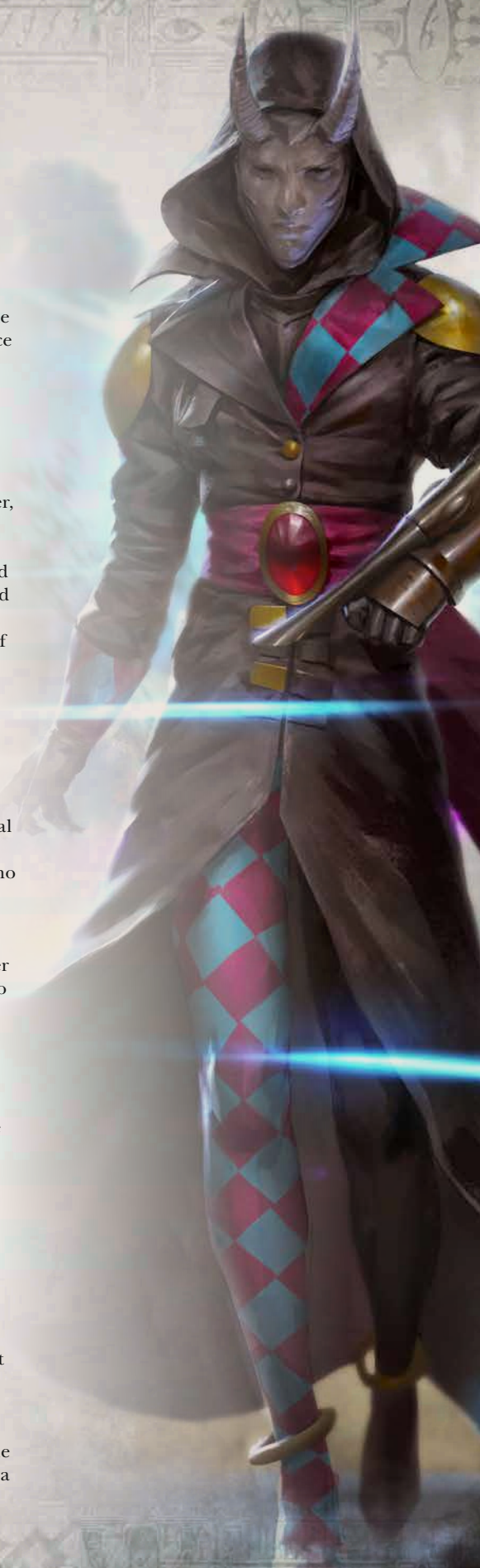
The Masque of Slaanesh gave a cry of disbelief and angst, spinning to slash a claw at the Solitaire's midriff. Her adversary was already moving, punching a monofilament wire into the Masque's neck before cartwheeling away, greatcoat billowing, to land in a sprinter's crouch. A split second later, the Harlequin launched forward like a living missile into the ranks of the Daemonettes. The Solitaire shot from victim to victim so fast that it was impossible to trace him. The blur of his passage left explosions of purple ichor with every new kill.

Yvraine and her Bloodbrides, now free of the dancer's spellbinding curse, plunged into the ranks of the angered Daemonettes with blades flashing. The fiendish handmaidens leered at the prospect of fresh meat, and charged to meet them. At first, the forces seemed evenly matched; blood was drawn on both sides. Even Yvraine took a shallow cut across the throat – it stung like fury, but did not cut deep enough to do real harm. She spoke words of power, and thin tendrils of grey mist seeped from the gladiatrix's wound. Their touch sapped the strength from the Daemonettes nearby and turned their unreal flesh a lifeless grey.

Yvraine frowned in consternation, but seeing opportunity, pressed her assault. The fiendish handmaidens found their sadistic joy replaced by panic at the sight of Yvraine's soul magic. The fugitives and their Harlequin allies were now fighting every bit as fast as the lithe, whip-thin Daemons – if not faster. Blood flew, throats were slashed, and slain Daemons dissipated in clouds of sickly pink mist. On the left flank, the Incubi were reaping bloody vengeance with their klaives; on the right, the illusory glamours of a Harlequin Shadowseer turned Daemonettes upon one another instead of their intended foes. With the Dark Eldar counter-assault on one side and the Harlequins' killing spree on the other, the Slaaneshi trap had been broken.

The Masque threw back her head and gave a horrendous scream. The sound was so loud it shattered a section of the webway wall behind her. A gale of psychic emanations roared into the tunnels, swirling into a tornado that carried the Daemonettes and their queen away and out of sight in the space of a few terrifying moments. The Eldar fought to keep their footing, embedding their blades and fingernails in the psychoplastic crystal of the tunnel's walls. The Solitaire strode through the gale as if it were no more than a summer breeze, fingers outstretched to draw a complex rune of warding over the breach. With a sigh of relief, the troupe's Shadowseer turned the ebbing gale of energy into a harmless, sparkling mist.

Yvraine and her warriors regained their composure slowly, picking themselves up and regrouping. The entire altercation had taken no more than a minute. They had lost several of their number in the fighting, but without the intervention of the Harlequins, they would almost certainly have died. Yvraine scanned the thinning mist for movement, intending to thank her enigmatic saviours. Only one of them, the Solitaire, could she see. That lone warrior had sensed something potent beyond measure in Yvraine. After a brief exchange with his fellows, he chose to remain as her guide. The others vanished into the depths of the webway to meet with a living legend, a famed warrior matriarch whose part was yet to be played.



DIRE TIDINGS FOR BIEL-TAN

The Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow were already leagues distant from Yvraine's vanguard by the time the Solitaire led the travellers on into the labyrinth. Their intended destination was deep in the realm Mankind called Ultima Segmentum, for there lay a jewel in the shattered crown of the Eldar's legacy. They made for Biel-Tan, a world-ship that seeks to unite its disparate race in what others consider a lost cause.

Craftworld Biel-Tan, whose name translates as the Rebirth of Ancient Days, is the most militant and proud of all its kind. Violently xenophobic and mistrustful of the lesser races, the vast world-ship protects its holdings with a vengeful fury. Biel-Tan casts itself as the guardian of the Maiden Worlds, those primeval planets where the Eldar Exodites live in harmony with their environments – and upon their death, join with the World Spirit of the planet itself. The bellicose people of Biel-Tan believe the Exodite worlds will be the seeds that flourish into a new order when the Eldar rise again to prominence. Many craftworlds consider the Biel-Tani delusional – the resources and manpower needed to successfully turn those paradise planets into an echo of the former empire were long ago consumed. Undeterred by these naysayers, the Biel-Tani cling onto their convictions as a wounded warrior holds tightly onto his sword.

Though few in Commorragh realised it, Biel-Tan was the original home of the one they called Daughter of Shades. Under the world-ship's glowing domes and elegant spires Yvraine was raised, nurtured, and taught the ways of the craftworlds. At first she walked the Path of the Performer, her intricate acrobatics thrilling high society as well as her fellow wanderers of the craftworld's abandoned zones. Her displays grew faster and more violent as she became more headstrong. When the Avatar of Khaine was roused within the craftworld's heart during the invasion of Gnosis Prime, she took the Path of the Warrior, becoming a Dire Avenger under the tutelage of the famously deadly Laarian Starspeaker, Exarch of the Silvered Blade shrine.

Long years slid past. The blood Yvraine shed as part of Biel-Tan's famous Swordwind should have been enough to sate even the most savage spirit, but it was not enough. Restless, she sought a deeper connection to the infinite. For a time, the Path of the Warlock gave her the esoteric understanding she craved, honing her psychic skills whilst still giving her a chance to fight in Biel-Tan's armies. The witch path too she forsook, becoming an outcast, then a famed Corsair admiral, and finally, after her hubris led to mutiny, an arena fighter in Commorragh. Yet Biel-Tan has always had a place in her heart, and vice versa. With the Solitaire she had encountered in the webway guiding her, the prodigal daughter's homecoming was close at hand.

Biel-Tan's struggling ambition was well known. In Yvraine, the Masque of the Midnight Sorrow believed

Ildraesci Dreamspear performed an elaborate bow, his arms wide. The Autarch Meliniel replied with a stylised salute. Both gestures were remarkably tense for warriors of such grace. With the Autarch were Dire Avengers, their weapons held lightly at their sides. Alongside Dreamspear, a dozen Harlequins stood in exaggerated postures of relaxation.

'Unusual, to arrive unheralded in such a fashion,' said Meliniel casually. 'Though it is perhaps the way of the Midnight Sorrow to embody the void-zephyr, taking or leaving as they please.'

'Uncommon, for an armed escort to welcome ambassadors,' said Dreamspear. 'In these dark days, we all walk shadowed paths.'

'As you say,' nodded the Autarch. 'Let us ensure they do not lead us astray. An act of provocation, such as Cegorach's theft of fair Isha's jewels, could be considered an act of open contempt.'

'Provocation? Some say Cegorach's act was one of desperation, committed in pursuance of a greater victory,' said Dreamspear.

'Of course. Though in times of war, lethal mistakes are made.'

'Let us hope they do not lead to unnecessary tragedy in the final act. Only a fool is deaf to the words of a prophet.'

'These words you speak of,' said the Autarch, turning to pinch the stem of a crystal rose and move it to catch the light, 'do they concern the God of the Dead, perchance? Lathriel believes so.'

'Indirectly, they do. They concern all of the Aeldari, past, present and future. But you, most of all,' he said. 'Your people, and you.'

'And so your troupe, known defilers of the Dome of Crystal Seers, choose to breach a latter-portal rather than obeying the unwritten codes.' The Autarch shifted, his body language speaking volumes.

'We had little choice. Ichor still dries on our blades. The children of She Who Thirsts already know of the Daughter of Shades.'

'So you risk doom to force our hand,' said the Autarch. 'You endanger only yourselves. They cannot penetrate the wards.'

'No, no,' laughed the Harlequin hollowly, his mask becoming the coal-eyed visage of Khaine's Avatar as he made the sign of the black key. 'They seek not to attack Biel-Tan directly, but via a threshold world. From there, a new tapestry of fate will unfold.'

'And have your divinations told you which world the she-Daemons intend to breach?' said the Autarch.

By way of answer, the Harlequin reached out and opened the palm of his hand. The Autarch looked down at the rune held there for a long moment before gesturing to his Exarch. 'Gather the Swordwind. Inform Lathriel. We strike at dawn.' He turned on his heel and left the audience chamber without a sound.

they had found a way to make that ambition a reality. The gladiatrix bore a peculiar aura, and the Shadowseer had marked it well. Her use of deathly powers in the battle against the Daemonettes had confirmed an eventuality foreseen by the troupe's patron, Eldrad Ulthran. The crux point of causality had been exactly where the High Farseer had said it would be, and Yvraine had manifested power from beyond the veil just as foreseen. Her safe arrival to a sympathetic audience was paramount. As Eldrad had said, the Harlequins must untangle the strands of fate that stretched before her if they were to be weaved into a greater thread – and ultimately, become a silken noose strong enough to destroy Slaanesh.

Months previous, secreted in vaults of black wraithbone within Craftworld Ulthwé, Eldrad had foreseen much of that which was coming to pass. Following the ripples in the fabric of the future that he himself had caused upon Coheria, he saw a new force rising, embodied in one called the Daughter of Shades. She alone held the key to Ynnead's ascension, and the cosmic upheaval Eldrad and Kysaduras had long predicted.

Pursuing Yvraine's thread of fate in his meditations, Eldrad deemed that there was no haven more likely to take this living phenomenon into their heartlands than Biel-Tan. Even then, Eldrad had seen the Reborn gladiatrix and the ruling castes of the craftworld bound together on an altogether deeper and more spiritual level. Another nexus point of destiny approached, the skein of fate knotted and tense around it. As he refined his divinations, Eldrad had seen the rune of the Night Maiden circled by the Fall from Grace, both in turn orbiting the heraldic rune of Biel-Tan itself. Ominously, the stylised heart that sat within the craftworld's rune had smouldered and turned black. Such was the price of progress.

The High Farseer had sent a psychic signal across the vastness of the webway, in doing so dispatching the only agents he could truly trust to work to a greater goal. So it was the Masque of the Midnight Sorrow had made haste through the webway to Biel-Tan, their intent to pave the way for Yvraine's arrival.

Though the Masque of the Midnight Sorrow had lately garnered a reputation as self-centred thieves and bearers of ill tidings, the message they brought to Biel-Tan was of such dire import it could not be ignored. The Autarch Meliniel consulted with the craftworld's High Farseer, Lathriel, even as the craftworld's aspect warrior warhost – known as the Swordwind – was mobilised for war.

Lathriel's own runic divinations, when carefully interpreted with the Harlequins' message in mind, spoke of a baleful truth. Much like Eldrad, she saw a fork in the destiny of her people, one route leading to blazing fire – the sign of the Rhana Dandra, the end of days – whilst the other to a darkened veil and the sound of a mourning bell. The implications were staggering. Perhaps the whispered notion of Ynnead's ascension could stave off the Eldar's destruction for a time, and maybe even calm the Warp storms ravaging the galaxy. The newcomer the Harlequins spoke of was central to this concept, bound tightly to the runes of the Great Enemy and Biel-Tan itself. It was likely the agents of Slaanesh too were aware of the importance of the interloper, this Daughter of Shades, and intended to seize her themselves.

Until now, the runes of warding that protected the craftworld had made the idea of a daemonic incursion the stuff of nightmares, not reality. With Empyrean tempests raging across the segmentum, however, there was a chance of a webway breach. Should a host of Warp-spawn set foot upon the craftworld, the sheer magnitude of the disaster that would follow did not bear thinking about. A full Daemon invasion could see the craftworld lying in ashes, never to recover.

The Masque of Slaanesh was well aware of this opportunity. She had learned of a route of ingress to Biel-Tan – a long-sealed webway tunnel that led from an abandoned extremity of the craftworld to the gates of the maiden world Ursulia.

ADDENDA INQUISITORIA

ASTRAL MISSIVE
(DOOMSDAY GRADE)

<cf. DAMOCLES CRUSADE>

<DAMOCLES GULF ANOMALY/
WARP STORMS ANNEX>

My Lord Inquisitor,

As you have no doubt already been informed, the Damocles Gulf was set aflame by esoteric weaponry after the reconquest of Agrellan, known to the Tau as Mu'galath Bay. The Adeptus Mechanicus, the architects of this preventative measure, committed this cosmic act of vandalism to stave off Tau incursions into the fringes of Imperial space coreward of the gulf. In all likelihood the Tau will abandon their attempts to cross that region of space entirely, and concentrate their efforts elsewhere.

Unfortunately, the flaming nebulae of the gulf have mingled with the newly formed Warp storms that have blighted the Imperium over the last few cycles. These aetheric tempests have flickered into life across a large region of space, and several have taken the fires of the Damocles Gulf into themselves to become blazing whirlpools of fire. These are not confined to the gulf — they actively emerge like ambush predators from a lair to assail the fleets of Mankind and Tau alike. Though the remote viewings of the Damoclesian Astropaths indicate the size of the phenomenon has already begun to recede, it remains extremely aggressive. Scoria Prime, Duala, and Vonsha Smyde IX have all been subject to daemonic invasion. One shred of positivity to result from this is the reported loss of a large-scale Tau expansion fleet — the entire armada was consumed by the gulf, if the information from our agents can be believed. Recommend urgent reclassification of entire region, starting with Perdita, or even Quarantine Extremis, at your discretion.

PARADISE CORRUPT

Ursulia, named after a famously beautiful maiden of myth, was a small but verdant world, famous in Eldar society for its majestic thornwoods and towering arbor cities. It had been fashioned as a true paradise by the Aeldari, but it had been twisted beyond recognition. To descend through the silver cloud banks of Ursulia's skies was to feel a great sadness of the soul. Roiling Warp storms had lashed its surface in the last few months, appearing from nowhere like a seismic eruption upon an unseen fault line. Ursulia's glorious waterfalls had been turned to swathes of crimson glass, and its rolling dales reduced to skull-strewn wastelands.

Amongst the planet's valleys was a moss-strewn henge known as the Obsidian Gate. This former webway route was permanently closed many thousands of years ago as a precautionary measure against invasion, for it led straight to Biel-Tan. The decision to seal it had since been vindicated a dozen times over, for gentle Ursulia had known many wars over the millennia. Yet it was theoretically possible that the route could be re-opened by arcane force. It was a possibility the Biel-Tani would do anything to avoid.

For the warriors of Biel-Tan, to make planetfall upon Ursulia was much like looking upon the face of a once-beautiful dilettante badly burned by some horrific twist of fate. The craftworlders did not take the loss well. Expressions had hardened to stony scowls under the hoods of those Rangers searching the twisted forests for Exodite survivors. They had found only death. In the space of time it had taken for Biel-Tan's outriders to arrive at Ursulia, the planet had already suffered beyond comprehension.

Under detailed instructions from Autarch Meliniel, the warriors of the Swordwind were en route to aerial ambush points in their Falcon and Wave Serpent skimmers. Underneath their helms, the faces of the Aspect Warriors remained cold and impassive. They had donned their war masks before leaving the craftworld, embodying the aspects of Khaine's inhumanly focussed killers. Only once the battle was over would they assume their fully emotive personas once more, allowing themselves to grieve.



Rain hammered down as the Swordwind's transports shot through the skies. The convoy of vehicles was all but invisible in their cloudstrike formation; this was common practice amongst the Biel-Tani, for they believe the blade unseen strikes truest of all. Around the grav-tanks, a tempest was brewing, the disturbing keening of the wind hinting at some unnatural energy beneath it. The tang of ozone hung heavy in the air, a sense of doom gathering like the closeness before a thunderstorm.

URSULIA

Once, the planet Ursulia was a spectacular utopia of lush vegetation and glittering waters. Since the breaking of new Warp storms across the coreward sectors of Ultima Segmentum, it has been transmuted into a nightmarish vision. Its forests have become wildernesses of sentient plant life dripping with mind-poison, jagged fungi that belch hallucinogenic gas, and mutant saurian beasts covered in eyes and mouths from snout to tail. Psychic storms still ravage the ruined Eldar settlements of the planet, bringing with them sudden squalls of ectoplasmic rain, winds that scream with banshee rage, and crackling empyric lightning. These phenomena leave utter devastation in their wake from which there can be no recovery. They taint not only the planet's landscape, but its spirit as well.



The Swordwind of Biel-Tan had sent a thousand fighters to Ursulia, yet in the heart of every warrior there was a sense they had already lost. They had watched over this hidden world for millennia, and in doing so had repelled Ork invasions, Hrud infestations, Imperial conquests and Dark Eldar raids. Against the raw power and sudden onset of a Chaos tempest, however, there was little they could do. Warp Storm Balamet had flared into baleful existence so swiftly that even the Eldar could not counter it. What was intended as a mission of rescue had become one of vengeance – and of preventing the same fate befalling Biel-Tan, should the unthinkable happen.

The Masque of Slaanesh was poised to achieve just that. Though it had cost her much to attain it, she had masterminded a full-scale daemonic invasion of Ursulia. Her intent was not to conquer the planet, but to use it as a staging post. Should she muster force enough to break through the Obsidian Gate, she would reach Biel-Tan before Yvraine, not only claiming a rich bounty of Eldar souls but also capturing or devouring the single greatest threat to Slaanesh's existence. The Daemon herald had taken great pains to arrange the conquest to come, and ensure that it had a semblance of focus – no mean feat, considering the rival forces involved. The Masque had marshalled not only her own great promenade of excess – a gathering of Daemonettes, Seekers, charioteers and half-mortal Hellflayers – but also seduced a grand battalion of Khornate Daemons into fighting for the same cause.

The rivalries between the Chaos Gods had raged across reality and the Warp for time immemorial. Though the brothers in darkness were each locked in their Great Game, and though they sought the same destructive ends more often than not, they were such bitter rivals that they held an open contempt for each other. This ire often boiled over into outright war. Slaanesh, the Master of Excess, was considered a self-indulgent, preening impostor by the Blood God Khorne. Conversely, Slaanesh saw the Blood God as an unimaginative boor with all the grace of a starving hound. Their Daemon minions harboured much the same attitudes, for in essence a Daemon is but a fragment of its Chaos God patron made manifest.

The Masque of Slaanesh was nothing if not persuasive, however, and her repertoire went far beyond the pleasures of the flesh. She knew well how to exploit the compulsions of others, for she was obsession given form. The strongest souls were often the easiest to fool – hubris and overconfidence was the downfall of champions and wise men alike. The Daemon lords of Khorne were prideful indeed. It was that flaw that the Masque sought to play upon, thereby binding them to her cause.

With the powers of Chaos ascendant and Warp tempests raging across the breadth of Mankind's realm, Daemons found moving from the Warp to the storm-wracked domains of realspace easier than ever – especially for one as adroit as the Masque. Still, there was no way she had the strength to break open the Runes of Warding that sealed the portal to Biel-Tan. She knew of but one Daemon strong enough to break the arcane defences – Skarbrand the Exile, the most terrible Bloodthirster of them all. Even then his power might not suffice.



Skarbrand was a Daemon whose arrogance was so immense that he sought to slay his own deity in single combat. He was hurled across reality as a result, broken in body and mind. All that was left of Skarbrand was rage, raw and all-consuming. Seeing in the infamous Daemon an instrument of pure brute force, the Masque had sought the Bloodthirster out, dancing her way through the Realm of Chaos to speak to him face to disfigured face.

At first, Skarbrand sought to cut the Masque to pieces with his twin axes, Slaughter and Carnage. However, the Daemonette swayed and dodged from the Bloodthirster's blows with such sublime passivity that Skarbrand stopped viewing her as a martial opponent and instead saw her as more of an inconvenience, just as a rampaging stallion might see a gadfly upon its flank. When he had all but lost interest, the Masque told her foe of her own exile, for she had been banished by her god just as Skarbrand had been banished by his. This won the raging Daemon's ear, for a time.

She spoke to him of a great wager, a contest between the Daemon hosts of Slaanesh and those of Khorne. The competition would be held upon the world of Ursulia – whosoever claimed the most Eldar lives in the name of their patron before nightfall would be proved the most powerful in the service of their respective gods.

The Daemon herald's words were expertly delivered. Her beguilements were clever enough to stoke Skarbrand's eternal rage, but not to trigger a killing spree – not yet, at least. The Greater Daemon spat, snarled and roared with contempt, for the disciples of Khorne do not idly ignore a challenge to their strength. With her greater plans set in motion, the Masque smiled from ear to ear, waltzing away to amass her followers even as the mighty Bloodthirster stomped off on his own warpath.

Within a week of that incongruous pact, the Daemon hosts of the Masque and Skarbrand trod the peaty loam of Ursulia's twisted forests. Their Warp-born followers numbered in the hundreds of thousands, for word of the wager had brought a great many champions together, each determined to outclass their god's rivals with impressive acts of slaughter.

As the Daemons burst from within the eye of Ursulia's fiercest psychic storm, the invasion had begun in earnest. The Exodites defending their world had used every weapon, trick and trap at their disposal, unleashing hordes of roaring megasaurs and mounting mass cavalry charges that saw whole households of dragon knights charge into echelons of daemonic foot soldiers. Theirs was a noble act of defiance, but ultimately it was doomed. The invading host outnumbered them twice over, and with the Masque and Skarbrand at the fore, the Exodite defenders were overwhelmed in a matter of days.

When the Swordwind of Biel-Tan arrived, the Exodites had been all but eradicated. Daemons already cavorted and guzzled hot blood amongst the twisted ruins, many counting the dead or arguing amongst themselves



as to which of their number was the deadliest. The Masque was still on the hunt, coordinating her plans with a choreographer's artistry. Her Seeker parties had located the Obsidian Gate on a ridge overlooking the Greenlush Valley not a moment too soon. She knew the Eldar well, and suspected that not only would the Exodites' craftworld cousins attack soon, but that in their haste to defend the portal, they would give her the chance she needed to break through it. It has long been said by the gossips of the Slaaneshi courts that Skarbrand's bitterness and frustration at his fall from grace lent him strength. When the Biel-Tani sought to bring him down, his mounting anger – bolstered by the eldritch power of the Warp storm that lashed Ursulia – should give him might enough to break through any barrier.

This evil contest of Daemons was about to escalate massively, for the slaughter was by no means at an end. By the time the storm abated, the death toll on both sides would have reached truly shocking heights.

'Why did you not foresee this, sister?' hissed Meliniel, jabbing a slender finger at the ghostly apparition in his Wave Serpent. 'Did the runes not show it?'

'They show a great many futures,' replied the seer, Lathriel, over the psychic link. 'Sometimes the futures change so fast even we Farseers cannot read them all.'

'I know your fallibility well. In our youth, it never carried quite so high a cost.'

'None of us saw this, brother. A psychic event of galactic magnitude has taken place. It bears down on us even now. The skein of fate is unravelling and reknitting so fast that none of us can predict it, not even the High Farseer of Ulthwé.'

'You speak of the Whispering God, sister, as do our uninvited guests. Salvation perhaps, but it comes too late. Too late for the people of Ursulia, and too late for us.'

'Though it withers my heart to admit it, yes. Biel-Tan may yet pay in blood too.'

The Wave Serpent shot over a vast jade lake. On the far-gazing hologram at the front of the passenger bay, Meliniel saw that the edges of the lake were tinged with red. 'Now,' he said, his voice distant, 'we will punish those who dare to risk our wrath.' The Autarch's tone was as clipped as an Exarch's battle stanzas. 'The time is here. Engines of Vaul to the north-west of the portal, eight leagues close. Windriders mirror north-east. Falcons form the tip of the pyramid. Aspect Warriors form the coils of the serpent. Enact.'

'We must turn Chaos upon itself, Meliniel,' said Lathriel. 'We cannot win this alone.'

'Keep your counsel, sister,' replied the Autarch. 'This is the hour of the blade.'



ASTRAL MISSIVE
(TERRA-GRADE OVERRULE)

<cf. The Black Gnaw>

<HERETICUS EXTREMIS
ACTIVID>

That which our order has long feared has finally has come to pass. A Genestealer cult has been uncovered on Terra, under the Inwit polar hive complexes. Organisms ranging from first generation Purestrains to fourth generation worker-hybrids have been shadowed, tallied and traced back to their lairs. In the last three weeks, six cluster-nests have been excised from Hive Zhaero through the combined efforts of the Adeptus Arbites and the Adeptus Custodes.

The implications are sobering. Through what can only be the most expert subterfuge, a xenos life form made it through the extensive and omni-blessed concentrics of Terra's securitals, bypassing countless checkpoints and somehow baffling the most potent of auspex scans. Task forces of the Custodian Guard and even the Officio Assassinorum have been engaged in attempts to identify the breach modus whilst a wide-scale Inquisitorial investigation attempts to burn every trace of the alien taint from the heartlands of Mankind's birthplace. The operations have been conducted under the utmost secrecy; Hive Zhaero and its environs have been quarantined under the guise of containing a necrotic flesh-plague code-named the Black Gnaw. It is a sign of the times that this unpalatable falsehood would be far more welcome a fate than the appalling truth.

DAEMONSTORM

Howling, crying, and screaming they came, blades gripped tight and snarling smiles displaying pointed teeth. The Daemon hordes of Slaanesh and Khorne scoured the twisted forests of Ursulia for more heads to claim. A cruel frenzy was upon them, their jibes and imprecations cast aside in their desperate need to prove their supremacy. With the psychic tempest raging all around, the Daemons paid little heed to the craftworld forces descending through the clouds.

Only the Masque watched the heavens from the corner of her coal-black eyes. She knew full well that Biel-Tan could not help but take the bait she had laid so carefully before them. They would attack with pitiless fury, as they always did – and in doing so, would not drive off their foes, but trigger a devastating counter-attack. Slaanesh revels in every kind of excess, especially that which involves the spilling of vital fluids; Khorne, for his part, is empowered just as much by the slaughter of his own armies as he is those of his enemies. The same could be said of his minions. Blood was blood, no matter its provenance.

The Eldar attack was sudden and devastatingly effective. At a single word from the Autarch Meliniel, the Swordwind dived from the skies, pulse lasers and plasma weapons flickering in such profusion it seemed a hail of killing light slanted down from the heavens alongside the squalls of ectoplasmic liquid. Explosions blossomed through the canopies of the forest, blasting grotesque anatomies high into the air.

Each fusillade was aimed not at the larger throngs of Warp creatures darting through the twisted foliage, but the largest and most elaborately ornamented of their number. The Swordwind had long practiced the strategy of assassination as a way to even the odds for their small but elite forces. Despite the ethereal nature of the Daemon hosts, the same strategy worked on the immortal legions of the Great Enemy. Within seconds, the Eldar had slain dozens of the heralds that had given a semblance of leadership to the Daemon hordes.

It was then that the Eldar launched a multi-faceted assault, devised by Autarch Meliniel in the space of a few intense minutes once he had ascertained the disposition of the daemonic hordes. Marshalling his troops into several warhosts, his layered attack saw the cloud-borne Eldar encircle the Daemon war bands closest to the Obsidian Gate.

First to press home the assault were the *Edruth Enfaolchú*, the Flight of Falcons. Tight squadrons of grav-tanks veered through the splashing rain to engage the Soul Grinders smashing aside corrupted foliage in their haste to close with their attackers. The Daemon engines spat a hideous amount of firepower into the skies, their harvester cannons sending dirty chain explosions into the oncoming warhost's path, but their fire was largely ineffective. The sheer speed of the surprise attack had robbed their fire of any real accuracy.

At the fore of the airborne assault came the Crimson Death. Two squadrons of Nightshade Interceptors shone like wedges of polished ruby in the sky, weaving to and fro with the grace of raptors on the hunt. One of the elegant craft was torn from the sky by a lucky shot, its wreckage spiralling knives of psychoplastic that stabbed into the jungle below. The others evaded the fusillades with barrel rolls and steep dives.

At the last moment, the scarlet craft crisscrossed one another in a series of interlocking attack runs, their bright lances stabbing pinpoint death into the ranks of the enraged Soul Grinders. The attack was intended to blind the giant Daemon engines, just as Khaine's hurled blades took the eyes from the White Wyrm, Oghanothir. In practice, their laser beams were so vicious they took the heads from most of the iron-skinned monstrosities they struck. The clanking, piston-legged advance of the war engines slowly came to a halt as their daemonic animas were violently unbound from their fleshmetal bodies and ripped away into the eldritch storm. The Crimson Death was already gone, the clouds spiralling in their wake.

Seeing their anti-air firepower snatched away, the Daemons of the greater host gave a roar of frustration so loud it caused the foliage all about to shake and shiver. Their bellows and shrieks were answered by the sizzling hisses of laser beams from the grav-tanks that descended by the dozen in the Crimson Death's wake.

With their holo-fields blending them into the cloud banks behind and a canopy of weird organic foliage covering much of the sky, Meliniel's Cloudstrike Squadrons were all but invisible. Only when the killing began did the Daemons realise the doom that was upon them. Fire Prisms sent lancing beams of killing energy into daemonic riders that were crashing through the forest atop brass-bound juggernauts. The laser shots, concentrated by exotic crystal focusing arrays, blasted great craters in the enemy host, their edges steaming with boiling daemonic remains. The brazen corpse-stuff left over from each strike bubbled away into little more than the stench of brimstone and hot brass.

Roaring down from the skies came Skarbrand himself, plummeting from the Warp into reality in a trailing ball of flame. The carnage had drawn him as surely as a sky-shark is drawn to magic in the air. With a thunderous boom he smashed through a squadron of grav-tanks, sending their mangled hulls spinning, and landed hard in the valley. Elder trees were blasted to splinters at the impact, and scarlet fires burned in his wake. Skarbrand stormed out of his impact crater, axes swinging to lay low the lesser Daemons scrambling out of the way. The giant Daemon made a choice target for the gunners of the Eldar grav-tanks. Many a blinding beam lanced into Skarbrand, but they just made him all the angrier.

As the grav-tanks hit from above, the Windrider Jetbikes of the Biel-Tan host were riding into the wide mouth of the Greenlush Valley. Taking aim at the greater host, they levelled such a fierce hurricane of razor-edged shuriken that they sliced down plant and Daemon alike. The war for Ursulia was raging once more.



The Swordwind of Biel-Tan, determined to stop the enemy in their tracks, brings the fight to the Daemonic ravagers of Ursulia.



Wielding Slaughter and Carnage as he rampages through the Eldar lines, the infamous Skarbrand is determined not to be outdone.





Under the direction of Autarch Meliniel, the Swordwind's rapid response elements drive deep into the Slaaneshi lines.

THE TEMPEST OF BLADES

The Windrider host, well used to striking their enemies at speed, made ready to peel off and attack further down the line. Against a mortal enemy, they would no doubt have proven swift enough. The Daemons of Slaanesh, however, were no normal foes. Out from the massed ranks of Daemonettes darted a flock of Seekers, long-limbed, bipedal Steeds with bejewelled riders atop them. Shrilling and hooting, the beasts ran at impossible speed alongside the racing jetbikes before they could pull away, lashing them with long, ropy tongues and pulling the Eldar from their saddles. Close behind were Seeker Chariots festooned with spinning, scything blades. Those Windriders still lying dazed on the forest floor were unceremoniously slashed to ribbons, their violated body parts strewn across the loam.

Monitoring the counter-attack from the passenger bay of his grav-craft, Autarch Meliniel ordered his elite troops into the fray. The warhost known as the Coiled Serpent, translated in the Eldar tongue as *Thiellan Aq Saim*, drove forward into the enemy flank. Its massed Wave Serpents disgorged hundreds of Aspect Warriors. Every colour and shape of Khaine's war aspect was suddenly on the attack, their armour vibrant and strong amongst the sickly hues of Ursulia's corrupted forests.

First came the Swooping Hawks, darting from blue-grey clouds so similar in hue to their armour the winged warriors seemed no more than flickers at the limit of vision. From their thigh holsters they dispensed small but powerful grenades, falling like acorns from a gale-tossed oak. They landed within the mass of Khornate Daemons at the edge of the cliff. Where they struck home, spheres of crackling white plasma appeared, each string of explosions hurling mutilated, red-skinned bodies into one another before they discorporated entirely. Lasblaster fire stabbed down to reap the tally anew. By the time the Khornate Daemon cannons had ground their way up a nearby ridge to retaliate, the Swooping Hawks were gone. In their place came Warp Spiders, materialising behind the cannon batteries without a sound. They fired tangles of monofilament wire so sharp they cut through Daemon flesh and hell-forged brass alike. Then, in a crackle of unlight, the Warp Spiders too were gone.

Down in the valley, the Slaaneshi counter-attack was fierce. A crowd of lithe Daemonettes charged the Aspect Warrior host, hissing with glee at the prospect of a rich banquet of souls. The first wave pressed towards the rematerialised Warp Spiders that had taken such a toll on the Khorne Daemons on the ridge, the Slaaneshi host screaming loudly to draw the focus of their enemies. The Aspect Warriors opened fire once more, a fusillade of monofilament wire engulfing the fiends to carve them to disturbingly bloodless chunks. But the distraction had played its part. A second war band of she-Daemons, having slunk close and climbed into a copse of spiked trees, dropped shrieking on the Warp Spiders from above. Several of the fearless Eldar were ripped apart, their severed limbs cast with abandon into the air. The rest simply vanished, triggering their Warp jump generators to reappear with a flicker of light some hundred feet distant.



The celebrating Daemonettes were left confused and wrong-footed. They hissed blame at one another as they cast about for more victims, only to be greeted by a devastating fusillade from the Dark Reapers stationed within the walkway of an arboreal palace. Reaper missiles detonated in the Daemons' midst, a chain of explosions so fierce it blew apart the iron-hard fungi of the valley even as it tore through dozens of the Daemonettes taking shelter amongst them. The thumping boom had barely faded from the valley walls before another Slaaneshi attack raced in – a wave of daemonic cavalry with Daemon chariots racing close behind.

Another squadron of Wave Serpents closed in as Meliniel reacted to this new assault by directing the mounted counter-attack known as *Fedhein Saim Zarakhain*. Whilst the Daemon cavalry sprinted on, a shrine of Dire Avengers disembarked with smooth swiftness to unleash a storm of shuriken at the Seekers racing past. Monomolecular discs slashed out by the thousand, even as the enemy cavaliers rode the lithe Steeds close. Not even the preternaturally nimble Daemons of Slaanesh could avoid a salvo delivered with such expertise. The Daemons were sliced to ribbons much as their charioteer sistren had cut apart the Windrider Guardians mere moments before, flesh flying from their bodies.

Whilst the Dire Avengers were reloading, those Seekers that made it through the hurricane of firepower darted in to lash and slice, laying high-crested warriors low. The shrine's Exarch stepped in to duel the riders at close quarters, taking the snake-fast blows of their opponents with shimmering force shields before ending the threat with thrusts of their swords and power spears. The chariots in the Seekers' wake burst through the ectoplasmic mist that was all that remained of their vanguard, blades whickering and riders hunkered down so as to avoid another shuriken assault. A trio of Wave Serpents glided smoothly from a natural boulevard, spinning to reveal their hull doors. The Fire Dragons inside stepped out and formed a line, forcing their zen-like focus into lethal accuracy as the Daemon machines careened in close. Their Exarch spoke a single word. A moment later, chariots and riders were vaporised in hissing streams of ichor, molten metal spattering and hissing from the bright orange plates of the Fire Dragons.

One lone Slaaneshi Daemon made it past the newly formed battle line to engage the Dark Reapers in the arbor behind, leaping from the burning remains of her chariot to swing from a low bough and vault into the midst of the heavy weapon team. With their cumbersome missile launchers and reinforced armour, the Dark Reapers were easy prey for the slashing, spinning Alluress. Claws darting, she claimed the lives of four Aspect Warriors before a heavy kick sent her tumbling into the fires below.

At the Obsidian Gate on the shoulders of the valley, the Daemons of Khorne had run down and decapitated every Eldar Ranger sent to keep them from the greater fight. First one, then three, then eight Bloodletter war bands charged down the forested slope towards the battle. It was an eventuality Autarch Meliniel had foreseen, and his warriors fell back with fluid grace to the transports waiting nearby. Watching from the valley's edge, the Masque hissed in frustration. She shrieked a hunt-and-retrieve order to her chariots – for her plan to work, the Eldar had to contest the henge itself.

Nearby, Skarbrand was hacking his way through a war band of Daemonettes in a ball of flame and white-hot anger. He loped past the Obsidian Gate to look with longing at the explosive carnage in the valley. The Masque had lured him there by insisting that the fighting would be fiercest outside the portal, and the brute had taken the bait. Now that ploy might come to naught, for the Eldar were falling back. Something had to be done, or the Bloodthirster was likely to dive into the fight half a mile from the location where the Masque needed him most.

In less than a minute, the Masque's chosen charioteers had returned, the mangled bodies of three fallen Warlocks laid across their yokes. The vehicles slewed to a halt as the Masque leapt nimbly atop the mossy capstone of the Obsidian Gate, and the riders tossed the psykers' corpses up to their mistress as if they were little more than straw-stuffed effigies. The Masque gave a piercing cry of delight, plucking the glowing spirit stones from the breastplate of each psyker's armour and sliding them down her throat one after another as a greedy gourmet might guzzle a dish of oysters.

The herald's grandstanding did not go unnoticed. Three squadrons of speeding grav-tanks changed direction, spearing in with their guns spitting death. The Masque danced and dodged, cackling with glee as the skimmers came in low.

Skarbrand leapt high, his axes arcing in a tremendous overhead blow. They smashed into the first grav-tank so hard it came apart in a double fireball of burning wreckage that smashed into the cliff beyond. Aspect Warriors tumbled out, stunned and broken, to land on the alien foliage below. The Daemons of Slaanesh and Khorne alike fell upon them, thrashing and slicing, desperate to claim their heads. Nearby, jetbike-riding Shining Spears charged in, opened fire and withdrew, expertly drawing the Daemons away with bait-and-switch manoeuvres.

Autarch Meliniel had watched the violation of his kin's spirits upon the Obsidian Gate with utmost horror. With the thunder of Khaine's fury in his blood, he issued another series of curt orders to his Exarchs. His wise and careful plan to draw the Daemons into his guns piecemeal was all but abandoned. Now his strategy became one of all-out assault.

In his haste to make the Daemonette herald pay for her heinous acts, the Autarch ordered his own squadron to close upon the Obsidian Gate. The leaders of the enemy armies had gathered there; not only the Slaaneshi Daemon, but a heavily scarred Bloodthirster that glowed with ruddy light every time the storm's screaming winds billowed past it. With enough concentration of force, Meliniel

reasoned, the Swordwind could deal a death blow to the enemy's cohesion and take revenge for those souls torn away from the salvation of the infinity circuit. The Daemon hordes would be far easier to stymie without direction – and perhaps even turn upon themselves, as his sister Lathriel had intimated they would.

The Autarch commanded his Sunstorm Squadrons to combine their fire, highlighting Skarbrand as their target whilst designating the Masque as the priority kill for his remaining Outcast snipers. Ranger fire spat from the high hills in response, each needle-thin burst of laser fire met with puffs of ichor from the dancing Daemonette's flesh. Glutted with soul-stuff after her dark feast, however, the Masque was proving resilient.

The Fire Prisms coming around for another attack run along the valley glowed bright, the complex laser cannons of the rear grav-tanks channelling their fire into the giant crystals of the skimmers at the fore. Beams of energy blasted out; each was so thick it could have punched through a craftworld's wraithbone superstructure, yet they were delivered with pinpoint precision. Three, four, five of the macro-beams burned into Skarbrand, their energies so bright they hurt to behold even from several leagues distant.

The Bloodthirster paused in his slaughter of the nearby Aspect Warriors, gritting his fang-like teeth as more and more energy poured into him. Glowing like a red sun, Skarbrand roared. His skin sizzled away as light poured out from his flesh. Every nearby Daemon save the Masque had been burned away by the terrible firestorm, Bloodletters and Daemonettes alike blasted into nothingness. Skarbrand staggered away, but the pitiless laser barrage followed his every step. The Greater Daemon's rage grew incandescent, stoked to the heights of apoplexy by the unwelcome thought that he might be slain so early on in the bloodshed, with a meagre skull-tally of less than a hundred to his name. Incensed, he cast his monstrous gaze around for something to kill. All he could see was the Masque, laughing cruelly at him from atop the lintel of the Obsidian Gate.

Skarbrand lashed out with all his strength, the Daemon axes Slaughter and Carnage arcing towards the Masque. At the last moment she leapt in a backwards somersault, evading the blow. The axes smashed through the lintel of the Obsidian Gate with force enough to shatter it, runes and all, to red-hot flinders.

In an instant, the long-sealed webway portal was ripped wide, a swirling tunnel of amber light stretching impossibly into the cliff face. Into the portal dived the Masque, her Daemonette hosts pouring through the gate behind her in a river of milk-white flesh.

Autarch Meliniel felt panic rise in his throat. His impassioned insistence that the Daemons would not breach that ancient webway gate now seemed the folly of a proud youth. Even as he watched, the Daemon infection of Chaos bled into the webway, no doubt already making speed for the very heart of Biel-Tan. He felt the mind's eye of his sister Lathriel play across his thoughts – seizing the opportunity, he sent a pulse of alarm through the aether towards her. Biel-Tan was in dire peril. Its protectors must be readied, for within a matter of hours, the craftworld would be invaded by its worst nemeses.

Though the Masque had accomplished her goal, the battle for Ursulia raged on. The Aspect Warriors, under orders from their Autarch, concentrated their efforts on the Obsidian Gate – the ruses they had used to draw the Daemons away from that critical location were now abandoned, and now all they could do was limit the number of Daemons that broke through into the webway beyond. Again and again they launched their assaults upon Skarbrand, but the monstrous Bloodthirster only grew more invigorated as the fires of his anger were stoked ever higher. He ripped through battle lines of Dire Avengers, burned through shimmering webs of monofilament coil, and smashed grav-tanks left and right whenever they passed within reach of his cruel axes.

Before long, though, it was not the Eldar that Skarbrand sought to slay, but the Daemons of Slaanesh. He now realised that he had been tricked into acting as the Masque's pawn, and that she had no intention of comparing kill-tallies at the end of the day's slaughter. He plunged through the Obsidian Gate into the webway beyond, intent on revenge.

The sheer unbridled mayhem that Skarbrand left in his wake drew hundreds, then thousands of Daemons towards the circle of standing stones. A horde of Bloodletters and Skullcrushers charged up towards the webway portal from the ground below, a trio of Greater Daemons storming in their midst. The steep slope gave no pause to creatures that had no notion of tiredness or exhaustion, and even though opportunistic attacks from Windriders, Aspect Warriors and grav-tanks hurled Daemons back down the cliff by the dozen, the Eldar were soon outnumbered five to one.

With a heavy heart, Autarch Meliniel realised the battle could not be won without blunting the Swordwind for decades to come. The Obsidian Gate was still in the hands of their enemies, and more and more Slaaneshi Daemons were using the cover of the fresh Khorne assault as a chance to slip into the webway unhindered.

Such a tremendous influx of Daemons could not be allowed to pass through the Obsidian Gate, or the Masque's incursion would turn from a few hundred Daemons to a mass invasion. There was only one course of action left. With a curt order, the Autarch commanded his Sunstorm Squadrons to concentrate their fire upon the Obsidian Gate itself; with its protective runes shattered by Skarbrand's mighty blow, it was vulnerable to conventional attack. One after another the macro-beams shot out. Daemons died by the score as the backwash of tremendous energies rushed outwards, the runes that had previously sealed the portal aglow once more as the stone burned from within. Then, with a titanic boom, the Obsidian Gate exploded.

The Eldar were already withdrawing, running hard to their grav-tanks and escaping away into the skies. Meliniel had ordered an immediate retreat – though the Swordwind valued the Exodite worlds highly, the craftworld itself was in dire peril. Biel-Tan was running out of time.



THE COMING OF ELDER SOULS

Upon Craftworld Biel-Tan, the air thrummed with aggression. Every soul upon the continent-sized ship had a rising need to kill. The Avatar was stirring, and the Biel-Tani felt his awakening within their veins. Meliniel's message, delivered via the psychic link he shared with his Farseer sister Lathriel, had put into motion a chain of events that had galvanised the entire craftworld. Somewhere in the webway that led from the craftworld was a host of Slaaneshi Daemons. Biel-Tan could be mere moments from invasion, not only from the Great Enemy, but also the Blood God's minions, a baying host of killers hungry for war.

Though there was only one swift pathway to Ursulia, dozens of small offshoots led from the mazes of the webway to portals upon Biel-Tan. Should any one of these gates be destroyed or corrupted, it could buckle the fabric of the world-ship itself, damning the entire structure to a slow metaphysical death. Though it seemed drastic beyond measure, and though many expressed concerns, Lathriel and the Biel-Tani Seer Council reacted to Meliniel's warning by runically sealing every webway gate upon the craftworld, save the giant portal that glowed in the darkness of space at the craftworld's stern. That vast arterial gateway, the vector through which Biel-Tan launched its mightiest invasions, was left under heavy guard; a full third of the craftworld's armada stood ready to destroy the gate, along with any daemonic force that used it as a route of ingress. Better to cauterise a gangrenous limb, said the seers, than risk losing the body entire.

When the Masque's attack came, it was far more insidious than a straightforward invasion. A band of Rangers in a sleek outrigger ship, sent through the webway by Autarch Meliniel with orders to monitor the Daemon incursion's progress at a distance, flickered into being through the stern portal and drifted down to the craftworld's docks. It made port through the irising roof of the gateway dome below. Unbeknownst to the Eldar, the Masque herself clung to the underside – Daemons need no air to breathe, nor do they feel the cold of the interstellar void, and with the Empyrean raging strong, she could exist in realspace for some time. Once past the port's armed cordon, the herald dropped from the underside of the message-ship and drifted gracefully down like a pearl diver in search of undersea treasure. Before long, the Masque had found her way inside the craftworld. Any who set eyes upon her found their darkest obsessions consuming them. Like some baleful hypnotist she bound one warrior after another into her wake. As her dance went on, the troubled expressions of those in her thrall began to twitch, then to turn to rictuses of horrid glee. The Masque caressed them with her claws, crooning an infernal summons. One by one the captured Eldar were possessed by the Daemonettes that answered the Masque's call, flesh transmuting to become that of the Daemon queen's own handmaidens.

On the eighth shattering impact, the Ursulian Runegate of Biel-Tan gave way in a roaring backdraught of psychic flame. The explosion was so loud it shook Farseer Lathriel to her core. With a tremendous crash, a heavily scarred Bloodthirster leapt from the billowing blue fires and stamped down onto the craftworld's mosaic floor. Psychoplastic shattered for half a mile in every direction. The Exiled One had broken through, a hundred red-skinned Daemons at his heels.

Farseer Lathriel felt her blood grow hot, but forced her anger to subside under her practiced calm. ++Now++, she sent, and at her psychic signal six shrines of Aspect Warriors darted from concealed positions amongst a forest of tall pillars. The leading edge of the Daemon host discorporated explosively as lasers, shuriken volleys and melta beams blasted into it. The raging daemonic giant was struck a dozen times, but the impacts only seemed to make it grow larger. It waded into the Striking Scorpions that spat death from their mandiblasters, its axes hewing them as if they were kindling.

Chiming impacts rang out from behind Lathriel like the clanging of a bell. Lathriel turned to see Biel-Tan's Avatar running towards the Daemon monstrosity, cinders trailing in its wake. It hurled the spear-like Suin Daellae *with killing force. Simultaneously, Lathriel sent a bolt of mind-killing force at the Daemon. Her attack did little more than distract the beast; the Bloodthirster turned and roared, the force of its anger and contempt knocking the Farseer from her feet.*

At that same moment, it was hit full in the chest by the Wailing Doom. Daemon flesh sizzled as the relic weapon's tip sank deep. Any creature of flesh and blood, no matter how monstrous, would have been slain in an instant, but the Bloodthirster kept fighting, axes hacking down the Howling Banshees and Striking Scorpions fighting the Daemon horde. The Avatar of Khaine ran in close, palming aside an axe blow to deliver a thunderous uppercut from its blood-drizzling gauntlet. The living statue then moved in close, ducked a wild axe swing and, grasping the embedded spear, hefted the Bloodthirster bodily from the craftworld's floor. The Greater Daemon's own weight drove it down the Suin Daellae's haft, impaling it through. Still the Bloodthirster fought on, hacking at the Avatar's iron body with its flaming axes. Each blow caused a grievous wound, but it did not fall. Flames of pure rage roared around the duelling giants. The conflagration grew so fierce it consumed them completely. The lesser Daemons rallying for a last stand around their leader were burned away to nothing, and those Aspect Warriors that did not scramble clear were turned to ashen corpses.

Lathriel ran, faster than she had ever run before, into the fight. Fighting against the heat, she hurled three runes of warding at the shattered gate to the Daemon-haunted webway beyond. The protective psychic symbols were pulled into place as if by hidden magnets, sealing the tunnel from invasion. Before beginning the arduous and soul-draining work of sealing the gate in earnest, Lathriel glanced back, hoping against hope to see the Avatar triumphant. She saw only flames, and a pool of molten iron.

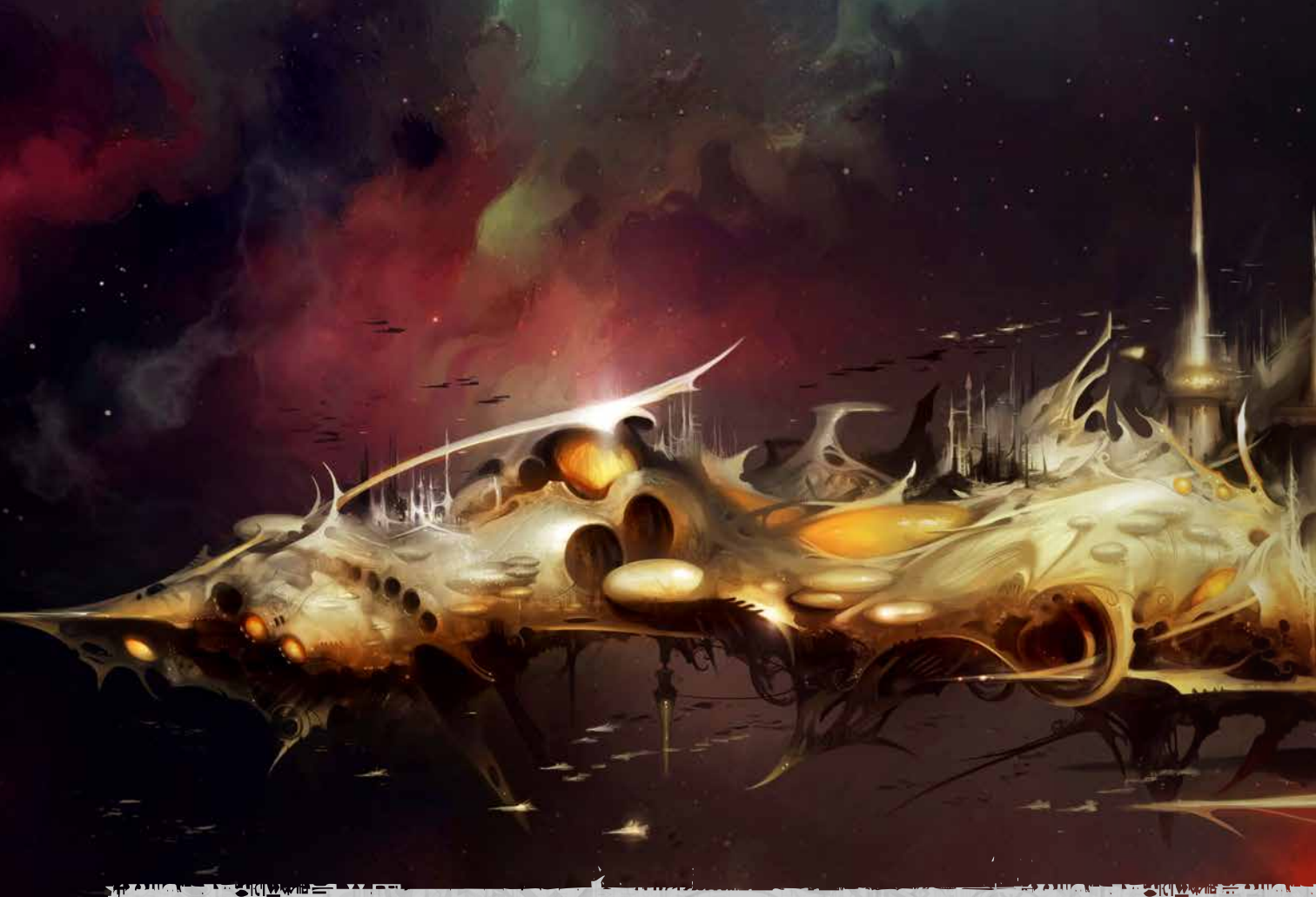
Slowly, unstoppably, the Masque's enrapturing dance took her to the very heart of the craftworld. None were able to resist her lure, for all Eldar have within them a seed of the obsessive spirit that led to Slaanesh's birth so long ago. Unhindered, she reached the iron chamber where the Avatar slumbered when the craftworld was not at war – the throne at its heart was empty, for the titanic living statue was elsewhere, already locked in battle with Skarbrand. The Masque chuckled to herself, skipped over to the great iron throne, and sat, legs folded like those of a prim maiden, to summon more of her kind.

A shrine of Howling Banshees came upon the parasitic impostor at the heart of the craftworld. Led by the Farseer H'daei after her rune-casting revealed the gruesome truth, the Aspect Warriors charged screaming into the open throne room, blades raised. The first few Howling Banshees to charge the Masque and her Daemon cohort made the mistake of meeting her gaze – and fell to her swaying dance immediately, stumbling to their knees in supplication. H'daei found her protective ghosthelm burning so hot with clashing psychic energies she was forced to take it off – one glance from the Masque, and she too fell under the Daemon's spell.

The Avatar's chamber was split by a deafening shriek. It was not the mocking cry of a Daemon, but a clear and piercing scream that grew to mind-numbing volume. A towering warrior charged into the fray, long-hafted blade whipping left and right to decapitate a Daemonette with every stride. The Masque, finding her spell ineffectual, jumped high with claws outstretched. Up came the polearm of the newcomer, fast as thought, impaling the Daemon against the iron ceiling of the throne room. Jain Zar, sent to intercept the Masque by her Harlequin allies, had come at the last.

Her intervention was too late. By digging her rune-inscribed claws into the wraithbone roots of the Avatar's throne room, the Masque had already breached the sanctity of Biel-Tan's infinity circuit, infecting it from within. Her handmaidens had followed suit, leaving their physical forms to pass into the infinity circuit in such numbers its innate defences could not repel them. Biel-Tan had been taken to the brink of disaster.





A WORLD-SHIP FRACTURED

The most integral part of any Eldar craftworld is its infinity circuit – that wraithbone core that runs like a skeleton throughout the immense structure, forming a limbo-like haven for the souls of the craftworld's dead. This is usually protected by the teleporting, psycho-crystalline creatures known as Warp spiders, yet the Daemon infestation spread by the Masque was so severe even they could not hold it at bay. The craftworld groaned like a living thing, a terrible screaming haunting the cusp of hearing as the Daemon host devoured the spirits of Biel-Tan's ancient dead.

As battles broke out between Daemon invaders and Eldar defenders, rivers of hot blood ran between the spires and colonnades of the world-ship's domes. With Meliniel's forewarning and the Phoenix Lord Jain Zar leading the counter-attack, the Daemons of Khorne and Slaanesh had been efficiently quarantined, then banished to the Warp with ruthless efficiency. There was no celebration, no voices raised in jubilation as each new section of the craftworld was declared clear. The world-ship had been infested, and the most dire consequences would likely follow.

It was into this unfolding tragedy that Yvraine and her companions arrived. Led by the Solitaire from the webway gate that Farseer Lathriel had begun to seal once more, they were held at spearpoint by a shrine of Shining Spears before being led to the craftworld's council. The newcomers were Eldar, that much was obvious, but they had with them those who wore the armour of Commorragh. In the wake of a Daemon invasion, the Biel-Tani were loath to welcome more potential enemies into their domain.

Only when a knot of Daemonettes sprinted from the shadows of a ruined theatre did the fates show their true hand. Lathriel's warriors scythed down the first wave of Daemon invaders, but the Slaaneshi creatures were fast, and hell-bent on reaching Yvraine. Many Biel-Tani fell to slashing talons and gouging blades before the Daughter of Shades stretched out her arms, her body glowing with the power of souls from beyond. She gave a great sigh, grey mist pouring from her mouth to wind around every fiend in the great chamber. There came a horrible keening, as if a thousand ghosts gave voice to their anguish at once – and when the mist had cleared, the Daemons were gone.

The resultant parley was strained, but welcome on both sides. Lathriel dimly remembered watching Yvraine dance during her childhood; she was taken aback to recognise her after the passing of so many cycles. And yet, she was unsettling now – not only in the company she kept, but in her eyes and manner of speech. There was no time to investigate further, however, for the craftworld was upon the brink of calamity.

Under Lathriel's stewardship, Yvraine and her vanguard were hurried to the Dome of Seeing. They were to take part in an emergency council.



The debate was already raging. With the Daemons defeated, the Spiritseers were doing everything in their power to siphon untainted souls from the catastrophically damaged infinity circuit and install them into wraith-constructs by way of salvation. But they were few, and the Daemon intruders many. Even as they worked, the wraithbone skeleton of the craftworld was crumbling and turning to grey ash. If this hideous metaphysical transformation continued, the craftworld itself would slowly fall apart. Something had to be done – something drastic.

When Yvraine spoke up unheralded, there was a great clamour amongst the great and the good of the craftworld. Who was she to return to Biel-Tan unannounced after forsaking their ways? Why did she bring the murderous warriors of the Dark City to their door, claiming to know the truth of their mutual destiny? The Autarchs had little time for Yvraine, no matter her pedigree. When Lathriel spoke in her defence, however, all ears turned to listen. Perhaps, said the Farseer, the returned wanderer was more than she seemed. She had banished the Daemons of Slaanesh with the same ease that another Eldar might exhale a weary sigh. Perhaps she was the Opener of the Seventh Way, as spoken of in prophecy by Kysaduras the Anchorite – nemesis of She Who Thirsts, who weaves the skeins at the dawn of the Rhana Dandra. The hush that fell over the assembled masses at Lathriel's words was intense. The atmosphere held in equal parts hatred, fear, confusion and hope. Only a few of those present dared to believe that perhaps their dying craftworld could travel that thin strand of fate that led to true rebirth.

Then came Jain Zar, her blade still dripping with ichor. Armoured boots clacking on wraithbone, she strode to the centre of the dome, and held court in a voice both clear and true.

'This one speaks with many voices. She is our salvation. Listen well.'

ADDENDA INQUISITORIA

ASTRAL MISSIVE

<DONORIAN SECTOR>

<cf. MACROFAUNA INFESTATION, ABDUCTIO MILITARUM>

The labyrinth dimension written of by Inquisitor Czevak is very real. It is believed to take the form of interstitial tunnels between realspace and the Immaterium. In the Donorian Sector, thought to be a dense convergence of these tunnels, a large area of this hyperspatial network has been forced open by the Warp storm codified Inchoate Rage. The evidence of this breach is an invasion of the giant predators known as Donorian Fiends — thousands of clawed, spined and quilled Fiends have rampaged across Donoria Prime in the last few months. A mass counter-strike was launched in response from the nearby Astra Militarum training world of Tradian Minoris — no fewer than six full regiments of Imperial Guard were despatched (331st Vitrian Dragoons, 838th to 841st Kanak Skulltakers, 122nd Savlar Chem-Dogs) to Donoria Prime to put down the infestation and seal the breach by any means necessary.

Sector Command was aware of the cost of lives that this operation might demand, but did not expect the total disappearance of all six of these regiments. When the 198th Cadian Shrinestormers made planetfall to reinforce their comrades upon Donoria Prime, the entire planet was deserted — not a sign of man nor beast was to be found, and many Imperial tanks were still idling. On further investigation, the exact same fate has occurred to Donoria Tertius and Septimus. All three planets are completely devoid of intelligent life. To date, there are no signs of that which abducted the regiments save a single playing card bearing the image of a steel serpent, found pinned by dagger to the forehead of the planetary governor.



THE FRACTURE OF BIEL-TAN

Flanked by statues of mythological heroes and with the Visarch standing silently beside her, Yvraine spoke long and well to the assembled masses. At first her voice seemed that of a wise mother giving stern guidance. As her speech continued and her passion came through, her tone changed to that of a youth caught up in the first flush of strength and determination. When challenged by a disbelieving elder, her voice changed once more, to the acid tones of a crone who had no time to suffer fools. Her presence was strong – not in the way that Jain Zar's stoic warrior soul lit a fire in the soul of every Eldar that saw her, but in the manner of storms to come; cold, close, and with the promise of destruction on the horizon.

There was only one way for the Eldar of Biel-Tan to survive the Daemon curse that the Masque had brought upon them. Be they living or dead, the Biel-Tani risked oblivion anew with every hour that slid past. She was the emissary of a deity that had never truly been born, yet whose power eclipsed the stars. She could guide them to a new future if they would allow it. All those present had heard the name that fell from her lips, yet when she spoke it, every Eldar there felt a grave-cold claw of trepidation settle upon the heart.

Ynnead had awakened.

The susurrus of voices that swelled in response to Yvraine's declaration swiftly ebbed away as Jain Zar stepped forward, her imperious gaze sweeping around the assembly. Yvraine waited until even her most strident detractors had grown silent, then continued. She spoke of the nascent god's power, and of revolutions to come. The accepted wisdom was that for Ynnead to manifest fully and defeat Slaanesh forever, every Eldar in the galaxy had to die, giving the composite god-spirit strength enough to prevail. Many nodded in agreement; that was the myth, often recounted. Yet to wait for that final fate meant for the fires of the Eldar race to gutter and die out altogether. That could not be allowed to happen. Yvraine proposed another way – the Seventh Path, which wound between the darkness and the light.

Yvraine relayed the vision she had witnessed in the Crucibael of Commorragh, and the secret knowledge that had come with it. Ynnead's sentience would be focussed upon five enchanted bones, cast across the sovereign domain of the Eldar. These took the form of swords entrusted to the agents of the Eldar gods in aeons past. Legend had it they were carved by the smith god Vaul, each fashioned from a finger of the crone goddess Morai-Heg's severed hand. Together, these blades had the power to awaken a god; if wielded in the right hands, they had dominion over life as well as death. At this, Yvraine raised Kha-vir, the Sword of Sorrows, by way of demonstration. Power shone from its elegant edge, both dark and light at the same time. There were four more such blades, said Yvraine, two of which were lost amongst the ruins of the crone worlds. Should all five be drawn and blooded together, Ynnead should have a strong enough focus in realspace to awaken fully and manifest his potential as the downfall of Slaanesh.

One of these Croneswords, *Asu-var*, the Sword of Silent Screams, lay within the heart of Craftworld Biel-Tan itself. It was that blade which Yvraine intended to claim – and in doing so, put the ailing craftworld out of its misery.

This time the uproar that greeted Yvraine's proclamation was so clamourous that no word could be made out against another. The Exarch Taralath Shadowheart darted forward, his biting blade revving, only to be knocked from his feet by the flat of Jain Zar's polearm. Others started forward, their faces masks of aggression and despair. Yvraine kept calm, but the Visarch moved to guard her, powered sword held in wordless challenge.

The time for words was over. The emissary of Ynnead closed her eyes, channelled her inner light into the blood red gauntlet that formed her left hand, and plunged a fist deep into the infected wraithbone core of the craftworld.

A breathless moment passed, and there was a thunderous boom as Yvraine pulled Asu-var from the wraithbone spine of Craftworld Biel-Tan. She drew it forth as if the irong-hard ground were no more solid than a pool of water. Then she held it aloft. Dripping psychic by-product, the greatblade burned with such fell light it seared the eye to witness it. Yvraine screamed in a mixture of triumph and pain as incredible energies seared through her. She did not let the blade fall, for to do so was to damn her race to a slow extinction. This was a key as much as a sword – one of five such keys that unlocked the last true hope, hidden long ago by the prescient goddess Morai-Heg in case the doorway to death itself needed to be flung wide.

Underfoot, the craftworld shook as if in the throes of an earthquake. High pillars split, cracked along their length, and toppled to crash amidst billowing clouds of dust into the forests below. A million departed souls cried out, released from their bondage in the infinity circuit, where the ravenous Daemons of Slaanesh roamed on their gluttonous hunt. The seismic shivers of the world-ship intensified, becoming an eruption.

'Arise!' cried Yvraine. 'Arise and live!'

Something terrible burst forth from the shattered wraithbone of the world-ship. Swathed in ectoplasm, it was a towering monstrosity of twisted bone and shimmering souls, both terrible and beautiful all at once. The gathered Biel-Tani clutched at their eyes, their hearts, their ears. They staggered and fell, clinging to the rubble of their beloved home even as it turned black and broke apart before their eyes. Amongst them stood Yvraine, glowing bright as she rose up into the air with a cry of fierce joy. The apparition before her spoke a word of deafening silence, and the void itself shook in response.

The Yncarne, godly avatar of Ynnead, had risen.



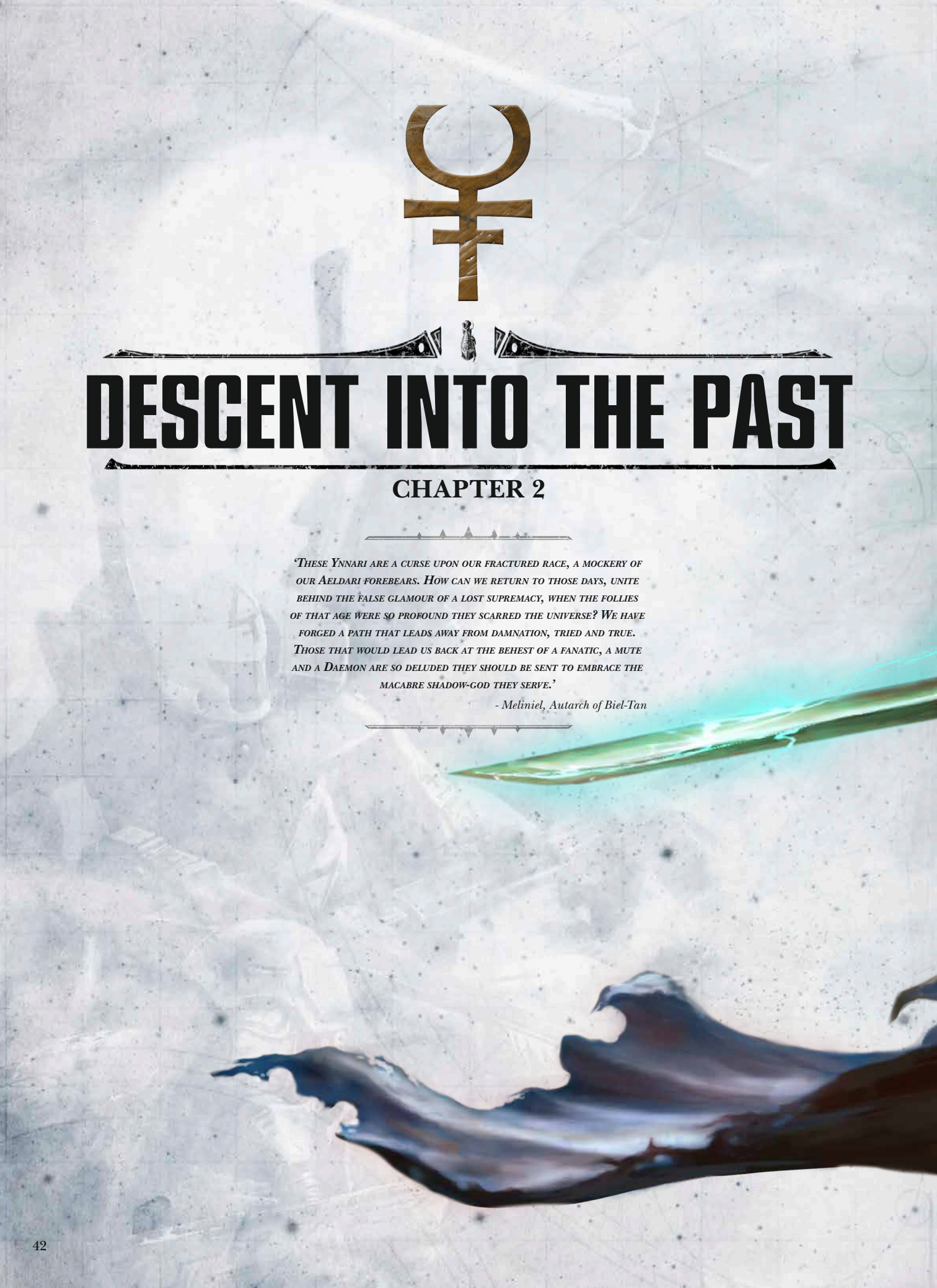


DESCENT INTO THE PAST

CHAPTER 2

'These Ynnari are a curse upon our fractured race, a mockery of our Aeldari forebears. How can we return to those days, unite behind the false glamour of a lost supremacy, when the follies of that age were so profound they scarred the universe? We have forged a path that leads away from damnation, tried and true. Those that would lead us back at the behest of a fanatic, a mute and a Daemon are so deluded they should be sent to embrace the macabre shadow-god they serve.'

- Meliniel, Autarch of Biel-Tan





THE GUARDIANS ON THE THRESHOLD

The cataclysm that Yvraine had brought unto Biel-Tan was not a sudden shattering, like that of broken crystal, but rather an eruption followed by a rippling spread, like that of a boulder dropped in a lake. By harnessing the death of the infinity circuit, the newcomers had brought into being the Yncarne, Avatar of Ynnead. In doing so, Yvraine had signalled the awakening of the Whispering God, and opened a new path for the entire Eldar race. With so many departed souls concentrated in one place, and his chosen followers gathered as one, Ynnead had many of the focal points he needed to manifest his power. Yvraine had brought to Biel-Tan the consciousness that Eldrad Ulthran had failed to summon upon Coheria – though at a high cost. For light years in every direction the Warp seethed, buckled and raged, a hundred psychic vortexes whirling through the stars at once.

The Yncarne's creation was a violent birth, and it had spread disaster near and far. The wraithbone skeleton of Biel-Tan was already rotting as a result of the daemonic invasion; rocked to its foundations by Yvraine's retrieval of the hidden sword, it was shaken apart. Whole sections of the craftworld withered, split and fell away from the central mass like petals falling from a frozen flower. The craftworld, originally built from ancient Eldar ships to be an ark of salvation, shed its constituent parts to reveal a living mega-structure shuddering in seismic upheaval.

The slow but disastrous fragmentation was not confined to the physical realm. With the infinity circuit suddenly flooded with death energy, the Daemons that had invaded it were banished utterly, repelled from its reaches by the sheer trauma of the Yncarne's manifestation. The ancestral Eldar souls who had once dwelt in that timeless limbo found themselves stranded on the brink of the abyss, with eternal darkness on one side and the seething hunger of Slaanesh on the other.

The upheaval was so profound that many Eldar cast about for revenge. The emotions of the warlike Biel-Tani had always run hot, and initial shock soon became open hostility. To some, the cause of the craftworld's demise was ascribed to a Commorrite invasion. To others, the spectre that had appeared in their midst was tainted by the energies of Chaos, perhaps even a Daemon of Slaanesh in a cruel disguise.

Were it not for the power and morbid beauty of the dread being that hovered above her, Yvraine would likely have been slain a dozen times over. Her Commorrite vanguard found itself fighting for its life more than once, but once Yvraine had entrusted the Visarch with the Sword of Silent Screams, none stood against them for long. Pockets of violence broke out wherever confusion outweighed solidarity. The spectre of kin-strife was kept from consuming the Biel-Tani only by urgent psychic messages from their Farseers. The seers worked harder than ever to save their home, and the spirits of their ancestors that dwelt within it. All the while, the void above resounded to distant laughter. The craftworld was infected; now the Biel-Tani fought for survival.

At Lathriel's command, every Eldar on the Path of the Seer took waystones from the Spectral Gardens and pressed them to stretches of naked wraithbone, beckoning the lost spirits of the dead into the safety of the psychoactive gems. Once the transfer was complete, the seers handed them reverently to jetbike-mounted couriers that bore them swiftly to Biel-Tan's ghost halls. There, the Spiritseers incorporated them into ghost warrior constructs in order to save them, for the wraithbone shells of the unliving warriors were separate from the infected material of the infinity circuit. The Eldar of that proud world-ship viewed the creation of such wraith warriors as a kind of necromancy, but they had little choice if they wanted to preserve the legacy of their ancestors. The mass installation of stranded spirits into bipedal shells was an act of soul-craft on a grand scale. Even as the craftworld broke apart, the ghost halls were emptied until thousands of wraith constructs stood upon Biel-Tan's cracking landscapes.

A strange phenomenon occurred wherever Yvraine and her allies passed through the wreckage and ruin. Following the lead of their mistress, Bloodbrides and Incubi darted, leapt and vaulted to those sections of the infinity circuit that could not be reached by the seers. They pressed empty waystones to those areas where the will o' the wisp revealed ancient souls clustered within broken wraithbone. Even though they had not the psychic mastery of the Spiritseer, the lambent lights of departed spirits seemed to flow out of the infinity circuit and pass straight into those waystones. Some of the Biel-Tani that witnessed this act saw it as soul-theft, and drew their weapons to lay low the warriors they saw as parasites in their midst. In every instance, a Harlequin interposed his blade, shaking their head solemnly by way of warning. These were the Ynnari, they said, the Reborn faithful of Ynnead – Eldar so in tune with death that long-dead ancestors would join them willingly.

Through it all, the Bonesingers of Biel-Tan practiced their uncanny art. Some resculpted the wraithbone of the shrine-craft and dome-ships that had split away from the craftworld. Others raised healing chansons and plainsongs that saw the ash-black skeleton of Biel-Tan slowly reform, a cadaverous shadow of its former incarnation, but a mighty world-ship nonetheless. It would take decades, if not centuries, for the world-ship to be rebuilt. The craftworld's solar sails were eaten away, and at its rear, the webway gate flickered and pulsed as if in pain. Warp storms raged in a vast corona around the craftworld as the psychic shock wave of the Yncarne's birth bled out into the universe.

Yvraine felt uncertainty settle upon her for the first time in months, her absolute faith wavering. With the fabric of the material realm torn to shreds around the Ynnari, there would be no escape from the ailing craftworld, be it through realspace or the labyrinth dimension.

It was no agent of Biel-Tan that saved them from the doldrums of stasis, nor even that of Ynnead – but those of Ulthwé, Craftworld of the Damned.



The ripples of Ynnead's awakening spread through the cosmos. For those with the witch sight, it was a discolouration of the sky that was impossible to ignore. Even the humblest soothsayers saw deathly omens. Across the galaxy, scattered bones fell in the shape of Ynnead's crosspiece-and-crucible rune, eyes glowed with white fire in prophetic dreams, and jagged crone's claws shimmered in bloody scrying bowls.

For the expert psykers of the Eldar race, the effect was far starker. Many were seized with waking nightmares, crying out in fear and clutching their hearts as visions of a deathly revenant burned in their mind's eye. The infinity circuit of every craftworld besides Biel-Tan glowed white hot with flaring anticipation, each world-ship lit brightly and given a burst of acceleration by this spiritual renaissance. The Eldar people looked to their seers for explanation. Those who had mastered the psychic wave of fear and hope led their people in meditation on the nature of this twist in the skein of fate.

Everywhere the Seers cast their minds, the tapestries of fate were unravelling and taking new shape. Every strand of causality led ultimately to the darkness of the Rhana Dandra, just as they had since the birth of the Great Enemy. But that darkness, it seemed, was far more distant than before.

The Seer Council of Craftworld Ulthwé were the most skilled of all their kind. They saw clearly the revelation that Yvraine had engineered upon Biel-Tan. The most senior of their number, Eldrad Ulthran, demanded that Yvraine and her Reborn kin be brought to Ulthwé as swiftly as possible. In public, the rest of the Seer Council agreed his reasoning was sound. In private, when the High Farseer was deep in his meditations, they made subtle inferences that Eldrad had overstepped his bounds, and their agendas were no longer the same.

The elders of Ulthwé conducted a great runic ritual at Eldrad's behest, using the spiritual link between the crystal seers that populated the great dome and those of Biel-Tan's recently devastated equivalent. The ritual was a gamble, despite the fact the hyperspatial link was strong between the two craftworlds. Though the Warp storms that raged near Ulthwé and Biel-Tan could theoretically be psychically channelled into a tunnel leading through the Warp from one craftworld to the other, the process might well consume the souls of the travellers that walked it – and those that had conducted the ritual too.

To use the crystal seers as conduits for psychic energy instead of revering them as honoured ancestors was a gross breach of craftworld culture. It was considered even worse than taking a spirit into a waystone and transferring it to a wraith construct. The Farseers that had undergone their kind's peculiar transformation into psychocrystal, before later joining with their craftworld's infinity circuit, had earned their rest a dozen times over.

To break the departed seers from that connection, and to use them as mere tools for sorcery, was a heinous crime indeed – but one Eldrad Ulthran had already committed, through his Harlequin proxies, on every craftworld across the galaxy. Such was the urgency of the hour that the Farseer showed no compunction in doing so again.

The seers gambled much, if the ritual went awry – in theory, a single lapse of concentration could see the portal open a tunnel into the Empyrean itself, allowing a Daemon incursion to spill into Ulthwé just as it had into Biel-Tan. If the seers of Ulthwé had not been confident in their psychic supremacy, and had the mental might to back that confidence up, they may well have capsized the entire world-ship into the Warp. As it was, their skills proved equal to the task.

With Eldrad Ulthran leading the runic rite, an unstable Warp portal opened up under Ulthwé's Dome of Crystal Seers. Uncounted light years away, Yvraine walked as if in a daze to the shattered equivalent upon Biel-Tan. What she found in that dome was all but invisible to the naked eye, but the Yncarne was drawn towards it as driftwood is drawn to a whirlpool. The Reborn, for that was the name

The Seer Council had gathered in Ulthwé's fabled dome, answering Eldrad's summons. Their rune-emblazoned robes waved gently in the same warm zephyrs that caressed the branches of wraithbone trees in the distance. One of the undisputed wonders of the craftworlds, the Dome of Crystal Seers was dotted with staircases of spiralling wraithbone that stretched up to nowhere. All bar the highest steps harboured the fossilized remnants of an ancient seer. Atop these staircases stood the luminaries of the craftworld, their voices joined in the Song of Ulthanash.

Abruptly, the song ended. 'Here we stand,' spoke Eldrad from his position atop the tallest staircase, 'ready to usher in a new age for Ulthwé and the Aeldari race.'

'Aeldari?' said Yemshon Il'foire. 'That name has no place this side of the Fall.'

'Until now,' said Eldrad. 'Our guests-to-be resurrect it with good reason.' Several of the seers raised eyebrows by a fraction of an inch, but did not speak out. 'We summon the bridge of stars,' continued Eldrad, his fabled staff describing the Rune of the Infinite Stride. 'This night we have need of it, no matter the cost.'

'As you say,' said Aralie Coppermane, a strange edge to her voice, 'we have no choice.'

The Farseers and Warlocks assembled atop the dome's stairways chanted once more, casting runes of star-striding and storm-walking into the air. The runes rose, glowing, to describe a wide circle in the casters' midst. Glittering motes of light span around the symbols, faster and faster, as the dome's gentle breeze became a gale, then a hurricane. The periphery of the Warp storm outside the craftworld curdled into the funnel of a tornado, the tip both remaining still and stretching untold light years into the aether.

By the time the ritual was complete, three of Ulthwé's finest Farseers had turned to crystal from head to toe. In their midst, a portal shone – within it, destiny made flesh.

Yvraine's followers had adopted for themselves, passed through the Warp portal and vanished from Biel-Tan altogether.

The howling, screaming vortex through which the Reborn passed was the embodiment of utter Chaos. So fierce and baleful was this passageway it would have robbed the sanity of a lesser being in a matter of moments. Yet the Reborn found themselves floating through a tunnel in the Warp unhindered, as if borne by an underwater current. At their fore was the Yncarne, a revenant creature so inimical to Chaos that the stuff of the Empyrean could not slow it. Even the Gods of Chaos did not look upon the creature directly; the incarnation of Ynnead's essence was so anathema to them they could not truly perceive it, even had they known where to look.

The ripples of the avatar's passage flowed outward nonetheless. Causing a great ruction in the Warp, the bow wave of its translocation cast Imperial ships aside hundreds of light years away, ripping open Gellar fields and distorting the light of the Astronomican. Thousands of human lives were lost with every second of the Reborn's passage. It was a price the Eldar would gladly pay a million times over if it gave them even the slightest chance of turning the tables upon their nemesis, Slaanesh.

With Yvraine came her Commorrite allies, but also a detachment of warriors from Biel-Tan. Even as the craftworld fell apart around her, there had been those that had believed her claims of rejuvenation and salvation. Across every stratum of Eldar society there were those who had thrown in their lot with Ynnead's disciples, declaring themselves Reborn.

Foremost amongst those converted to Yvraine's cause were Dire Avengers from the Silvered Blade, the shrine in which the Visarch, in his former life, had taught Yvraine the Path of the Warrior. Near threescore of the tall-crested warriors had forsaken their traditional colours and, with a few simple minutes of concentration, altered the psychically attuned metafabrics of their Aspect armour until it bore the same colouration as Yvraine's regal panoply and the deep scarlet plate of the Visarch at her side.



The Dire Avengers were far from alone. Biel-Tan was once a highly populated craftworld, and the appearance of the God of the Dead's avatar had been a compelling sign that Yvraine spoke the truth about a new order. With the Dire Avengers came warriors from every Aspect, Guardian citizens in the garb of the craftworld's militia, whole squadrons of grav-tank pilots and rank upon rank of silent ghost warriors. These wraithlike converts had been given a chance to truly live again, for their transfer from Biel-Tan's shattered infinity circuit had been more complete than any Spiritseer or waystone could ever achieve.

Yvraine did not disappoint her new followers. All those who had joined the Ynnari cause had heard her speak about the hope she brought to their race, and many influential Biel-Tani were soon devoted to it, body and soul. For too long the Eldar – be they craftworlder, Exodite, Harlequin, Outcast or Commorrite – had skulked in the darkness, afraid to burn too brightly lest they catch the attention of She Who Thirsts. To have a force amongst them that could take the fight back to Slaanesh, even one as disturbing as the Yncarne, was freeing, a call to action that no Aeldari had felt for ten thousand years.

TRAIL OF THE SEERS

The tunnel through reality known as the bridge of stars yawned, spasmed and pulsed. Through that secret aperture came the Ynnari, the favoured of Ynnead. The combination of the Seer Council's runic powers and the powerful psyche of the Yncarne had brought the Reborn safely to the crystal havens of Ulthwé, one step closer to securing the two lost Croneswords that Yvraine sought from the husk of the Eldar empire. Though the manner of their coming had cost the lives of several Farseers and driven some of the Ynnari half-mad with fear, the stillness that descended upon the Dome of Crystal Seers after their safe passage was a balm to the soul.

First to emerge was the Yncarne, hissing and whispering in the voices of the dead. The Ulthwéan council felt the cold mantle of terror upon them at the sight. The creature came forward like a ghost, slow and ethereal, the energies of the otherworld swirling around it. It was slender and androgynous, yet far larger and more fearsome than any Eldar warrior save perhaps the Avatar of the Bloody-Handed God. Where the living statue of Khaela Mensha was a creature of fire, iron and blood, the Yncarne manifested a shuddering chill that was both invigorating and shocking, like a deluge of ice water.

In the revenant's wake came Yvraine and the Visarch, leading the Reborn to gather beneath crystal stairways. The crested helms of the Ulthwé seers turned to look down at the newcomers with the unwavering gaze of raptors. There was an electrifying tension, a sense of history in the making. To the relief of all those nearby, the Yncarne drifted from the dome's heart and circulated around the periphery, staring at each of the crystal seers in turn as if hunting for something.

It was Yvraine who spoke first, formally thanking the seers of Craftworld Ulthwé for their aid. To cross the galaxy in a matter of hours was a feat worthy of the Aeldari at the apex of their power. It was a status they could achieve once more, now that Ynnead had shown them the Seventh Way, the path between darkness and light. First, though, they had to ensure the physical conduits of the God of the Dead were brought together. The Croneswords, when united, could act as a focal point for Ynnead's ascension, thereby restoring the broken cycle of life and death. The Visarch claimed that two of these blades were buried in the heart of the Eldar's former empire. They were somewhere upon the crone world known as Belial IV, caught between realspace and the Warp in the Eye of Terror. With Ulthwé having kept vigil over that vast tempest for so long, they were the logical choice of allies.

Eldrad Ulthran nodded quietly in satisfaction as the Openers of the Seventh Way made their case.

'You ask the impossible,' sneered Yemshon Il'foire of the Seer Council, shaking his head before putting on his ghosthelm. 'Pray be still, Daughter of Shades, and keep your people in silence. Your presence is desired, of course, but we have matters of the past to attend to before we consider the future.'

'There is no matter of more import than this,' said Eldrad Ulthran, his tone grave. 'I have foreseen it.'

'You have foreseen much,' answered one of his peers, Aralie Coppermane, donning her own helm with ceremonial formality. 'And yet ultimately, it seems you are blind.'

'I see further than all others, and act accordingly,' said Eldrad indignantly, 'which is why our kindred now stand here, on the threshold of a lasting victory over She Who Thirsts.'

'An impressive claim,' said Yemshon, inclining his helmed head. 'But a victory at what cost? The destruction of Craftworld Biel-Tan? The loss of thousands of Eldar ancestors? The dissolution of harmony itself?'

'There will always be those whose vision is clouded by fear,' said Eldrad. 'Now we proceed. Muster the Black Guardians.'

'No,' said Aralie. The word resounded through the Dome of Crystal Seers like a dropped tombstone.

'Eldrad Ulthran,' said Hijeroc the Blind from the crystal stairs opposite, 'We, the Seer Council of Ulthanesh Shelwé, accuse you of misappropriation of our mutual destiny. In conjunction with the Midnight Sorrow, who exist outside our cultural jurisdiction, you engaged in the theft of the crystal seers.' At this, Hijeroc motioned towards a stairway step where the lack of a fossilised Farseer was like a missing tile in a sacred mosaic. 'After taking the remains of these long-serving heroes, you formed a hyperspatial link with the crystal sands of Coheria, thereby endangering every departed Eldar soul in every craftworld.'

'The death blow to Slaanesh was levelled, and near dealt,' protested Eldrad. 'Were it not for the intervention of the crass warriors of Humanity…'

'And yet they did intervene, and your ritual fell apart like Khaine's castle of bone,' said Yemshon, 'risking billions of souls, and all but handing She Who Thirsts the chance to consume every craftworlder that has died since the Fall.'

'In seeking to keep the Rhana Dandra at bay,' said Hijeroc the Blind, 'you may well have hastened its onset.'

'Your behaviour is intolerable,' said Aralie. 'It is not for you to decide the fate of our race by yourself, nor to dabble in the affairs of gods. You are no god, Eldrad Ulthran. You are barely even an Eldar, for you should have joined the ranks of your crystal brethren long ago. Your time is long past. It is the will of the Seer Council that you be exiled to the void.' At this, Eldrad stumbled as if he had been struck.

'Act once more on the behalf of the Eldar race,' said Yemshon, 'and you will be put to death.'

The judgement of the Seer Council saw Eldrad slump to the floor, his grandeur evaporated in the heat of their ire. Every one of his ten thousand years and more weighed heavy upon him, and his bones – already half-crystal – felt like jagged knives within his sparse frame. To have his influence over the fate of his race eradicated was worse than death to the ancient Farseer, for he had striven for nothing else since the Fall.

Yvraine spoke eloquently in Eldrad's defence, only to find herself verbally attacked in turn. Who was she to demand the Seer Council lend her aid, and to request they follow her lead into the stronghold of the Great Enemy? By her direct action, Ulthwé's martial ally, the ancient and proud Craftworld Biel-Tan, been reduced to a skeletal shadow upon the brink of extinction. What was to prevent the same fate from happening to Ulthwé? Was it not enough that they stood sentinel over the Eye of Terror, thwarting the Chaos-tainted armies that emerged from within it and sending their citizen soldiers against the worst terrors in the universe?

Many of Yvraine's Biel-Tani followers reacted strongly to the hostility of Ulthwé's seers. They held forth with great passion, saying that though their craftworld had indeed suffered after the apotheosis of Yncarne – and though they could never truly forgive her – they truly believed the damage could be healed. More importantly, there was a greater battle being fought, worth more than life itself.

With a way to escape Slaanesh's curse, there was a slim chance that Biel-Tan might succeed in its quest to restore the former glory of the Eldar. It was a crusade once seen as futile by many of the Biel-Tani present, but admitted to by none amongst them, for to do so was unthinkable stigma within their militant culture. Now there was a real hope of success. Their argument was persuasive, but many elder seers remained unconvinced. When asked by the Ulthwé Farseers if they spoke on behalf of their craftworld, or as a rogue splinter faction, the Biel-Tani Reborn had no answer. That in itself was telling enough.

On and on the debate raged, the usual allusions to well-trodden myths and social mores giving way to veiled insults and outright displays of anger. The Ulthwé Seer Council believed that Eldrad, Yvraine and their fellow revolutionaries represented the worst of all disruptive influences. Though they had reknitted the skein of possible futures, they had done so at so great a cost, and in so reckless a manner, they could not be trusted.

It was during this scathing assessment that Yemshon Il'foire suddenly paused mid-rhetoric, the heat of his anger still radiating as he glanced sharply at his fellow elders. A psychic impulse passed through the ranks of the Seer Council in that moment, the urgency of the missive bringing the debate to a pause. Word had arrived of yet more visitors to Ulthwé; via the webway gate at the world-ship's rear, a delegation from another craftworld had arrived. A diplomatic corps was already inbound, making for the Dome of Crystal Seers with all haste.

When the tall-helmed warriors made their way into the dome and approached the impromptu war council that raged there, a smile came once more to Eldrad Ulthran's features. These mysterious warriors were clad in the colours of the fabled Craftworld Altansar.



Within craftworld society, the Eldar of Altansar have long dwelt in the twilight of mistrust. Much speculation surrounds them. They speak only in whispers, and never remove their helmets, no matter the situation.

During the calamitous times of the Fall, Altansar was on the periphery of the Eye of Terror, the cosmic wound resultant from Slaanesh's birth. At first, the populace believed themselves safe, but the gravitic pull of that immense Warp storm gradually drew the craftworld and its attendant ships into its reaches over the course of five hundred years.

The only Eldar to escape Altansar's doom was the Phoenix Lord Maugan Ra, first of the Dark Reapers. Towards the end of the 41st Millennium, that legendary warrior sought his craftworld in the depths of the Eye. After a gruelling series of trials he managed to locate Altansar and guide it through the insanity of that aetheric tempest. It re-emerged through the Cadian Gate, bringing the Altansari into the material dimension once more after their impossibly long incarceration.

Since that day, the Altansar Eldar have used the symbol of the Broken Chain to represent their craftworld. Set free from their eternal bondage, they have fought tirelessly against the forces of She Who Thirsts. Yet despite their proven loyalty to the Eldar cause, the matter of how the Altansari survived their millennial imprisonment in the dark heart of Chaos has proved persistent.

The Altansari are unwelcome on many craftworlds, even forbidden, amid fears they are not as closely aligned to craftworld culture as they claim and secretly serve Slaanesh, despite the evidence to the contrary. The question is asked time and again – have they not been tainted by their ordeal, changed by the Ruinous Powers that roam the Eye at will?

Usually such questions are put aside, but with the appearance of an Altansar delegation at this critical time upon Ulthwé, they arose in greater measure than ever before. A furore broke out almost immediately. To add fuel to the fires of controversy, the Altansari were moving to side with Yvraine.

It was the Warlock Guentilian Onyxblade who stepped forward to represent Altansar. Her low whisper was unheard at first amongst the raised voices of the Ulthwé seers, but when she reached up and unclasped her helm with a dual puff of escaping air, the dome's interior fell silent once more. Only the Yncarne could be heard, its unnerving hiss turning from the sibilance of a questing serpent to something like a sigh of relief.

Tall even for an Eldar, Guentilian was a striking sight. Her skin was so pale and waxen it was as if she had died long ago. Many of those gathered could not shake the notion they were looking upon a well-preserved corpse. The Warlock held her long black witchblade as if it were a rod of office, proof that though she was one of a forgotten kindred, she still walked the Path. At her side was one of the rare feline creatures known as gyrinxes, those psychic familiars that bolstered the mental and spiritual power of those they took as masters.

The dome's atmosphere grew thick as the Warlock climbed atop a nearby spiral of crystal stairs to speak.

'Autarch Orensae extended you welcome after all, then,' said Yemshon, nodding in greeting. 'The gates of Asuryan's halls open, and cleanse those who enter.'

'There are those who call Ulthwé damned,' interjected Zuar'lias the Wise, addressing his fellow council member, 'purely for our proximity to the Eye. We would be the worst kinds of hypocrites if we were to refuse those of Altansar for the same reasons.'

'And we thank you for it,' said Guentilian. Disturbingly, her soft whisper was echoed by every one of her kindred.

'You came to speak in defence of Eldrad Ulthran and the Ynnari,' said Yemshon. 'Have you a vested interest in this matter?'

'We must return to the Eye,' said the Altansar Warlock, her gyrinx prowling around her legs. 'The blade that the Daughter of Shades speaks of must be reclaimed from our enemies, if our race is to transcend. I know in which city it lies. We failed once, and only escaped She Who Thirsts thanks to the shroud Ynnead cast over us. We cannot fail again.' At her words, many of the Altansari shifted uncomfortably, looking through the translucent dome walls to the Eye of Terror's purple bruise amongst the stars.

'I cannot ask my people to return to the Eye,' said Guentilian, 'but neither can I stand idle. So I give my soul to Yvraine, and to Ynnead himself.' Raising her sword, she slashed her own throat wide open. Black blood spurted outward as she gasped her last. Yvraine darted forward, grabbing Guentilian's body. The Ynnari priestess seemed to inhale deeply even as the Warlock's body slumped, lifeless and pale. A moment later the gyrinx, purring in recognition, rubbed itself against Yvraine's legs.

'And so we must act,' said Yvraine, staring unfocussed into the middle distance. 'We must leave now to retrieve the Croneswords of Belial IV, lest the handmaidens of Slaanesh reach it first.'

'Surely the risk of snuffing out this flicker of hope is too great,' replied Yemshon. He twitched a finger, and a trio of Ulthwé Warlocks drew their own witchblades. 'We cannot allow you to take the fate of so many into your hands. The wise do not pin their hopes upon a life unborn. Would this journey not be better made by the warriors of Craftworld Il-Kaithe? They profess to know the crone worlds better than any other.'

'None know the Eye as well as the Altansari,' said Yvraine. 'They have navigated its tides for thousands of years, avoiding the claws of the Daemon with each new day. Guentilian's sacrifice will not be in vain.' There were whispers of assent from the Altansari behind her, building to a hissing chorus.

'No,' said Yemshon. He raised his arms, and ethereal winds raced around the dome, knocking several of the Altansar Eldar from their feet. 'You and your followers will stay until the Seer Councils decide your fate.' The psychic hurricane blew harder still, and the craftworld erupted into utter bedlam.

Courtly negotiations turned to veiled threats, then to open hostility as the Ulthwé psykers threw up barriers of psychic force and sent strength-sapping curses into the ranks of the Ynnari. The Visarch fought through the psychic tempest, his blade raised as he made for Yemshon. The Yncarne loomed from the shadows, a storm of glittering spirits whirling around it as it bore down on the chanting seers.

Then a clarion shout rang out. The Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow stepped out one by one from behind the darkest of the crystal statues, each striking a pose as if parrying a blow. With them was an elderly Farseer clad in a simple black robe. The Seer Council looked on in wonder; the newcomer was Kysaduras the Anchorite, wisest of all Ulthwé's visionaries. He had emerged from his self-imposed imprisonment to speak to his people.

The psychic hurricane that raged around the dome ebbed away, becalmed in an instant as Kysaduras raised his staff above his head. He spoke in a croaking baritone, a voice that had clearly not been used for decades, but yet carried immense weight. They stood at the crux point of fate, he said. Whether the seers wished it so or not, the Ynnari had to leave – or else another craftworld would die, never to be reborn.

As one, the Seer Council turned away. The Ynnari – their ranks now bolstered not only by the Biel-Tani, but also by a few bold Altansari, the Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow, and a swathe of Ulthwé sympathisers – made for the dome's primary gates. With them went the Yncarne, the ground crackling with hoarfrost at its passage. Eldrad Ulthran followed the creature, bent under the weight of his peers' censure. Kysaduras, using his staff as a support, went with him.

Before the craftworld's diurnal cycle ended, the Ynnari had left for the Eye of Terror. They embarked upon a journey of supreme peril, for their journey was to Slaanesh's own birthplace. Not one of them looked back.



EMPIRE OF ASH

The journey into the depths of the Eye of Terror was fraught. The purplish swirl of that vast Warp storm had the presence of a living, predatory thing. The weight and saturation of its evil pulled at the soul as a black hole devours light. Without the thought of Ynnead's ascension to inspire an icy determination in the Ulthwé pilots carrying the Ynnari into the Eye, those at the helm would likely have turned back a dozen times over. On they went, each soul resolved to live as boldly and fully as the ancient Aeldari rather than to look away or hide in the manner of their modern kin.

The graceful starships moved under the cover of gigantic holo-fields, bypassing the embattled war zones of the Cadian Gate and venturing into the unstable overlap between realspace and the Warp. The Eldar expedition evaded fang-toothed tornadoes, fled from hungry ghost suns, rode out hailstorms of bloody skulls and negotiated crashing tsunamis of raw Warp energy. They did not falter. Whenever the resolve of the Ynnari began to waver in the face of these trials, Yvraine was there to inspire them and lead them on. It was this bravery that came to typify the Ynnari over the months to come, securing their reputation as a force for change from one side of the galaxy to the other.

Already the shock waves the Ynnari had sent throughout the Eldar civilisations were causing ripples of causality in their turn. The transformation of Yvraine in the Crucibael had triggered the invasion and dysjunction of Commorragh, and Asdrubael Vect himself had abandoned the Dark City as a result. Though the damage to his reign had been cataclysmic, the Supreme Overlord had already set in motion hundreds of plots and schemes that would reaffirm his stranglehold upon Dark Eldar society. It was the metaphysical danger of the Ynnari's rise that concerned Vect most of all.

Almost as soon as Yvraine had escaped the Dark City, wheels had been put in motion that had seen a host of Vect's Haemonculi allies depart for the most dangerous reaches of the webway – and from there to the same Daemon-haunted planet sought by the Reborn. In many ways it was a dark homecoming. Amongst the Covens' founders were the self same Eldar whose wanton indulgence had led to the Fall.

After a series of maddening and surreal trials, the Ynnari expedition reached its destination with most of their number still alive. There were those that maintained it was the spirit of Guentilian guiding the Ynnari through the Eye of Terror's hellish reaches that allowed them to reach their destination all but intact. Others said it was the presence of the Yncarne. It may even have been Ynnead himself that held back the infernal tides; certainly that was what Yvraine had claimed since they had passed the Cadian Gate.

BELIAL IV

The crone world of Belial IV was once at the heart of the Eldar empire. A planet so vast its gravity once sent comets hurtling through space around it like stones flung from a sling, Belial IV seemed tumultuous from a distance, but was prosperous beyond measure upon its surface. Within its luxurious and beautiful cities every possible kind of indulgence was pursued. For millennia it thrived at the golden centre of a web of influence that quenched suns and forged stars at will.

When the cataclysm of Slaanesh's birth ripped the Eldar civilisation apart, Belial IV was transformed from paradise to purgatory. It became a blasted wasteland of haunted ruins, Daemon-infested caves and scattered riches left to tarnish under the weight of aeons. To this day, waystones are scattered across its wastes, each a treasure beyond price.





<INTERVOX MECHANICUS>

SOURCE: AETHERIUM CHOIR, AGRARIA XIII

CHORISTO: DANTILH OCTUS

<AUTOREFERENCE ENACTOR>

<WAAAGH! BADRUKK>

A fleet of crude but powerful Ork ships has bludgeoned a path through the Alavatus Sector, devastating the industrial world of Naiad Tronglomeros as they made their way towards Catachan beyond.

Xenolexicographers have analysed the glyphs of beaten metal on the side of the Ork flagship, a giant vessel bristling with guns that has more broadside power than an Adeptus Astartes Battle Barge. The spacecraft is the kill cruiser known as 'Da Blacktoof', flagship of the notorious pirate Captain Badrukk.

As the Ork fleet passed Naiad Tronglomeros, many hundreds of invasion craft made sudden and devastating planetfall upon the moon's silver-skinned islands. A gruelling war followed, where the greenskins unleashed a hitherto unforeseen amount of firepower at the native Skitarii convocations. After slaughtering the populace, the Orks stole every spacecraft and cannon they could salvage, adding them to their own fleet.

Later investigation saw the trajectory of Badrukk's fleet correlate to that of a wounded void whale, black of skin and bleeding mile-long rivers of viscera into the cold void. The vast whale, fully ten times the size of the Blacktoof, appears to be headed for Catachan itself. As yet, no astropathic message has made it through Warp storm Bas Infernia to warn of this lethal macrofauna, nor the approach of the Ork fleet, which has now grown to such immense scale it forms the core of a system-spanning Waaagh. It is unlikely that blighted region of space can be evacuated before it is under attack from the wounded void whale, the Ork Waaagh, or both at the same time.



Though many of the Reborn were slain during daemonic attacks or driven irrevocably insane en route, the core of the Ynnari's expedition was still intact when the convoy of starships came into orbit around the giant, milk-white orb of Belial IV.

When an Ulthwé warhost's grav-tanks bore the Ynnari low into the crone world's atmosphere, and from there to the surface of the planet, there was not a soul to be seen. Dunes of off-white dust had accumulated everywhere, the residue of a once-mighty civilisation mingled with the remains of its people. The planet's ruin-dotted surface had the stale and unwelcoming atmosphere of a place that had not felt the footfall of a living creature for hundreds of years. Just occasionally, however, the Ynnari saw flickers of movement in their peripheral vision, as if something half-real was watching.

As the Ulthwéan contingent split off in a spiralling search pattern, the Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow too fanned out, making exaggerated gestures of stealth. So swift was their progress than many Ynnari asked themselves if they had visited these ill-fated lands before. It was their Shadowseer that brought their suspicions to Yvraine first, drawing a thin and shimmering veil of darkness behind her as she came. They were not alone amongst the ruins. The creatures that pursued them were not ghosts, nor Daemons, but creatures that were very much flesh and blood.

No sooner had the Shadowseer confided in Yvraine than a howling menagerie of abhorrent terrors charged headlong from the ruins ahead. They were coming straight for the Ynnari, hungry and focussed on their prey despite the Harlequin psyker's illusory veils. At their fore were eyeless Ur-Ghuls, multiple nostrils twitching as they bounded on all fours towards their prey. Behind the creatures came all manner of twisted anatomies, from muscle-bound hulks whose spines bristled with steroid injectors to whip-limbed hunchbacks who scuttled on bare feet with the speed of hunting spiders. Floating amongst them were the Haemonculi sent on a mission of murder by the fleshmaster Urien Rakarth.

Eyes wide, the Haemonculi grinned like flayed skulls as they came, many licking their lips in anticipation of the gruesome experiments they would enact upon the Ynnari. It was as if the vilest elements of Aeldari society had been resurrected amongst their shattered holdings, and given forms that better mirrored their inner personas – not those of elegant and athletic paragons, but those of ravening monsters, whose surpassing ugliness revealed the parasitic souls beneath. The Ynnari were under attack from the hidden architects of the Fall, an echo of the torrid past come to rip away the brightest hope for the future.

As a silver moon glimmered upon the parched surface of Belial IV, the echoes of Aeldari long dead flitted and moaned amongst the ruins, crying out as the darkest incarnation of their ancient society fell upon their would-be saviours. Even the Bloodbrides and Incubi amongst the Ynnari ranks were under no illusions as to what their Commorrite brethren intended for them, and so dived into the fray alongside the Black Guardians of Ulthwé and the Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow.

The razored blades of mercenary and gladiatrix cut away heavily thewed limbs, bisected leaping Ur-Ghuls and decapitated masked monstrosities wherever they came forward. Incredibly, many of the Haemonculi's minions kept fighting even after sustaining grievous wounds, limb-stumps spraying nameless fluids as they thrashed and flailed. Their violence was indiscriminate, but the unnatural strength behind it made it dangerous. Many an Ynnari was hurled broken across the wasteland to skid like a rag doll into the drifts of bluish-white dust.

In the centre of it all, a clutch of Talos Pain Engines drifted towards Yvraine, claws and tentacles twitching. The shuriken catapults of the Biel-Tani Dire Avengers slashed a hundred wounds in the fleshy war machines, black liquid flying from their iron-hard carapaces. The pulsing energies of nearby Cronos Parasite Engines spurred them on regardless.

A double rank of Wraithblades loped through the dust to intercept them before they reached Yvraine, elegant ghostswords gleaming as they sliced and cut. The spirit constructs fought with courage and strength, but the Pain Engines were true masterpieces of the fleshcrafter's art – one by one the Wraithblades were caught by clacking claws and wrenched apart. Suddenly the Visarch was there, stepping nimbly around the Pain Engines as he ducked, slashed and moved away once more, avoiding whirring chain-flails and jabbing ichor injectors with impressive grace. Soon, all that was left were hovering carapaces that drizzled foul blood.

The eldest of the Haemonculi, his mouth twisted in a moue of irritation at the sight of his pets being dismembered, brought forth a rune-engraved box from his robes and opened it. Sickly light flooded out as captive djinn-spirits shrieked towards the Visarch. His long blade whirled and slashed, but no physical foes were these, and they could not be cut. They lifted him bodily into the air and stretched his limbs taut; grinding and snapping sounds were clearly audible as the warrior was slowly stretched to breaking point.

A moment before the Visarch came apart, the Yncarne burst from the morass of dead Pain Engines with a deafening roar of triumph. With nothing more than its bare hands, the avatar ripped the djinn-spirits to dissipating wisps of ectoplasm. It flexed a slender claw, and the djinn's Haemonculus master withered away to a puff of dust. In far Commorragh, those samples of the Coven-lord's anatomy that were kept for regrowth turned to dust at the same instant. There could be no proof nor safeguard against the death brought by the Yncarne, for it was the God of the Dead given form.

Seeing their comrade's demise, and fearing that he had died a true death at the hands of a Daemon, the rest of the Haemonculi withdrew. No prize was valuable enough to risk their carefully maintained and treasured immortality. Within minutes they were gone entirely, their servants vanishing with them.

The Ynnari had barely regrouped amongst the ruins when a ululating shriek pierced the air.

THE SOUL HUNT OF BELIAL IV

The screams in the middle distance were painful to hear. These were not shrieks of agony, but of savage joy, the cries of lunatic killers on the hunt. They were not of mortals, nor even the playthings of the Haemonculi, but of entities borne from the Warp and attracted to the psychic spoor of carnage. Every one of the Ynnari that heard them felt trepidation; these were the Daemons of Slaanesh, birthed from the catastrophe that had laid this wretched place low. To fall into their clutches here was to know an eternity of torment, and to be consumed utterly by She Who Thirsts. They told themselves that their souls would be saved from that direst of fates by Yvraine and their fellow Ynnari, but ancestral fear still clutched at their hearts.

Darting up to elevated positions, Yvraine's Bloodbride handmaidens peered into the gloom. Through the ivory mists came whole armies of blade-wheeled chariots, striking sparks from the tumbled ruins as they came. In their wake was a tide of sprinting Daemonettes.

Realisation broke across the Eldar like a cold wind – this was a hunt, and they were the quarry. Yvraine cursed loud and long. The souls she kept safe within her had aided her in finding signs of the ancient swords she sought; one of the artefacts was near, but not likely near enough.

Shortly before the Haemonculus ambush was sprung, Yvraine had found a trail of dead waystones – the psychocrystal gems known as Isha's Tears. Highly prized as havens from Slaanesh's unquenchable thirst, they were formed by the shearing of realspace and the Warp during the Fall. The particular waystones Yvraine had found did not glitter with psychic potential, like those typically sought out by the Rangers and Wraithknights of the craftworlds. Instead they exuded a leaden absence of life. Yvraine had followed the trail of dead stones to find it converging with another, then another. It was a sign, a hint that one of the morbid artefacts she sought was close – though with the Daemons of Slaanesh hunting her, there was no time to investigate.

It occurred to her that might be precisely why the Daemons had chosen this time to strike, though it was just as likely they had waited for the Haemonculi and the Ynnari to bleed each other white before attacking the survivors.

With her inherited gyrinx growling at her heels, Yvraine took up her own Cronesword once more and made for the charging Daemon host. She was unsurprised to see the Visarch leading the Eldar from the front, darting through the densest ruins so the chariots of the Slaaneshi could not attack him without dashing themselves to pieces. Their Ulthwé allies were no more than a few miles distant – though they had split off from Yvraine's vanguard in a search pattern in order to find the Cronesword they sought, Eldrad Ulthran had insisted there be a strike force close to the Ynnari at all times in case of ambush.



As she saw the chariots racing pell-mell around their flanks, Yvraine's hope that they could reach their Ulthwé allies ebbed away. The Slaaneshi were moving along what had once been the widest boulevards of the crone world's capital city, bouncing and skidding at breakneck pace as they encircled their prey entirely. With them came Daemonettes riding long-necked, bipedal Steeds, and freakish, scorpion-tailed Fiends whose pincers clacked a percussive accompaniment to the chorus of delighted screams.

Within minutes, the Ynnari were trapped. They had been expertly driven into a dead end, a sinkhole pit before them and Slaaneshi Daemons on all sides. Yvraine and her vanguard exchanged doleful glances, preparing for a last stand. As they drew close, they saw the sinkhole before them was no natural well at all, but a vast gullet that pulsed and growled in hunger.

The hordes of Daemonettes came within range of the Ynnari's shuriken weaponry, and a blizzard of razored discs hurtled out. Their slicing kiss only served to drive the Slaaneshi hunters further into an ecstatic frenzy. On the lithe Daemons came, hissing and hungry. Bounding lightly through the ruins came the Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow, diving and somersaulting to intercept. They joined in battle with the Daemons with such grace and speed the skirmish seemed as if it were choreographed – the clash between Daemon and Harlequin had long been a subject of their dances.

Where the Eldar fell in greatest number, there was Yvraine, drawing the souls of the lost into herself even as their bodies died. The ghosts were made visible by the eerie half-reality of the Eye of Terror; to those around her it seemed that Yvraine was physically breathing them in. With each release of deathly energies, the Ynnari around her found themselves inexplicably invigorated. They pressed the attack with such quicksilver speed even the Daemonettes looked sluggish by comparison.

As the battle reached a crescendo, a moan of longing came from the throat of every Daemonette, Steed and Fiend. From the gullet-pit blocking the Eldar's path emerged a vast claw-tipped tongue as large as a hive transmotive. Many Ynnari screamed at the sight, fearing She Who Thirsts herself was emerging to gorge upon them, and perhaps they were right. Riding upon this grotesque appendage, their claws hooked into cairn-sized taste buds, were three Greater Daemons of Slaanesh. The largest of them, the incarnation of dark bliss known as the Queen of Suffering, howled with ecstasy as the titanic tongue slashed down, crushing hundreds of Eldar to death.

Flanked by two of its disturbingly alluring kin, the Keeper of Secrets swept a jewel-studded claw through the air, backhanding two leaping Harlequins into the scissoring pincers of its fellows. Their end was swift, at least. Blood glittered like ruby rain as they came bodily apart.

From nowhere the Yncarne loomed upward through the mist, its hissing whisper growing to a waterfall's roar. It darted towards the Greater Daemons with blurring swiftness, and grabbed the Queen of Suffering by the throat. The she-Daemon gave a strangled cry of surprise as the Yncarne ripped open her neck in a welter of blood. But in coming within arm's reach, the avatar of Ynnead had risked much. A jagged pincer caught the Yncarne by the ankle – then another, and another as the Queen's courtiers closed in. The Yncarne was yanked down and dashed to the floor. A moment later it was stamped into the saliva-sodden earth by a flurry of cloven hooves.

Yvraine gave a cry of anguish. She summoned the energies of her god, a storm of whispers hissing out to consume the Daemonettes around her. They turned to cold grey statues, then fell apart, but there were more to take their place. Nearby, Eldrad Ulthran and Kysaduras were striking at the flanks of one of the Keepers of Secrets, their witch weapons flaring as they tore it one grievous wound after another. Harlequins vaulted around them, flip belts keeping them one step ahead. The spectacle was so rich in splendour, so steeped in ancestral hatred, it was all the Harlequins could do not to fall into their ritual roles and reenact their famed performance of the Fall in reality.

Even as she fought for her life, Yvraine had a strong feeling that she had seen this all before. At first, she could not place where; the rescued souls within her did not number any Harlequins, for the Laughing God took them unto himself instead. Then it came to her – this dance of Harlequin and Slaaneshi Daemon was an echo of the Final Act, as portrayed by the Midnight Sorrow in the theatres of Commorragh. Inspiration struck Yvraine. She knew this performance well, as she had danced a similar waltz in her youth. She dived, rolled and span, for by recalling the dance forms that had fascinated her as a child, she found she could predict the Harlequin's battle dance all but perfectly – and therefore that of the Daemonettes that faced them.

On she danced, vaulting and somersaulting, following the scatterings of dead waystones to a nexus of the crystal ovals only a few dozen feet from the Greater Daemons of Slaanesh rampaging through the Ynnari lines. Underfoot, she could feel the pulsing energy of one of the swords they had come to claim, a reservoir of deathly power so strong it had stolen even the potential life from the waystones nearby. Smiling grimly, she placed both hands upon the ground and cried out.

A heartbeat later the Yncarne burst like a phoenix from the ground beneath the Queen of Suffering, reborn in a fountain of ice-blue energies. It held a long and shining Cronesword in both hands, and as it soared into the sky, it cut the Daemon queen in half from groin to neck. The deathly energies around it lent it speed; in a blur of purple-white motion, it hacked and slashed at the Greater Daemons until they had discorporated altogether. The weapon wielded by the avatar of Ynnead was *Vilith-zhar*, the Sword of Souls, largest and most powerful of the Croneswords. After millennia of slumber, its edge was hungry for the blood of the Eldar's persecutors. Like a bladed whirlwind, the Yncarne plunged into the Slaaneshi horde. Its every breath was a killing mist, its every thrust the final death of a shrieking Daemon. The Yncarne slashed at the giant claw-tongue grasping for it, and the hideous appendage withdrew back into its sinkhole lair as if stung by the great *murekh* wasp itself. Inspired by the Final Act made real, the Harlequins renewed their attack, and within minutes, the encircling horde was in utter disarray. Better still, through the ruins could be seen the colours of Ulthwé. With the trap broken, salvation was at hand.

ADDENDA ESOTERICA

DATA RESURRECTION BY ORDER OF HIS IMMORTAL MAJESTY THE EMPEROR'S MOST HOLY INQUISITION

<cf. CRYSTALLISATION OF THE GHOULSMAW REACH>

A fractal web of crystal structures has emerged from the Warp storm codified Ghoulsmaw, centred within the Methystos System half a light year south of what was once the forbidden Prosperine System (Eradicatus/Perdita Extremis). Although first seen as a low-level curio by the local Methystan astroseers, the structures – which thus far have defied any attempts to classify or quantify them – are spreading at an alarming rate through the space lanes of the sector.

There have been several investigative forays launched by members of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, each intended to investigate the rumours that there are figures moving within the structures – as disturbing as this may seem. As yet, none have returned. Every ship that has come within augur range has been subject to sudden and devastating daemonic invasion from the creatures known only as 'Horrors' (cf. Prosperine Cults). The auspex frigate 'Penetrating Stare' was recovered with all hands lost, its vid-thief skulls bearing footage which has been extensively analysed by the Ordo Malleus. Many of the ship's corridors were filled with complex crystal structures, a little like gossamer webs of hard glass, that hold the crew and passengers paralysed within. This same phenomenon has been recorded within ghost ships across the sector. They correlate identically with instances of major daemonic possession and subsequent counterstrikes, including the death of the eight great hives of Barrowdon Theta, where every corridor, duct and dwelling-cell of every structure was filled with complex crystal webs.









THE LAST HOPE OF THE ELDAR

CHAPTER 3

'The Reborn are the only hope left to our people. They seek to unite the Aeldari entire – to bring together not only the craftworlds, but every scattered shard of our race, be they outcast, Exodite, or soul-hungry Drukhari. With the Whispering God's net gathering us together away from the sight of evil, we shall be reforged. We shall be a people that look forwards in hope, not backwards in despair. Follow them, cast aside your waystone and the crippling fear it represents, and we shall soar on the winds of fate once more.'

- Lathriel, High Farseer of Biel-Tan



LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

With the Ynnari and their Ulthwé allies fighting together as one, the Eldar tore apart the tightening noose the Slaaneshi Daemons had cast around them. Their strike forces flowed like fast-running streams through the ruins and dust dunes of the shattered Aeldari city, capitalising on their gains before the Daemon hosts could cut them off. Yvraine led the charge, her regalia billowing behind her in the etherial winds as she sprinted through shattered arches and under statues of fallen heroes. Towards the giant Memorial Hall of Atransis she ran, a vast museum-like structure where the works of the pre-Fall Eldar were once displayed as the foremost treasures of the universe. With Ulthwé's close assault specialists forming a wall of blades on either flank, the Ynnari vanguard plunged inside the enormous hall, seeking a defensible position from which they could repel the soul hunt from a narrow frontage. Within those walls, they were to find far more than simple tactical advantage.

As the Reborn took up positions on the sweeping ramps and daises of the hall's interior, the building was gradually flooded with golden yellow light. Two immense structures at the back of the hallway shook dust from their slab-like facias as they opened, unfurling jerkily like the wings of a butterfly fresh from its chrysalis. A glowing yellow rune-portal was revealed within, immense yet visible only to the dead – or those that bore their blessing. Massive as the secret portal was, the figure that emerged from within was so tall it still had to stoop to fit through.

A rune-emblazoned Wraithknight in proud yellow and blue heraldry glided out from the ancient portal, two more of the immense ghost warriors in its wake. Long-barrelled suncannons thrummed loudly in the stillness. A shout of triumph rose up from the Ynnari as the giants opened fire, blast after blast of intense plasma energy shooting from the entranceway of the hall. Wherever they struck, the Daemons tumbling through the hall's entrance to capture the escaping Eldar were annihilated. Everywhere a new hunting pack of Slaaneshi creatures appeared, a killing volley of energy scoured them from existence. When a knot of chariots careened through the ranks of the Ulthwé Eldar, blood flying from bladed wheels, one of the Wraithknights stepped forward and smashed them to scattering shrapnel with a sweeping blow from its massive blade. Yvraine was the first to notice the smaller figures at the giants' feet. The fabled constructs of Craftworld Iyanden had arrived, already spreading out to form a protective wall around the Ynnari. Amongst them was none other than Iyanna Arienal, the Angel of Iyanden.

At the Spiritseer's instruction, the ghost warriors formed a loose circle that spread out through their living comrades, then locked in tight. The wraithbone bulwark allowed every living Eldar through without resistance, yet hurled back their



The world-ship Iyanden was once the foremost of all its kind, a vast capital of the space-borne Eldar empire teeming with life. Its journey through the aeons has been blighted with disaster, however, and now it is a pallid reflection of the spacefaring power it once was. Large-scale raids by Chaos fleets and the coming of Waaagh! Rekkfist sorely tested the craftworld's military strength, but it was the attack of Hive Fleet Kraken that proved Iyanden's doom. A long and hard-fought space battle against the teeming bio-ships of the Tyranid fleet was initially successful, and for a while, the craftworlders dared to think their superior tactics and technology had carried the day. Then came another wave, and another, and another. Iyanden was all but overrun. Not a single bio-dome remained untouched by the skittering hordes of the Tyranid race. The entire craftworld would have been devoured but for the timely return of the pirate Prince Yriel, a gifted commander exiled for his reckless tactics against a Chaos invasion many decades hence. Despite his bitterness, Yriel was unable to watch his home be destroyed. His corsair armada penetrated the Tyranid blockade, and ended the space-borne threat. The alien invaders had taken a terrible toll; fully nine-tenths of the craftworld's populace had been slain before the last Tyranid was cut down. Since that day, Iyanden has been forced to rely on the numerous wraithbone constructs of its ghost halls for its continued survival. The Light in the Darkness, as Iyanden's rune is known, has come close to dying out altogether. There are those that would see it blaze bright before the end.

Daemon pursuers with volleys of firepower and methodical bladework. Many of the faceless warriors gave their lives to ensure their living kin could escape. Iyanna beckoned the Ynnari into the golden portal. Realising that to stay was to die, Yvraine ordered the retreat. Group by group the Reborn dashed into the secret spar of the webway beyond.

Perilous indeed were the hidden paths that the Iyandeni used to reach the crone worlds and gather their waystone bounty. The Ynnari were led by not only the most gifted Spiritseer of her generation, however, but also the Masque of the Midnight Sorrow. Though it took long weeks of arduous travel, they found the second of the golden portals without serious incident – a gateway that led them to a hidden webway portal of Craftworld Iyanden within Vaidh Wayport. Iyanna Arienal presented the Bonesinger's seal of her dynasty to a dozen runic locks, sang in a lilting soprano the lineage of Eldanesh, and projected her psyche into the spirit reservoirs beyond each gate until they opened soundlessly one by one.



The expedition passed through into the chilly, mist-wreathed catacombs of the craftworld's ghost halls. Each alcove, once occupied by the inert shell of an inactive ghost warrior, was empty. There were sounds of distant thunder high above – the Visarch cocked his head, and loosened his great blade in its knotted scabbard. These were not the sounds of a tempest, but the din of ongoing battle. Yvraine felt hope and despair in equal measure. They had found safety, just as it looked like they would be overwhelmed completely, and better yet, their rescuers were numbered amongst those craftworlders they sought to bring to Ynnead's cause. In dying and being Reborn within the domain of the ancient Aeldari, the Yncarne had claimed the shape-changing Sword of Souls from within the soil of Belial IV. Yet the Ynnari had found only one of the two blades of power they sought from Belial IV before they had been forced to flee. Without all five of the Croneswords, Ynnead's power would be significantly lessened. Worse still, the sword Yvraine had expected to find upon Iyanden was missing, its psychic spoor nowhere to be found.

The Angel of Iyanden, Iyanna, had a series of impassioned exchanges with Yvraine as they gained the winding steps to the craftworld's well-lit interior. The world-ship was under siege once more. As it had passed through the Endregan Sector, a Warp storm that had seemed distant one night was alarmingly close the next. From within that empyric tempest had come a pair of vast rotten space hulks, each a cadaverous mass of metal and rock so pitted with age it had not a single straight line nor smooth contour upon it. The runic divinations of the Farseers had shown the immense composite ships to be infested with daemonic life-forms, just as a bloated corpse is infested with maggots. Vast swarms of rot-flies, each led by a pinioned Daemon Prince, had flown from the repulsive space detritus towards Iyanden upon membranous wings. With the Warp storm propelling them, and with no need to breathe, they had descended upon Iyanden in their thousands. Yvraine had a hollow feeling it was no accident that Iyanden was assailed by Daemon invaders just as she and her Ynnari had sought safe haven there, but she kept her peace on the matter. To a craftworld that counted the dead as most numerous of its defenders, the message of Ynnead's awakening was a delicate enough matter already.





'Our fate is that of Omethrian, it seems,' said Iyanna Arienal, as she and Yvraine strode across the Bridge of Endless Night. 'To be torn apart anew by carrion crows each time our wounds begin to heal.' Overhead, just visible through the thin crystal of the Aldanari Dome, the explosions of fleet warfare lit the void.

'Did Omethrian not wish to die under the Red Moon,' said Yvraine, 'thereby ending his torment, and being reborn anew?'

'If you seek to extinguish what is left of Iyanden's flame, you will find your welcome short indeed,' said Iyanna. 'I have sung the songs of Ynnead myself, for many long years. Truly I believe all our destinies are held within his net. But first we will take a grievous toll upon those who wish to hound us to our deaths. That does not involve succumbing to some horrid infestation, nor wasting away in apathy and despair.'

'Well said,' murmured the Visarch as he walked behind them. Yvraine started in surprise at her companion breaking his silence, but said nothing. As the Eldar reached the end of the bridge and made for the war council beyond, a dozen Wraithguard blocked their path, a robed Farseer in their midst.

'Dhentiln Firesight,' Iyanna whispered. 'He will not risk the ghost halls coming to our side, not now.' She turned to Yvraine, eyes alight. 'Whatever happens, we shall make Ynnead proud to call us his daughters.' Yvraine nodded, emotions thick in her throat.

'I bid you welcome,' called out Dhentiln, 'but sadly your timing is more that of crippled Vaul than deft Asuryan. With the armada fully engaged, Iyanden cannot afford distraction, lest we inadvertently open our gates to the enemy once more. You and your followers have travelled far – even Faolchú the Messenger folded its wings at day's end. You must rest.' At this he gestured at a distant quarter of the great dome, ill-lit and still. 'We will escort you and your fellow Commorrites to a guarded haven, to ensure minimum disruption. Those of your host that wear craftworld colours, or the motley of Cegorach, will be dispersed to fight upon the front line. We dearly need their blades.'

'That measure is not necessary,' said Yvraine, her tone ice cold. 'My people will stay and fight as one.'

'But I insist,' said the Farseer. Behind him, the Wraithguard lifted their weapons. In the middle distance, bipedal war walkers emerged from behind the curving architecture of the war council's chambers, their guns reinforcing the deadly message.

'Very well,' said Yvraine. 'We will not raise our blades against you on this dark day. If you wish to snuff out the flame your people once held so dear, we shall be there to light it once more.'

The Wraithguard closed around the Ynnari commanders, and led them away into the gloom. High above, the thunder of war rumbled ever louder like the laughter of distant gods.

Within minutes of leaving the Bridge of Endless Night, Yvraine, the Visarch, the core of the Ynnari, and Iyanna Arienal were involuntary guests in Iyanden's most sumptuous halls. Their every need was catered for, white-robed Eldar adolescents on the Path of the Servant offering refreshment and even cleaning their war gear of the crone world's dust. Still the truth was obvious to all. The Reborn, those who believed Ynnead to be the saviour the Eldar so desperately needed, had been incarcerated against their will. Battle in the stars high above still raged between Iyanden's armada and the space hulks that drifted, slow but unstoppable, towards them.

Yvraine felt a slow-burning rage build within her breast, but she tamped it down. The way of Khaine would not release her from this; neither the Ynnari nor the Iyandeni could afford a civil war. Instead, she had to reach inside herself, deeper than ever before, and let the conduit between all living things channel her soul. Outward she cast her essence, ever outward, her mind's eye reaching towards one star after another.

That which she sought was not there.

On the outer surface of Iyanden, elephantine rot-flies buzzed and swarmed, their pot-bellied plague riders smearing filth upon crystal domes that had felt only the kiss of solar winds. A trio of Nurgle Daemon Princes alighted nearby, talons screeching gouges in the transparent domes. With rusted maces and wrought-iron blades they hammered the crystal over and over until they had forced open an entrance. The thin bubbles of atmosphere that surrounded the dome-like nodes, fashioned to prevent the insides of the world-ships being sucked out into space in the event of a meteor swarm, gave the Daemons the shelter they needed to wriggle and crawl within.

Through these apertures the winged Plague Drones of Nurgle gained entry into the craftworld, descending upon the elegant forests and sculpture gardens in a hideous greenish-brown cloud. They were swiftly intercepted by several shrines of Swooping Hawks that flitted, lasers blasting, just out of reach. The winged Aspect Warriors were swiftly joined by squadrons of Crimson Hunters, streaks of deep red scarring the air as they hunted the fat-bellied Daemon Princes that befouled their home. The bright lances of their Nightwing Interceptors struck over and over, each unerringly accurate shot blasting streams of viscera from the chests and abdomens of the fleshy intruders. Garulgor the Virulent plummeted lifeless from the skies, but both Duke Oglorr and Maleathrus of the Foetid Claw descended towards the Eldar homelands below as if unconcerned by their injuries, chortling with glee as their innards drizzled filth across the lands below. The Crimson Hunters performed tight loop the loops and came in again, this time aiming for the heads of their prey. With the Swooping Hawks thickening their fire, even the Daemon lords could not shrug off the intensity of their punishment. Oglorr and Maleathrus fell like stones to explode in showers of filth upon the alabaster flagstones below.

The Daemon riders assailing Iyanden's forests did not get far, for they were contained and quarantined by unliving hosts of ghost warriors. Yet the invasion was really only just beginning. In the firmament high above, the twin space hulks that had emerged from the Warp storm drifted ever closer.

Though the Daemons embattled upon Iyanden's surface were outmatched ten times over, the same could be said of Iyanden's armada. Each of the space hulks that faced them was truly immense, a composite monstrosity formed of abandoned spaceships, space debris and asteroids the size of small moons. Many of the craft that jutted from the space hulks' flanks had active gun batteries that sent punishing broadsides towards the Eldar craft that harassed them from afar. The spacecraft of the armada were nimble enough to simply evade any solid munitions, but not every weapon used by the hulks was so conventional.

When thousands of winged drones flew silently across the dark reaches of space to latch on to the solar sails of the Eldar ships, gnawing away at them like moths devouring silken finery, the Eldar vessels found themselves slowing to a crawl. Again the hulks opened fire, this time to full effect. So widespread and devastating were their volleys that they caught several Iyanden craft amidships and destroyed them completely.

Sequestered in her guest quarters, Yvraine reached out once more with her powers. She could feel the energies of the armada's demise even in her confinement. This time she was rewarded. Beyond it was a thin flare of intent, a soul-sign coming from the allies she had sent ahead when Ynnead first arose. It was the psy-spoor of Thraelle Longblade, captain of the *Mansbane*. She peered through the crystal skylights of her quarters, hoping to see a glint in the stars, and gave the psychic signal.

The corsairs who knew Yvraine as Amharoc in Commorragh emerged from a field of stellar debris, their ships hidden from plain sight by holo-fields and mimic engines. Pulsar batteries, keel torpedoes, phantom lances and leech engines took their toll on the nearby hulk. Under sustained barrage, the engine bay reactors at the hulk's rear detonated with spectacular force. As a new star burned in the firmament, Yvraine allowed herself a tight smile.

THE FATED PRINCE

As Yvraine's old comrades took their toll, Iyanden's own corsair allies joined the fight. With the smaller of the two Nurgle-infested space hulks destroyed by Amharoc's corsairs, both the armada of Iyanden and the warships of the Eldritch Raiders concentrated their firepower upon the larger vessel – codified by Prince Yriel himself as *Spawn of Oghanothir*. Like nimble star-sharks tearing chunks from a void whale, the corsair ships closed in, levelled their devastating attacks, and slipped away. The crater-pitted behemoth's main defence was not guns, however, but its sheer bulk. It could be hammered by the guns of the Eldar for days and still have enough mass to destroy Iyanden should it collide.

The hulk had drifted long in the haunted tides of the Warp, even passing through the sickly green-grey skies of Nurgle's Garden for a time. The Daemon infestation that had claimed it riddled its labyrinthine innards right to the core, and thousands of winged Daemons wound from every new crater like ribbons of smoke. The truth was becoming clear. If the hulk's exterior was inviolable, it would have to be destroyed from the inside out by a strike force of Eldar – who would be risking the most hideous deaths imaginable.

Prince Yriel, as ever, was quick to answer the call to action. In collusion with his fellow corsair princes in Yvraine's fleet, he organised a three-stage assault on the *Spawn of Oghanothir*. The plan was ambitious in the extreme, but necessarily so, for to approach the hulk in a boarding craft would be to become swamped by daemonic rot-flies before ever reaching its sides. The gamble was so daring that it appealed to Yriel's fellow captains' sense of pride and bravado, and within a matter of hours, it was well underway.

Virtually unnoticed by the combatants at large, Yriel and his captains left their ships aboard sleek assault craft and made for the webway portal at the rear of Craftworld Iyanden. En route, Yriel used his rank as High Admiral to convince the world-ship's steersmen to adopt a specific course. Slowly, the beleaguered craftworld came about upon the designated coordinates. Prince Yriel's insertion craft were nimble and swift enough to bypass the Daemon invaders that harassed Iyanden's exterior, and they passed through the stern webway portal with acceptable losses. Using Yriel's uncanny hunter's instincts in conjunction with ancient Ulthanashi maps of the nearspace labyrinth, they located the spar of that insane dimension that corresponded to the *Spawn of Oghanothir*'s course. It was a heading Yriel had all but dictated by offering Iyanden as the bait. As the *Spawn* drifted through space towards the craftworld, intent on ramming its



prey, Yriel and his captains activated their personal webway portal devices and walked through the shimmering discs, crossing from the labyrinth dimension into the foetid heart of the enemy space hulk.

The Eldar strike force stepped cautiously from the emerald portals they had opened into the cavernous interior of the infested enemy flagship. It was near pitch black inside, and a drizzle of foul fluids spotted down from a vaulted ceiling high above. The corsairs, anxious to avoid the patter of stinking liquids, darted to the cover of the nearest corridors and gingerly made their way further in. The faint sound of engines, pulsing regular as a heartbeat, could be heard in the distance. Having come this far, the corsairs were not keen to turn back without completing their mission, even if the slime-slicked innards they were forced to navigate were more like the winding insides of a diseased sea monster than the ordered corridors of a spacecraft. Yriel and his fellow captains took comfort from the fact they wore sophisticated air reservoirs and hermetically sealed armour, the finest that centuries of reaving could afford. It was well they did. Puffy balls of fungus, each formerly the head of an earlier trespasser, wheezed spores in billowing streams. For the intruders to breathe even a single lungful of that blighted air would have resulted in a truly disgusting death.

Though the corsair princes had to cut their way through thickets of grasping, tentacle-like cilia and leap over bubbling pools of acidic slime, they proved dextrous enough to penetrate to the thrumming heart of the ship's enginarium. Thus far they had encountered little fiercer a foe than giggling Daemon mites, for their vector of attack had bypassed the Daemon hordes on the warpath at the outer edge of the hulk. When they reached the engines, however, they found a more daunting sight – the slime-slicked cocoons of sulking Beasts of Nurgle that had sought a warm place in which to make their vile metamorphoses.

Perhaps the corsairs would have swiftly disabled the hulk's mighty engines and escaped without hindrance had the swamp-like inner chamber not also been home to a squatting, sedentary terror. Gurgling at the chamber's heart was the vastly obese Daemon Prince Gara'gugul'gor, whose name can only be pronounced correctly with a throat full of phlegm. Though the monstrosity's tentacle-like arms were whip-thin and dextrous, his abdomen was so engorged that it was impossible for him to move further than a few feet. Still, he laughed with good reason – for this day the prey had come to him.



Whipping tendrils lashed out as Yriel jumped nimbly from one island of solid ground to another, the fabled Spear of Twilight blazing in his hand. One of them brushed the impeccably dressed corsair Prince Lumino on the heel and immediately hauled him screaming into the air, dangling him within biting range. A gristly snap, and the Eldar pirate was halved at the waist; his severed legs kicked spasmodically as Gara'gugul'gor finished his snack. Yriel grimaced as he leapt closer still, polearm blade slashing at the tentacles whipping towards him to force them back.

The damage was already done. Lumino's death scream had disturbed the pupae all around the room, and now many were beginning to shiver and shake, glistening wings and questing proboscises pushing from the foetid sacs. One by one, a swarm of fluid-drizzling rot-flies emerged prematurely from their transformations, hissing and half-formed as they stirred from their slumber to malevolent wakefulness.

Another corsair prince cried out as something grabbed his ankle. Spurred into action, the rot-flies took wing as best they could, buzzing angrily as they lurched through the air towards the intruders. The horrified Eldar abandoned all attempts at stealth, opening fire in all directions. With that, the vaulted engine room erupted into violence from end to end.

The battle that followed saw some of the most inspired displays of swordsmanship, agile footwork and acrobatic poise outside of the troupes of Cegorach's favoured Harlequins. The corsair princes unleashed every weapon they could bring to bear. Jokaero digital weapons, Aeldari soulknives, Commorrite slasher-prisms and contraband elixirs that tripled the imbiber's reaction speed were all employed to ensure the daemonic denizens could not lay a single talon upon the intruders. And for a while, they were enough.

At the heart of the battle Yriel fought hardest of all, his spear glittering with killing energies as it slashed, whirled and stabbed at anything foolish enough to come within reach. Running up the wall opposite Gara'gugul'gor, Yriel pushed backwards and away over a grasping tentacle, backflipping to spring once more off a gantry with greatcoat billowing. His spear was raised for a killing thrust. Gara'gugul'gor heaved a spray of stringy vomit from the gills in his wattled throat, and though Yriel twisted and arched his spine to avoid it, he turned his back on the black pseudopods that reached out to pluck him from the air. In an instant, Yriel was caught like a fly in a spider's web, sticky tentacles wrapping around him to bind his arms to his sides. The Daemon Prince brought Yriel close, his jaws yawning wide.

PRINCE YRIEL, SCION OF ULTHANASH

High Admiral of Iyanden's armada and bastard scion of the House of Ulthanash, Prince Yriel is a consummate Eldar commander. The incidents that shaped much of Yriel's life came when he led a bold attack against an encroaching Chaos fleet. His victory over the scions of the Dark Gods was overwhelming, but it temporarily left Craftworld Iyanden all but unprotected. Instead of accolades. Yriel earned bitter censure. Driven by pride, he became an Outcast, vowing never to set foot on Iyanden again. When he left, his followers – the Eldritch Raiders – left with him. Under Yriel's leadership, they were to become the galaxy's most feared corsair fleet.

It is likely that Yriel would never have returned to the world-ship that spurned him had it not been assailed by Hive Fleet Kraken. The flame of Iyanden was all but snuffed out when the corsair prince led his Raiders in a glorious return. In a daring series of strikes, the hammer of Yriel's attack crushed the Tyranid fleet against the anvil of the craftworld's guns. On Iyanden's surface he drew forth the ill-fated Spear of Twilight from the Shrine of Ulthanash, a weapon so potent it curses the soul of any who near it. With this mighty artefact he slew the Tyranid leader-beast, and in doing so, unmade its swarms.

Yriel was later restored to admiralty of Iyanden's grand fleet. However, in saving his people Yriel had doomed himself. The Spear is no mortal weapon, and cannot be abandoned. Though he technically holds the office of Autarch of Iyanden, Yriel still plies the stars, seeking a way to restore his craftworld to its former majesty before it finally fades into myth.



Suddenly the chamber was lit by a stark white brilliance. Yriel's ocular implant, the Eye of Twilight, flared bright as it released a storm of killing electricity. The energies were so fierce they burned away the Daemon's tentacles – the corsair prince was free once more. Down came the deadly Spear of Twilight that had claimed so much of Yriel's life, its blade gouging deep – not into the Daemon Prince, but into the beating heart of the enginarium itself.

A hideous shriek was wrenched from the Daemon overlord's throat as the unearthly energies of that baleful artefact went to work. Black veins spread out across the hulk's core machinery, necrotising once-living metal into shuddering black rust wherever they spread. Though it had taken every iota of his skill and ingenuity, Yriel had achieved his goal. He smiled momentarily as the spear's deathly energies slew its true target – the heart of the spacefaring juggernaut itself.

A whipping tentacle came around, a broken girder in its grip. Yriel was too exhausted to dodge. The heavy iron bar smashed the life from the Eldar prince with a single blow.

Gara'gugul'gor, once he had finished killing the last of the interlopers in as gruesome a fashion as he could devise, slurped and shuffled his way to Prince Yriel's cooling corpse. Before his death, the Autarch of Iyanden had effectively becalmed the hulk's only intact enginarium with a single stabbing blow of his eldritch weapon. Without the ability to correct the behemoth's course, the space hulk was reliant on momentum alone, and could likely be avoided. How could a mere mortal defy the will of Nurgle?

Gara'gugul'gor was still high in the favour of Grandfather Nurgle, for he had diligently spread disease for countless centuries, and his particularly inventive brand of gallows humour was most amusing to the Plague God. But with his plan to break the necromantic Eldar of Iyanden in tatters, the Daemon Prince would have to find another way to rise in his patron's estimation.

Stirring a pool of blood-laced slime with one of his tentacles and reciting the Seven Sickening Psalms, the Daemon reached out with his psychic abilities into the depths of the Warp. There he had an epiphany. If his theory held true, and this warrior's blade was that which it appeared to be, there was still a chance to help Nurgle's power wax high – not of its own slow but steady accord, but because one of his chief rivals in the Great Game would suddenly find his own star waning fast. At the very least, Gara'gugul'gor could deliver a little gift to the Eldar world-ship, one that would reduce it to ruin as surely as a direct collision from a space hulk.



The Daemon Prince frowned once more at Prince Yriel's spear, clutched in its owner's death grip and still glowing gently with baleful energies. Then, as shuddering waves of mirth wobbled Gara'gugul'gor's seven great chins, his consternation turned into a belly laugh that shook rust from the rafters high above.

It was not long after Iyanden had left the grotesque space hulk behind that Prince Yriel's body, frozen in a strange milky resin with the Spear of Twilight laid across his chest, was found floating in space. The entombed corpse was recovered by a team of Hemlock Wraithfighters that had sensed its presence in the stars; by using a remote wraith-construct familiar on a silver tether, they were able to retrieve the corpse and take it back in safety to the craftworld itself.

A great sadness rippled throughout the world-ship at the news, for Yriel was their brightest star, a once-wayward genius who had proven to be Iyanden's saviour more than once. His loss was so profound that many Eldar were seen weeping openly in the streets. What must Iyanden do, they wailed, to escape the cursed fate that haunted its every turn?

ADDENDUM EXCRUTIATI

Class: Adept Interrogatus

Subject: Prisoner 28264

Foci: Eldar, Warp storms

<:TERMINATION POSTPONED:>

The excruciation of the Eldar specimen, Prisoner 28264, continues to yield data. Not only does this self-proclaimed outcast believe that his idol, the infamous seer Eldrad Ulthran, is manipulating the course of Imperial history (cf. Second War for Armageddon, Precipitation/Cause) he also claims that his actions are behind the rifts that have appeared in the skies of the Imperium. Though this is of course utter nonsense, I have detailed his claim below in the interests of completeness.

The prisoner speaks of a God of the Dead – not one of the previously recorded Eldar pantheon (cf. Aldus Mari), but a new deity that is somehow formed from the departed souls of his people. It is his belief that the Eldar seer Ulthran has somehow awakened this god-to-be from his prenatal torpor, allowing it to strike back against a rival god, the nemesis of their ancient spacefaring race. He will not name that deity, referring to it only as She Who Thirsts. Recent interrogations have shown he clearly believes that this new god has dealt his enemy a mighty blow. When I asked him if he thought that was why the galaxy itself had been so grievously wounded, he flew into a snarling, spitting rage. Though he claims the opposite is true – that had this new god not awakened, the Warp storms raging across the galaxy would be far more widespread and intense – he maintains that the death of the Imperium would be a small price to pay for the Eldar race's resurgence he believes imminent.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this, but I am left in doubt as to whether any of them have more than academic interest. After all, when the enemy is at the gates, one seeks not the scholar, but the swordsman.



Iyanden's wraith constructs move to repel the Nurgle invaders from their craftworld.



Having infiltrated the Nurgle space hulk, Prince Yriel and his fellow corsairs battle the virulent Daemon Gara'gugul'gor.





TO WEAVE THE SKEIN

Yvraine had called upon old debts from her former life as Amharoc, and in doing so aided Iyanden. With that, the Reborn were vindicated in the eyes of the craftworld's seers, and were allowed to fight as one against the creatures invading the world-ship. The Ynnari banished not only swathes of plague Daemons, but also the infections they spread. All forms of life are hastened to their end when Ynnead's ire is raised.

Prince Yriel's body was quarantined after its recovery – after the grisly fate of the Seers of Lugganath, all Eldar have feared the Plague God's gifts. The resinous shell that contained Yriel was broken open by wraith constructs in the Barren Chamber, a sealed oval room isolated from the wider infinity circuit by the Spiritseer's art. That caution was well exercised. The prince's corpse yielded a cloud of plague spores that would have turned living, breathing Eldar to walking hotbeds of contagion.

News of the corpse's infection was psychically conveyed to a Spiritseer, and from there to Iyanna Arienal. Yvraine was soon escorted to the antechamber outside Yriel's resting place. She called out to the ghost warriors inside, bidding them retreat into the airlock-style vestibule on the far side of the chamber, and then drew her blade. Holding it aloft, she summoned forth the spirit magic in her soul and, by moulding the necromantic energies with her psyche, sent waves of lethal energy into the chamber beyond. Though they had no effect on Yriel – by this point he was beyond harm – they killed every single spore and microorganism that Gara'gugul'gor's filthy curse had unleashed upon the craftworld.

It was then that a true miracle took place. Yvraine ran three fingers down the length of the Barren Chamber's doors, and they opened soundlessly before her. Two of her Iyanden Wraithblade escort crossed their curving blades to bar her passage to the sacred space, but Iyanna Arienal waved them aside. Yvraine sketched a curtsey to her ally before striding inside with a contented smile on her features. She took up the Spear of Twilight, reversed it in her grip, and plunged it into Yriel's chest.

With a great heaving exhalation, the corsair prince of Iyanden sat bolt upright. His pallid flesh was restored to a vigour it had not seen since before he took up his fabled spear. The blade, having returned the stolen life force it had siphoned from its wielder over the years, turned to quicksilver in Yvraine's grip. It took a new shape, revealing its true form as the fifth of the Croneswords. She passed it back to Yriel, and in his grip, it became a spear once more. The pirate prince stood unsteadily, then straightened to his full height, a new power glowing from his eyes. Prince Yriel of Iyanden had been Reborn. Soon, he would be far from alone.

The Hall of Truths was so massive that mist gathered under its vast dome. The voices of Iyanden's greatest heroes, living and dead, echoed from the frozen waterfalls of wraithbone that stretched from floor to ceiling. Some of those present were still mortals, their lifespan measured in mere centuries. Others had served the craftworld for millennia, their statuesque war-forms towering over the Eldar that gave them a reason to fight on beyond the gates of mortality.

'Take heed, children of Asuryan,' said Farseer Dhentiln, 'for this is a day of fates.' There was a murmur amongst the assemblage. With the initiation phrase spoken, the audience would have to begin, despite Yvraine and Iyanna still absent.

'We must act,' said Eldrad Ulthran. 'We must find a way to change the fate of the galaxy.' Silence stretched out until Dhentiln gestured to continue. 'The red moon rises, for the Great Enemy is ascendant,' continued Eldrad. 'The veil is torn in a thousand new places each night. We cannot prevail alone.'

'Then who would you use as sword and shield alike?' said Sylandri Veilwalker, one of the high-ranking Harlequins in attendance. 'The Tau are still too young, the Orks too unpredictable and the Tyranids out of the question. Humans are too easily corrupted, this we know. They walk the same path we once followed, blindly walking into the abyss.'

'Not with faith,' said Dhentiln, nodding. 'With faith, they still have power.'

'And who can give that to them?' asked the looming presence of the Wraithknight Soulseeker, piloted by Aethon Sunstrider. 'Not their corpse-god. His time is over.'

There was a slamming impact as the doors at the end of the hall were flung open. 'No,' said Yvraine as she strode in, Iyanna Arienal at her side and a shadowed figure in their wake. 'They must have a new leader. Only then will they serve our interests.'

'Impossible,' said the corsair Lord Aracleo. 'They are entrenched.'

'They worship their past,' said Iyanna. 'If we raise a hero that reminds them of it, they will follow him. Do we not also cling to our myths, finding comfort in the glories of yesteryear?'

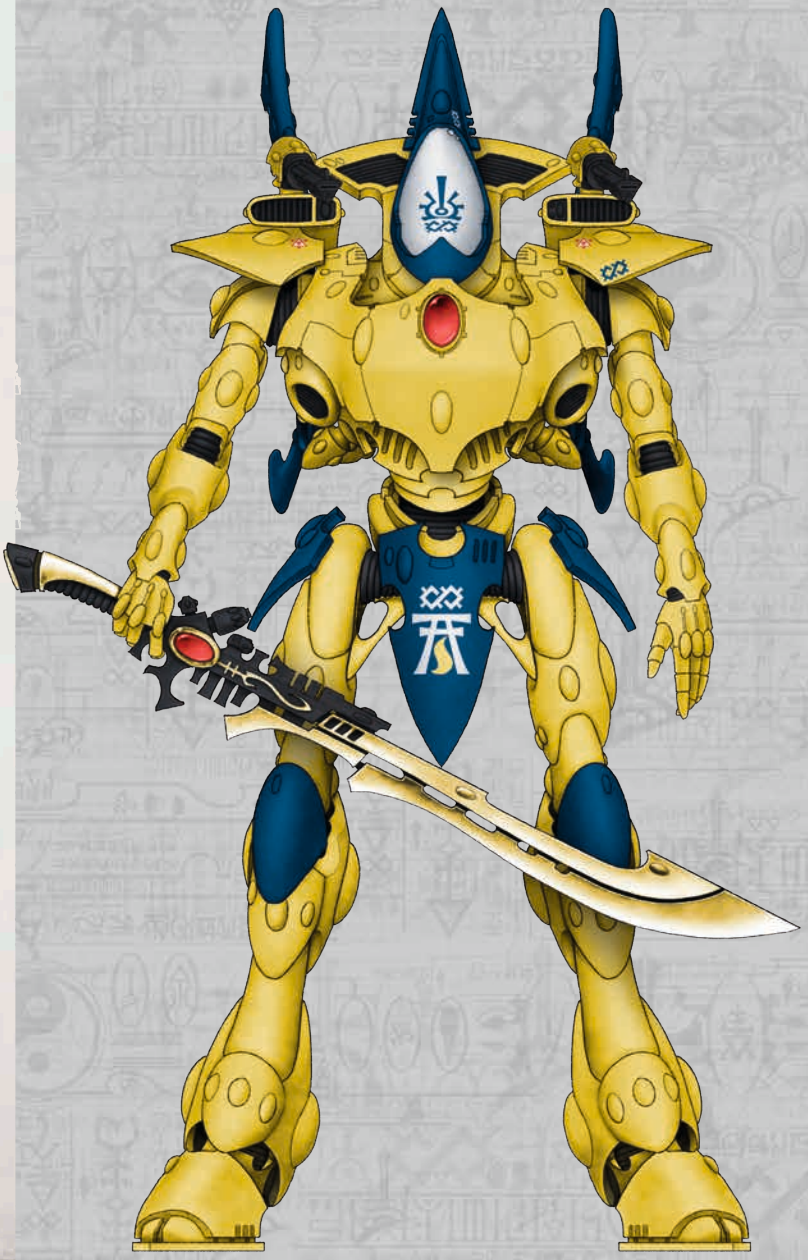
'She is right,' said Eldrad, 'and I have already found a way through the skein to that end, and a leader the humans will follow like sheep. The fulcrum of destiny is the moon of Klaisus, that we once called Ulthanash's Rest.'

'You do not steer our course, Ulthwéan,' said Dhentiln. 'We need not the guidance of the Damned, but the counsel of our own kin.' The uncomfortable silence was broken by Prince Yriel, stepping from the shadows to the incredulity of all present. As one, the wraith constructs kneeled, the ground shivering beneath.

'We shall give the humans a demigod,' said Yriel, his tone as chill as if coming from the other side of the grave. 'A king reborn, with a deathly blade. And the hosts of Iyanden shall go with us.'

THE SOULSEEKER REBORN

The Wraithknight Soulseeker is piloted by Aethon Sunstrider and his deceased brother, Ashodh. Like all Wraithknights, Soulseeker is given animus in the material dimension and that of the spirit world alike by the combination of living pilot and ghostly twin. The construct is the oldest of its kind, and a prized guardian of the House of Ulthanash. Its crew were first to volunteer when Iyanna's divinations led to the muster of a rescue mission bound for Belial IV. During the voyage back to Iyanden, Yvraine laid hands upon the giant construct and bound the soul of the ghost twin Ashodh to that of his living brother Aethon. Now the two live as one in the same body, reunited on the mortal side of the veil. After the repelling of the Chaos attack upon Iyanden, Yvraine used that same soul magic to transform dozens of wraith warriors from somnambulant revenants into vital beings as deft as they were in life.



<ADDENDUM XENOS>

SOURCE PROMARTIAL:

MACROLUCIAN SEERS, NUNC VIGILIA

<cf. THE FICKLE ULTHWE>

The sudden appearance of black-clad Eldar across the penumbra of the Eye of Terror persists. They have been positively identified as the warhosts of the Ulthwe world-ship by their insignia and heraldry, and have been active as far out as Fenris, with some reports of Eldar pirates clad in midnight armour coming from even further afield.

These strike forces have only ever appeared on planets that have been under invasion from the forces of the Enemy, and in every case barring the Great Traidia Riots, have sought to fight alongside the Imperial forces rather than against them. This does not mean shots have not been fired, of course; the sudden appearance of xenos scum upon sovereign Imperial soil is reason enough to declare war, and in some cases the Ulthweans have disappeared almost as soon as they arrived.

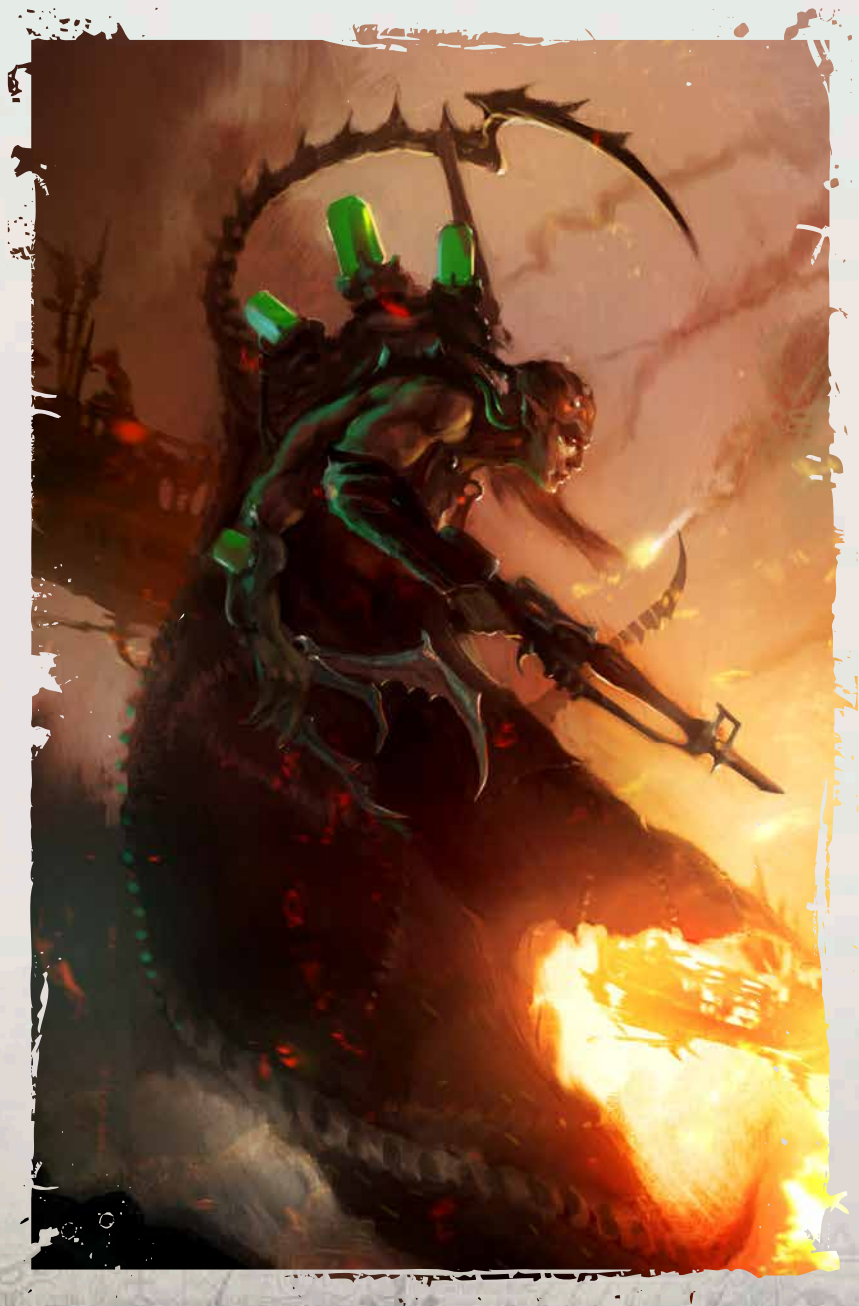
Those who have been forced to tolerate their presence, however – whether through choice or desperation of circumstance – have found them powerful allies. They appear quite literally from nowhere, stepping through portals of xenos origin with their guns already raised and blazing. Each report of such an appearance makes mention of the fact their weaponry makes little to no noise upon firing. This can be considered yet more proof that these creatures do not appreciate the joyful thunder of honest and hateful war.

Very few Imperial commanders have succeeded in exchanging words with these so-called allies, and those that have are treated with thinly veiled contempt. Rest assured, that emotion was reciprocated on every occasion.

The harrowing odyssey of Yvraine and the Reborn had been the subject of much interest in the Kabal of the Black Heart. The Supreme Overlord Asdrubael Vect had far more pressing matters to attend to, for Commorragh was wracked by the most severe of dysjunctions and his aeons-old power base was literally falling apart. Yet he could not shake the desire for vengeance upon the upstart gladiatrix that had triggered this turbulent uprising that night in the Crucibael arena, and causing division amongst the Commorrites – a sentiment shared by a great many of the Haemonculi who had long considered themselves the true masters of Dark Eldar society.

The dysjunction of Commorragh was an eventuality Vect had long planned for. He was a past master at ensuring that when misfortune befell the Dark Eldar, his rivals suffered the worst; often it transpired that it was Vect's hidden hand behind the disaster in the first place. Though he implied to his servants that he had deliberately triggered the cataclysm to relieve his immortal ennui, Vect was secretly livid that his personal fiefdom had been defiled, and his contingency plans forced into sudden reality.

Whilst his rivals scrambled to salvage the remnants of their once-glorious holdings amidst the spreading Warp quake, Vect was already well established elsewhere, populating the ruins of ancient port cities and turning them into sprawling fortresses. He offered safe haven to those who sought his protection – at a price, of course – and prepared for his long campaign of counter-attack.



Meanwhile, the cataclysm of the Dark City occurred in a series of chain reactions. The underground River Khaïdes burst its banks as a slough of Nurgle Daemons flopped into its acrid reaches, surging into the streets above to trigger waves of necrotising plague. With the mid-spires largely unguarded, Tzeentchian sky-sharks and the fiery chariots of Daemon sorcerers roared into the skies, flame spiralling as they clashed with the murder-packs that populate Commorragh's starscrapers. When the Daemons of Khorne poured through empty streets to invade the sprawl of Sec Maegra, the most nefarious, hardened mercenaries and pirates of the galaxy united as a single army in the face of swarming Bloodletters and rampaging Greater Daemons. The hordes of Slaanesh, beside themselves with ecstasy, sated themselves with orgies of violence unbound as they massacred Commorrite kabals spire by spire.

That immense and complex metropolis had power enough to swallow even a major Daemon incursion and cauterise the areas deemed irretrievable, but it was far too fractious a domain for a unified defence. Many of the Dark City's Archons tried to slay their rivals under the pretence of fighting back the Daemon hordes, their actions adding to the mayhem. Skirmishes and gang wars broke out in the streets in escalating measure, for this time there was no Kabal of the Black Heart to bring the city to bloody order.

Like a palace made of dominoes given a single push, Commorragh suffered a chain reaction of disasters. Around the Crucibael, the escaped Tyranids that would once have been put down with relative ease carved a red path through the domains of the Wych Cults. Archon Sythrac, counter-attacked after a vicious but costly coup staged against the Lords of the Iron Thorn, was beheaded by the shadow creature Kheradruakh.



With this singular and grisly kill, the Decapitator finally claimed the last 'perfect' skull he needed for his dark work. Flaying it and licking his trophy clean, he used it to complete the underground ritual he had been obsessively fashioning from the stolen heads of his prey over the last eight millennia. The gaze of a thousand perfect skulls met in the middle of his lair and bored a hole in the wall between worlds, opening a gateway to the midnight dimension of the Mandrakes. A morass of shadowy assassins and tenebrous monsters spilled like an inky flood through the streets, and slew every soul within a dozen miles. In the space of a single night, that region became the shadow kingdom of the Decapitator, long-lost monarch of the Mandrakes. His was a new reign of terror, his throne set within a sea of living shadow that consumed even the Daemon invaders that strayed within its grasp.

On the third night that shadow army combined its strength with the fleshy hordes of the Haemonculi Covens. Endless menageries of twisted flesh-things and shadow daemons surged up from the Dark City's underworld, and the mayhem of the Daemon incursion begin to lose momentum. The Kabals and Wych Cults regrouped somewhat, using their knowledge of the Dark City to fight back against the Warp-born invaders. As the dark suns burned overhead, Commorragh's fate hung in the balance.

In Vect's presence, the topic of the dysjunction's cause was already taboo. The Supreme Overlord had already claimed he had Yvraine in his power, and that he and his Haemonculus allies were painstakingly extracting every ounce of the power she had shown in the Crucibael. Though there had been no proof of it, none were foolish enough to call him a liar to his face. Vect had publicly tortured the steersmen and corsair warriors Yvraine had abandoned in her flight from the city, but of the gladiatrix herself, there was no sign. Rumours were circulating that Vect's claim was hollow, and his rivals – his former paramour, Lady Malys of the Poisoned Tongue, foremost amongst them – were doing everything in their power to ensure that Vect's authority and dominance was undermined.

In secret, Vect was sparing no expense in the search for Yvraine, and Urien Rakarth's Prophets of Flesh were pulling every string they could in order to track down the Ynnari. Without the aid of their Harlequin allies, the Ynnari would likely already be captured, but for now they had slipped the net.

To Rakarth, the rumours of soul magic were both intoxicating and horrifying. They hinted at a prize worth any cost to the nigh-immortal Coven-lords, whilst also representing a manner of death that even a Haemonculus Ancient would not be able to escape. Word had already reached the master fleshcrafters of the embodiment of Ynnead that had fought the coven sent to Belial IV. Upon their return to Commorragh, the Haemonculi had ascertained that their worst fears were true; their slain fellows had been entirely reduced to dust by the powerful revenant magic of the Yncarne. Every vat-clone, phylactery-hidden remnant and secret skin sample had been desiccated to nothingness. Somewhere out there was the power to wield both inescapable death, and life eternal.

WAR IN THE LABYRINTH

With a galactic cataclysm unfolding around them, the Ynnari made haste to the ghost halls as soon as the Iyanden Seer Council had reached its decision. Using her influence over the spirits of the dead, Yvraine worked every available moment to transfer the consciousness of ancient heroes from the infinity circuit directly into the wraithbone bodies they had previously only controlled via the use of spirit stones. These ghost warriors were not trapped in a waking dream, but given new life by Yvraine and her kin, able to see, feel and hear the material world around them with all the clarity they had possessed as mortals. Though mute, their gratitude was obvious in their deference – the stiffness and uncertainty of the typical wraith construct was replaced by a fluid grace as the statuesque spirit warriors adjusted to their new forms. Before long these newly realised ghost warriors had taken up the artefacts and heraldry of their mortal incarnations. They were truly Reborn.

With their senses singing and their thirst for vengeance undiminished, the ghost warriors of Iyanden were more formidable than ever.

In conjunction with Iyanna Arienal and her Spiritseer brethren, the high priestess of Ynnead brought entire ghost halls to full wakefulness. The wraithbone constructs were filled with purpose – they felt the presence of Ynnead calling them to war, for if any could command them from beyond the veil, it was the God of the Dead.

Within a matter of days, the Ynnari made for the webway once more. This time they went with not only with elements of the Swordwind, ghostly emissaries from Altansar and strike forces from the craftworlds amongst their ranks, but also with a mighty host of Reborn ghost warriors. Many of the Iyandeni traditionalists objected vociferously to what they saw as a crippling blow to the world-ship's defences, but the newly realised constructs would not listen to even the most compelling argument, and would not allow themselves to be stopped. Few had the nerve to stand before the ancient heroes of the Eldar race and tell them to stand down in the name of passivity and caution. The future of their entire race was at stake, and the dead would do everything in their power to ensure that their living brethren were beyond the reach of She Who Thirsts.

From the sternmost portal of Iyanden, the swollen ranks of the Reborn made for the depths of the webway once more. To use those esoteric pathways often carries a cost – even with the Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow to guide them, the Ynnari found their progress painfully slow. Fractal complexities haunted their peripheral vision, surreal dreams assailed their minds, and false turns confounded them every night. Half real, half of the Warp, that twilit dimension was in places as much the domain of the



Dark Gods as that of the Eldar – or rather the Old Ones that had come before them.

The Chaos-tainted wilderness of the webway, long abandoned even by the Harlequins, had become the stalking grounds of Ahriman, Arch-Sorcerer of the Thousand Sons. A devotee of Tzeentch, Ahriman had once been a mystical warrior of the Imperium, noble and just. In the millennia-long search to save his cursed Legion, he walked such dark paths he became consumed by ambition and revenge.

Ahriman's former master, the Daemon Primarch Magnus, had wrought a great doom for the Space Wolves, those executioners that had hounded his Legion to near extinction. In doing so he had not only brought utter devastation to the Fenris System, but also used the tremendous magical forces he had unleashed to force his own power base, the daemonic Planet of the Sorcerers, through the veil between the Warp and realspace. That cataclysmic act of metaphysical manipulation had seen a dozen new Warp storms spiral into being across the galaxy. Empowered, the Legion of the Thousand Sons had risen again in power and prominence.

The Thousand Sons were a force like no other. In the name of enlightenment, they had dabbled with the energies of the Warp so deeply that a flaw in their geneseed had mutated out of control, with some of their number turned into fleshy monsters robbed of all sanity. Ahriman had cast a great spell, the Rubric, to preserve what was left of his fellows, but in doing so had been too successful. He had turned his kin from mutable flesh to unliving dust sealed inside baroque suits of armour. Since that day, the Arch-Sorcerer had sought a way to rescue his fellows from their deathly and soulless half-life. He had needed little spurring to seek out the Ynnari. In their travails within the webway, the Reborn had come to the notice of many a baleful eye.

Through the whispered cant of Daemons, word had reached Ahriman of a new force in the galaxy that could defy death – and even resurrect those whose spirit still lingered. With all haste, he gathered his Daemon servants and sent them into the twilight between worlds to serve as his eyes and ears. Here was a chance to save his Legion in earnest, and possibly restore them body and soul. He had sent several thrallbands of his servants alongside Abaddon's Black Legion to the ice moon Klaisus, for he had foreseen that planet as a nexus of fate in the greater schemes of Tzeentch. Yet that was a distraction from his own self-imposed mission – a task he still considered selfless, but which was more truthfully yet another quest for power and vindication entwined. If his agents in the webway spoke even a whisper of possible



redemption for his Legion, he would snatch it up with both hands. Then, once he had wrung the Ynnari's secrets from their pain-wracked bodies, he would use their power over life and death as he saw fit.

When they had first ventured into the webway from Commorragh, the relatively small size of the Ynnari expedition had lent them stealth. They had evaded the notice of Ahriman's diminutive spies, for the webway is impossibly convoluted and beyond the ken of all but Cegorach himself. Yet bolstered by warriors from Biel-Tan, Ulthwé, Iyanden, Altansar, and several other craftworlds that had been drawn to their banner, the Ynnari had become a force that could no longer hide.

Ahriman, having stolen passages of the fabled Tome Labyrinthus from the Black Library and deciphered their mind-bending secrets, knew many of those shattered spars that had been claimed by Chaos. He had even learned to scry regions of the webway at will, the better to catch his prey unawares. The sorcerer waited for his moment to strike with the attentiveness of a serpent; ten millennia of pursuing his arcane agendas had given him a terrible patience.

When the Ynnari strayed into the Psychedelta, a many-tunnelled region where the walls of the webway were thin, the sorcerer conducted a great ritual of translocation, sacrificing nine hundred and ninety nine captives to the glory of Tzeentch. The Changer of the Ways was pleased, and a few moments later, Ahriman burst from the aether to attack the Ynnari with a host of Thousand Sons and gibbering Daemons at his back.

The battle that ensued scorched the still air of the webway delta. It was a pyrotechnic display of raw Tzeentchian magic pitted against the expert skill and spiritual conjurations of the Reborn. Initially, the battle was fought on a narrow frontage, every thrallband and Daemon host pushing with relentless, tireless strength into the ranks of the Ynnari. The Eldar reacted instinctively, flowing and darting around every push and thrust with the expertise of master duellists. Then, as the Ynnari were forced to give ground by the sheer power and suddenness of the Chaos assault, the battle flowed back to the neck of that section of the webway, spreading into every one of the contributory capillaries of the Psychedelta. Before long, a half-dozen battles were being fought in parallel or in tunnels one atop another, each force giving everything it had to break past the other – and in doing so, win a critical advantage by attacking on two fronts in the neighbouring engagement.



High on a crystal bridge that seemed open to the void of space, a host of Iyanden's Guardians and ghost warriors were led into battle by the Wraithknight Soulseeker. A phalanx of Thousand Sons Terminators barred their path across the apex of the bridge, but the wraith-led host slowed not at the sight. Where they had once moved in ponderous strides, the blank-helmed constructs now ran with the easy grace of the living Eldar that loped behind them, their complex Warp-tech guns held tightly to their broad chests. Guardian heavy weapon platforms sent a steady hail of shuriken cannon fire into the ornately armoured Terminators, the shredding discs shattering or ricocheting from ensorcelled ceramite without visible effect. The Scarab Occult returned fire, their combi-bolters stitching thunderous explosions across the oncoming Eldar constructs, but in turn did little more than scorch their inviolable forms.

The Thousand Sons swiftly switched targets, picking out the Guardians behind with uncanny marksmanship to take a gory toll. The Sorcerers in their midst sent vivid helixes of light shooting out to trap the Wraithguard in cages of azure luminescence – these then contracted to slice through wraithbone as if it were raw meat, until only chunks of ivory anatomy were left behind. Those Terminators armed with rotary cannons and hellfyre rocket launchers poured in enough Warp-cursed firepower to dismember two of the leading ghost warriors. The irresistible force of the Thousand Sons firepower had met the immovable object of the wraith host, and found their edge not in technology, but magic.

Soulseeker loomed over the front line, his flickering shield generator casting a pale aegis of light across the leading elements that prevented the worst of the magical storm from taking a greater toll. The Wraithguard, so protected from the Terminators' salvoes, seized the moment, running in close to open fire with their distortion weaponry. Howling vortexes of Warp energy simply snatched away their heavily armoured targets as if they had been sucked from an open airlock into space.

Soulseeker charged through the Thousand Sons ranks, braving salvoes of mutagenic fire that would have turned a mortal target inside out, and swept his immense ghostblade across the span of the enemy battle line. The dolorous blow cut several of the Scarab Occult in half at the waist, breaking the Thousand Sons' cohesion. Suddenly, the Iyanden Wraithblades were in amongst them, fighting with grace and efficiency of movement as their axes hewed apart suits of Prosperine battle-plate.

Tortured by so many arcane forces clashing at once, the crystal bridge shuddered, shook and cracked along its length. Some of the wraith constructs were fast enough to leap from one cracking floe of crystal to another until they reached the safety of the far side. Others were not so lucky, and tumbled away into nameless, fractal oblivion.

Nearby, the Daemon-choked tunnels of the Psychedelta's rightmost spar were lit brightly with Warpflame. Cackling Pink Horrors and Flamers drizzled fire with manic glee as they lurched and bounded towards their quarry. Amongst them were towering Lords of Change, each hurling their own devastating spells at the oncoming Eldar. The Biel-Tan spearhead that faced that flaming host suffered a thousand deaths in the space of a few terrifying minutes.



Wherever the mutagenic flames touched an Eldar warrior, manifest insanity was left behind. A squad of Howling Banshees were turned to infants in outsized armour that looked at their blades in fascination. A trio of winged Swooping Hawks were transformed to a scintillating rain of scaled serpents. A shrine of Dire Avengers, having released a hurricane of razored shuriken, found their projectiles reversing course to attack them with the avidity of starving piranhas. Each inventive demise brought great merriment to the Horrors that massed around the Lords of Change. For a while, the webway echoed with skirling hilarity.

The laughter stopped when figures of legend strode forth, brought together once more by the mighty Jain Zar.

Majestic as Khaine himself, the Phoenix Lords emerged from the darkness of the webway one by one. It was not Asurmen at their fore, but his foremost student – she who had taken Ynnead into herself, and found her way back to the Reborn.

Baharroth dived low, blinding beams searing from his multi-barrelled rifle to burn the eyes from a Lord of Change as he passed. His sword took its head with contemptuous ease as he shot past in a sapphire blur. Faced with a horde of assailants, Jain Zar span, polearm blade carving a deadly spiral around her. Her triskele shot outward; it cleaved pink-skinned Daemons in twain on the way out, then slashed through their blue-skinned replicas on the way back as it returned to her hand. The Brimstone Horrors that scattered the ground in their place shrieked at the sight of Fuegan, the Burning Lance, striding swathed in the heat of a thousand fiery deaths. They ran back howling to set fires amongst the Thousand Sons that came behind. Hissing in impatience, the Lord of Change Zarzapt the Ineffable strode forward to bathe Fuegan in Warpfire, but its mutagenic curse could not touch the Phoenix Lord's scaled armour. A moment later he blasted the creature into discorporating mist with a pinpoint beam from his firepike.

Asurmen ran a beaked Tzeentch herald through with the Blade of Asur, hoisting its wriggling body high so his Dire Avenger acolytes could shred it to nothingness with shuriken fire. Maugan Ra, standing legs braced atop a fallen Wraithknight, methodically shot every blade-winged Screamer from the sky with such impeccable skill that not a single one of the Maugetar's shuriken failed to hit its mark. His bio-explosive rounds he saved for the Burning Chariots trailing flame through the skies; each turned to a fiery meteor as they were sent crackling into the hordes below. The Greater Daemon Vexwing teleported into being behind him, stave raised to lay him low. Before the blow could land, Karandras struck from below, melting from the shadows to hack the avian horror into shimmering nothingness with biting blade and scorpion's claw.

The Phoenix Lords' skill at arms outmatched the Daemon host to such a degree that not one of the Horrors or their flame-hurling, bestial brethren could lay a single claw upon them. Here, amongst the tight press of battle, the First Exarchs were lethality personified.

In the next spar, at the foremost tip of the Ynnari advance, the warriors of Ulthwé raced to close quarters with the tightly packed Rubricae. The Black Guardians had felt the sting

+++OPTICON SOLO+++

INQUISITOR ARROD IBN MOADH

ORDO MALLEUS

<THE CACOPHONY OF EXTREMIS SIX>

The appearance of a horrifically scarred Heretic Astartes warlord upon Extremis Six has correlated with a psychic missive from the Prognosticators of Titan. Their prophecy has been borne out – the fiendish traitors that follow Lucius the Eternal are behind the seismic death of that once-populous starscraper planet.

The Prognosticators, having warned of a billion death screams stacked one atop another, evidently foresaw the collapse of the vast starscrapers that studded the mineral-rich planet's prime continent. These were shaken to their foundations by translocator-sized sonic weapons attached to the upper limbs and carapaces of a traitor Titan Legion (cf. Riotous Host) – the auditory barrage deafened, drove insane or even liquefied those in its path, depending on their proximity. After continuous pulses of mind-killing noise eroded their structural integrity, the starscrapers collapsed in on themselves in swift succession, the billowing hurricane of rock dust making extraction all but impossible even for power-armoured soldiers.

The airborne Astra Militarum regiments that moved to enact vengeance (cf. 352nd Elysian Drop Troops, 998th Harakoni Warhawks, 142nd Etharic Seraphs) and their Militarum Tempestus allies (12th Thetoid Condors, 1st Zetic Harriers) reported heavy resistance from Heretic Astartes in the war colours of the Emperor's Children. Ironically, for all the planet-shattering noise that has laid it low, the war zone has gone utterly quiet.

The alleged sighting of a gigantic, serpent-bodied <<<REDACTIO VOX DEUS>>> slaughtering everything the Astra Militarum could send against it has yet to be confirmed or denied.

of the Thousand Sons' ensorcelled fusillades before. They knew from experience that a single inferno bolt could blast an Eldar limb from limb. Yet they faltered not, for they knew the God of the Dead was watching over them. In rushing the enemy lines they invited decimation, and indeed many irreplaceable lives were lost. It would likely have been a massacre but for the presence of Eldrad Ulthran.

The High Farseer cast the runes of war to lend uncanny fortune to his kin, whilst his close ally, Kysaduras the Anchorite, sent storms of crackling lightning within the ranks of the Thousand Sons to disrupt their firing lines. Ahriman parted the sea of his warriors with a wall of psychic force before replying with his own volley of magic. Transmutive flames struck out, turning the elder Farseer Kysaduras into a crude wooden statue that was caught eternally in a pose of desperate anguish.

With the Ulthwéans came the Masque of the Midnight Sorrow, their Shadowseer casting a veil of mist over the Dire Avengers that sprinted alongside them. Where a volley of blazing bolts roared in, the mists saw the fiery bolts pass through the aspect warriors as if they were made of no more than shadow. The blitzing attack had gained the Ulthwé warhost a good deal of ground, however. As their Harlequin allies flipped and danced through the air around them, the Eldar hit the Thousand Sons line like a bladed tornado.

The armoured automata suddenly found themselves hard pressed. The heirloom blades and energised swords of the Reborn slashed open ancient power armour at the waist, the shoulder, and the neck, each blow aimed with pinpoint precision to ensure as telling a cut as possible. The tactic worked well, and for a triumphant few seconds the Eldar advanced over dismembered suits of battle-plate that lay gently steaming in the mist.

Then Ahriman pointed his staff, and geysers of pink fire roared out to consume the Harlequins vaulting towards him. Three graceful warrior-dancers were caught mid-leap; they landed as scatterings of dust. At the same time, the ranks of beleaguered Thousand Sons seemed to wake from their dreamlike torpor and attack with sudden speed, shoulder-barging, punching and clubbing the Eldar to the ground with the stocks of their bolters before stamping down to mangle flesh and crush bone.

In a crackle of Warp-light, Eldrad materialised amongst the Thousand Sons, the glowing Staff of Ulthamar spinning to shatter their armour as if their ancient battle-plate were made of no more than fine china. The fight in the tunnel descended into anarchy around him as the Ulthwéans pressed in again and again, their morbid black and bone armour lit by the neon-bright, mind-searing hues of the raging psychic battle.

In anarchy and mayhem, the forces of Tzeentch thrived.



Riding upon aetheric winds came the Exiles, gathered over the millennia to Ahriman's side. Nine was their number, each a Sorcerer of incredible power who had, alongside their master, transformed the Thousand Sons to their unliving state. Some strode through the air itself, footsteps blazing in their wake; others came on bladed discs that soared through the air, or rode fiery chariots pulled by swift sky-ray Daemons. The Triumvirate of Ynnead had been sighted on the front line, and the psychic signal had been sent – the Reborn were fighting hard to break through the Thousand Sons ambush with Yvraine at their head. It was time to close the trap.

The bird-headed Azhtar Manutec stretched his feathered fingers into claws, grabbing and ripping

the air. Fifty metres distant, Incubi bladesmen were torn bodily apart by invisible forces. The skull-mantled biomancer, Naratt of the Broken Troth, stunned a knot of Eldar with a blast of kaleidoscopic light before casting knucklebones at their feet like a farmer scattering grain. Each osseous seed grew swiftly into a fleshless corpse, the unliving warriors clattering forward to lock bony fingers around the limbs of the nearest Eldar. Ahriman himself tied an invisible noose and pulled it taut, a score of those Eldar closest to him clutching at their throats as all breath was sucked from their bodies. Each new spell took a terrible toll. Here, so close to the Warp from which they drew their power, the millennia-old Sorcerers of the Thousand Sons could mould reality to their desires with the twitch of a finger.

Towards them came Yvraine, her face twisted in a snarl. Her proud strut turned into a purposeful run, her expression that of a lioness who has seen her cubs cut down by a cruel assailant. Kha-vir, the Sword of Sorrows, sang at her side, the edge of its blade glowing white with psychic corposant. With her came the Visarch, his own Cronesword held poised to strike, and the Yncarne, howling with the voice of a thousand departed souls. Empowered by the deathly energies around them, they moved faster than any mortal creatures should. Whispering potent curses, Yvraine cut the air with her fan, and six scalpel-sharp dirks flew on deathly winds to impale a chanting Sorcerer. Another found his spell cut short as the Visarch ran in close, the Sword of Silent Screams casting a pall of soundless twilight around him as the great blade sheared off the front half of the Exile's helmet – and bisected his head with it. Nearby, the Yncarne rose high like a bird of prey on a hot thermal, only to swoop down forcefully. The quicksilver Sword of Souls flowed to become two daggers that slashed and stabbed at the Thousand Sons, each striking with a demigod's strength behind them. A circle of Rubricae turned their guns on the creature, but although their explosive salvo tore bloodless chunks from the Yncarne's torso, they could not shift the cruel smile from its face.

A spiralling vortex of spiritual energy whirled out from the creature's opening maw, and the Thousand Sons froze like statues. The mystical animating forces within them had been reduced to nothing more dangerous than echoes.

Yvraine felt her hatred flare hot, her gyrinx growling at her side. There was their leader, commanding the throng from his perch on a disc of fiery metal. Casting aside her finery, she shot towards him like a living missile, her companions close on her heels. Calmly putting his staff aside, the champion of Tzeentch cupped his hands as if trapping a winged insect, and hurled a handful of nothingness upwards with a roar.

Along with the Visarch and the Yncarne, Yvraine suddenly found herself adrift – not within the webway, but without. They were stranded in a near-silent limbo, trapped on the top of the psychocrystal walls. The sounds of battle were muffled beneath them, and the cool void sucked in its breath at their backs. Yvraine did not look around, for she felt something there, in the darkness. A voice in her mind said should she do so, she would behold the Changer of the Ways himself, and learn the meaning of madness. That voice was not Eldar, but human; it belonged not to a salvaged soul, but to the Arch-Sorcerer below. Another joined it; that of Elierrogh the Sage, one of the spirit passengers within her. She had studied this one at length.

A flash of insight struck Yvraine. 'Ahzek Ahriman!' she shouted, 'I have that which you seek. I can restore your brethren!'

A stone's throw away, the Visarch cut at the webway's exterior with the Sword of Silent Screams, but he could not scratch it. The Yncarne hissed in pain to her flank, trailers of purple mist unwinding from its body as it was dissolved by the aether behind.

'And why should I believe that?' came the sorcerous voice in Yvraine's head. 'You have no power here, in my new domain.' She felt white heat as something loomed behind, the fell gaze of godly eyes burning down upon her with terrible, inhuman focus.

'Open your eyes!' she cried, secretly praying to Ynnead that her desperate gambit would work. She pressed her hands upon the psychocrystal of the webway's exterior, focussed on the armoured Legionaries within, and reversed the cycles of their existence.

A dozen of the Thousand Sons Rubric Marines, previously levelling firepower into the Reborn with the emotionless efficiency of automatons, staggered backwards as if struck. They looked at one another, clutched their hearts, and fell back, rallying around Ahriman before taking up the defensive stances of the Emperor's Legiones Astartes. Yvraine could just make out their words as they frantically sought to make sense of their situation.

'Ahzek? Is that you, brother?'

'Where are the Athenaeans? These are Eldar we face this day!'

'In the name of Magnus, what is going on?'

Ahriman shook his head as if stunned, his wide shoulders shaking uncontrollably with mirth, grief, or a mixture of the two. He brought his cupped hands together once more and yanked Ynnead's luminaries downward with a shout of pure exultation.

A lurch of the stomach, and Yvraine suddenly found herself in the swirling tide of battle once more, the Visarch and the Yncarne quickly taking up positions behind her.

'Do it,' she said to her companions, siphoning the rich reservoir of Eldar life force that flooded the tunnels into a single burst of invigorating energy. In a flash, the Iyandeni giant Soulseeker was there, trailing white flame as his wraithblade carved a chasm through the crystal of the webway's superstructure with an ear-splitting scream. Stepping to the edge of the fissure, the Yncarne opened its maw impossibly wide. It inhaled so mightily the resurrected Thousand Sons were drawn towards it, stumbling over the edge of the chasm to fall away into the void beneath. Ahriman screamed in denial, riding his disc after them on a trail of fire.

'The Whispering God gives new life,' said Yvraine as her Reborn surged forward around her for the kill, 'just as he takes life away.'





CLASH ON THE ICE MOON

With Ahriman defeated and the majority of his thrallbands trapped on the far side of a metaphysical chasm, the battle for the Psychedelta swiftly turned in favour of the Reborn. Yvraine and her fellows were initially forced to backtrack, joining their rearguard at the mouth of the delta and taking the two spars that led to the relative safety of the arterial tunnels beyond. Though perhaps only half of their number had made it to the other side alive, those that had died had their spirit stones secured by the living. They would fight on, just as scores of departed Eldar already fought on within Yvraine. Of the Yncarne and the Phoenix Lords, there was no sign, but for a tunnel packed with the swiftly discorporating remains of a thousand Daemons.

The Harlequins of the Midnight Sorrow once more took their place as guides for the greater mass of the Ynnari, following the laughter of Cegorach as a ship follows a lighthouse's beam. The Laughing God had been most amused by Yvraine's gambit, and was of a mind to help her to her destination. Twisting the fabric of fate to confound the Dark Gods had long been Cegorach's way, but he yearned for a brother in arms, for his fellow gods were long ago devoured by She Who Thirsts. Though awakened Ynnead was sombre and sinister in comparison to Cegorach's riotous, colourful demeanour, any force in the galaxy that could deny Slaanesh was worth fighting for. To rebuild a trinity of Eldar deities, with Khaine as the fell-handed destroyer, Ynnead as the giver of life after death and the Laughing God to balance the two – that was a truly worthy goal. Indeed, some amongst the Ynnari had already begun to talk of the gods as a small pantheon – and even pay homage to them in thought, deed, and sumptuous regalia, becoming an echo of the ancient Aeldari in microcosm. One of the Spiritseers, upon seeing this, asked if the equivalent female trinity was to set Iyanna Arienal as the maiden, Yvraine as the mother and Lady Hesperax as the crone – though a sharp glance from a Crucibael Bloodbride cut short her mirth.

With the Harlequins' divine patron guiding them out of the webway, the Ynnari made good speed for the ice-locked moon of Klaisus. Orbiting the planet of Kasr Holn, it was as pallid as a corpse's skin, its surface swirling with blizzards. Eldrad had seen the white orb clear in his visions. Indeed, he had been dreading its coming, for in his glimpses of the future he had seen its snows stained by blood. To the Eldar, such an omen was truly feared; it symbolised the spilt blood of Eldanesh at the hands of the war god Khaine, and a severing of the peaceful accord between the Eldar and their deities. The High Farseer still had hopes that omen was inverted – a sign of imminent disaster not for the Aeldari, but for their enemies. They approached a confluence of fate where they would join forces with Humanity, and in doing so strike a blow against the Dark Gods that could yet prevent the fabric of the universe from unravelling.

Unbeknownst to Eldrad and the Ynnari, the omen spoke true for every kindred that set foot upon the cursed moon of Klaisus. The murderous hordes of Abaddon's Black Legion were already on the attack upon that ice-locked orb, waging war on the Imperials that followed the vision of the Living Saint, Celestine. As the Ynnari came to the spherical webway portal that led to the Crone's Claw mountains, they gathered one final time to commune in the name of Ynnead. A swathe of Aspect Warriors from Biel-Tan were the first to wholly

KLAISUS

Klaisus is a world clad in ice, a place of desolate mountains and blizzard-afflicted valleys. Deemed by the Imperials to be of no real use due to its remote location, Klaisus has but one asset of interest to the scholar or the visionary – the ancient xenoform structure at the heart of the Crone's Claw mountain range. This strange curved crest arcs high into the air, its flanks dotted with oval shapes that glow with a ghostly phosphorescence when its true purpose is revealed. This moon was once an outpost of the ancient Eldar empire – a waystation that leads not only to the Psychedelta convergence, but also to the eastern fringe of the galaxy – that realm that Mankind knows as Ultramar.



entrust their souls to the Whispering God. Inspired, they finally found the inner steel to put aside their helms and their war personas, in doing so honouring not just Khaine in one of his aspects, but also Ynnead, trusting to an existence beyond the grave. Should they die, their souls would find salvation in those Ynnari nearby. In doing so the Reborn would deny Slaanesh her feast, join with Ynnead in the afterlife, and continue the fight against Chaos forever more.

Massing for battle alongside Eldrad and the Black Guardians of Ulthwé was a faction from the Cult of Strife. Lelith Hesperax had agents of her own; in hearing of Yvraine's intended destination from her Harlequin contacts, she had sent a force of skilled arena fighters to take up arms alongside the Ynnari. If these Wyches reported back that the Ynnari truly were able to allay the soul-curse that afflicted the Dark Eldar, then Lelith herself would seek them out and fight for Ynnead's cause. Yvraine suspected that Lelith's motivations were purely selfish – the belladonna of the arenas would give almost anything for an immortality of adoration without having to pay a constant cost in souls. Still, with her forces badly depleted by Ahriman's strike, Yvraine welcomed her kin from the Dark City with open arms.

Nearing the webway gate, Yvraine traced lines of psychic fire around the tiny triggersphere that hung in mid-air before it, setting in motion the opening of the portal. A thin hint of icy wind became a gust, then a gale of freezing cold as the webway gate unravelled the quantum barrier between the labyrinth dimension and the ice-locked mountaintop of the Crone's Claw. The Ynnari plunged through the fractal portal, only to behold a vision of utter carnage.

The precipice-ringed hollow of the portal's site was almost hemispherical, its lip ridged with sharp rocks. Beyond it was a wasteland stained with blood. A trail of corpses led for miles into the middle distance, many of the wounded and the dying pulling themselves through the gory slush in search of safety.

Here were the Imperials that Eldrad had spoken of, their strength all but destroyed by the ravagers of Chaos. They had clearly been forced-marching through the snow, assailed by the infamous Black Legion as they presumably sought the same webway gate from which the Ynnari emerged. It was here they had decided to make their last stand, unaware of just how close they had come to the ancient xenos structure.

Too stubborn or stupid to realise they had no chance of victory, the Imperials fought back with a desperate ferocity. A disarrayed assortment of Black Templars Space Marines, Sisters of Battle, Imperial Guardsmen and Adeptus Mechanicus forces fought at the feet of battle-ravaged Imperial Knights, guns barking as they gave their lives to defend three warriors in their midst – Inquisitor Greyfax of the Ordo Hereticus, the Archmagos Dominus known as Belisarius Cawl, and the Living Saint herself, Celestine of the Martyred Lady.

All of this the Ynnari took in at a glance, for the Eldar have senses so sharp even a blizzard is little hindrance to them. The Windriders of the Black Guardians were first into the fray, the Wyches of the Cult of Strife close on their heels. The Imperials, pushed beyond breaking point, could only stare in disbelief and wonderment as Ynnari warriors flowed like a river around them to crash against the Black Legion. The Chaos Space Marines had hounded their quarry across Klaisus, only to find themselves denied at the last. Now it was the blood of the Black Legion that turned the moon's snows crimson, the smoking corpses of mutant traitors to Humanity that lay thick upon the ground.

Seeing the large force of Eldar suddenly appear to repel his assault was enough to give even Abaddon pause, but he drove forward nonetheless. Twice he assailed the ridge of the Crone's Claw, and twice he was hurled back, his numbers sorely reduced. After the third time, he angrily ordered a tactical withdrawal. The bedraggled Imperials had reached safety – of a sort.

ADDENDA DOMINUS
(Apocellipsis Grade)

TEMPUS GRADE NON

SEVERUS GRADE ALPHA

++++

Inquisitor ven Ayr,

I submit the following for your attention.

Yours in dread,

Ellan van der Gheist

++++

The sudden detonation of the forge world Glenescrede Raptus has sent shock waves of trauma throughout the Glenid Swathe of Segmentum Pacificus. The dreams of every psyker within eighteen standard Terra-sols have been haunted by the same visions — that of a 'Daemon sun' emerging, sentient and hungry, from within the cold void. Some claim to have further visions of questing metallic tendrils pushing ever deeper into some forbidden crypt, wrenching out amorphous treasures that were never meant to see the light of day. Each such psyker to report these visions has become the epicentre of a daemonic incursion within the week, often requiring the use of dozens of Astra Militarum regiments to purge with any chance of success — and a high cost in the subsequent mind-wiping operations necessary to ensure the taint does not spread.

Though the precise import of these dreams may seem questionable, the site of Glenescrede's destruction has an energy signature that is not diminishing, but growing by the day. Soon it will have surpassed that of a red giant. Worse still, it seems to be moving, and trailing Warp storms behind it as a comet trails debris. By the calculations of House Balevolio, long considered the premier Navigators of that segmentum, it is heading coreward on a direct course for the Sol System.





THE ROAD TO SALVATION

In the dubious safety of the Crone's Claw, that natural bowl housing the Klaisus Wraithgate, humans and Eldar watched each other warily. The rag-tag Imperial warriors were exhausted, wounded, or dying, barely a hundred of them huddled around the giant Triaros Conveyor that the Archmagos in their midst clearly valued more than life itself. Incredibly, the light of battle still burned in every warrior's eyes – that, and the certainty of absolute faith. The Ynnari, knowing well the horrors that the Black Legion would have unleashed upon these hapless humans, took note of that determination, and looked with admiration upon the stubborn resolve of the survivors. To stand against the infamous Despoiler in person and remain unbowed… it was a feat worthy of the Dark Muses. Though it ran against the grain of their souls, even the Wyches of the Cult of Strife felt a kind of respect.

The Eldar, upon seeing the winged figure of the Living Saint, parted their ranks so a clear corridor led from the Ynnari leaders to Celestine. To her left stood Inquisitor Greyfax, as suspicious of the saint as she was of the xenos. To Celestine's right was the Martian priest; his servo-eyes followed a lithe figure who moved unnoticed into the ranks of the Eldar host before vanishing entirely from sight.

First came Meliniel, Autarch of Biel-Tan, followed by Yvraine, the Visarch and Eldrad. Swathed in ethereal energies, the Eldar seemed like ancient monarchs stepping from the world of myth. As they approached, Greyfax's hand went to the hilt of her power sword. The Visarch mirrored the gesture, grasping Asu-var in a graceful motion. These small acts of aggression rippled outward to the warriors of each side, escalating as they did so until it seemed as if conflict were inevitable. Were it not for the strident words of Autarch Meliniel ringing out over the cries of alarm, perhaps the Imperium would have lost its best chance to ride out the coming tempest, and perhaps the Eldar would have faded into obscurity forever.

With Meliniel's entreaty delivered, he had bought a few valuable moments – and in those seconds, chose to bow low before the Living Saint. His mastery of the human custom – and of the Gothic tongue – was impeccable. As Celestine moved forward to talk to him, she purposefully cleaned her silvered blade of blood and sheathed it behind her, motioning her Geminae Superia to hang back with Archmagos Cawl and his conveyor as she did so.

The few remaining Astra Militarum still alive averted their aim, but did not stand at ease. As Inquisitor Greyfax stepped forward to join the negotiations, the Black Templars stood on a knife edge of action and inaction, casting baleful glances to one another as if daring their battle-brothers to make the first move. A brief binharic blurt of the Lingua Technis from Archmagos Cawl, and the Skitarii marksmen aiming their long-barrelled rifles from the mouth of the valley took aim at the Autarch striding confidently towards the Living Saint.

Autarch Meliniel was the first to act. The seers were known to the humans as manipulators and liars, and the Drukhari as evil incarnate. A warrior, however, they might just listen to.

'I know you feel hatred for our kind,' the Biel-Tani commander said to the human leaders. 'You have good reason for it. But just as your million far-flung worlds each has its own culture, we too are a fractured people. You look upon that element that would see Humanity and Eldar both escape their doom.'

'We look upon pampered peacocks and depraved fiends,' spat Inquisitor Greyfax. Saint Celestine cast her a reprimanding glance, but the statement hung in the air, unretracted.

Meliniel cast his gaze at the strange acolytes of Ynnead beside him before turning to regard Greyfax. 'I thought so too, at first. My people have reason to fear the unknown more than most. But these visionaries are agents of destiny and hope.'

'Your Saint and I share the same goals,' said Yvraine. Her voice was quiet, but steady and sure. 'Even if she is yet to fully understand exactly what they are.'

'We would see your pilgrimage to completion,' agreed Meliniel.

'You Eldar twist fate,' said Greyfax, 'and only ever in your own selfish interests.'

'Perhaps,' said Meliniel, nodding. 'But there is only one thread that leads to salvation. And it is tenuous indeed. Our mutual enemies are in the ascendant as we speak. Look above you.'

None of the Imperials took their eyes from the Eldar.

'I know the sight well enough,' said Celestine. 'The Warp rift is an ugly and infected wound. We must prevent it growing any worse.'

'Enough of your riddles and platitudes,' said Greyfax, her upper lip curled. 'Why are you here, xenos?'

'Because your wish to deny the end of all things outweighs your unreasoning hatred,' said Meliniel. 'This is a crux point of fate. We believe that here, by casting a stone amongst the snows, we can start an avalanche that will quench the flames of Chaos.'

'The Dark Gods rise,' said Yvraine sombrely. 'We must rise higher, the better to cast them down. This lumpen thing,' at this she gestured at the Triaros Conveyor, 'this contains hope. The lord it belongs to will be a powerful symbol for your people; he will oppose the Ruinous Powers, and turn back the encroaching darkness.'

The Visarch stepped forward to stand at Yvraine's shoulder. 'And he will not be alone in that fight.'

'You have won yourselves an hour,' said Greyfax. 'Convince us, or die.'

The first hour of the parley slid past, and then the second, and the third, the atmosphere thick with a sense of history in the making. By the time the cold light of Kasr Holn's sun disappeared behind the curling talons of the Crone's Claw, the Eldar and the humans had come as close to an understanding as their races had ever attained.

After the Eldar had said their piece, the Imperial leaders had consulted amongst themselves. The Saint stressed that her visions had led her here, and that the xenos rescue could not have been happenstance. It was then Celestine chose to name where they must go next – a place that struck a chord with every soul present. It was imperative, she said, that the cargo the Tech-Priest carried reached its destination. Such was her conviction that she did not need to see Cawl nodding in confirmation to know the truth of her words. Given that the only route ahead was through a semi-mythical domain that the Eldar alone knew how to navigate, Celestine argued, they had little choice but to join forces. If the xenos had wished the Imperials dead, they had but to watch the Black Legion go about their red work, yet they had interceded in order to save the lives of human warriors.

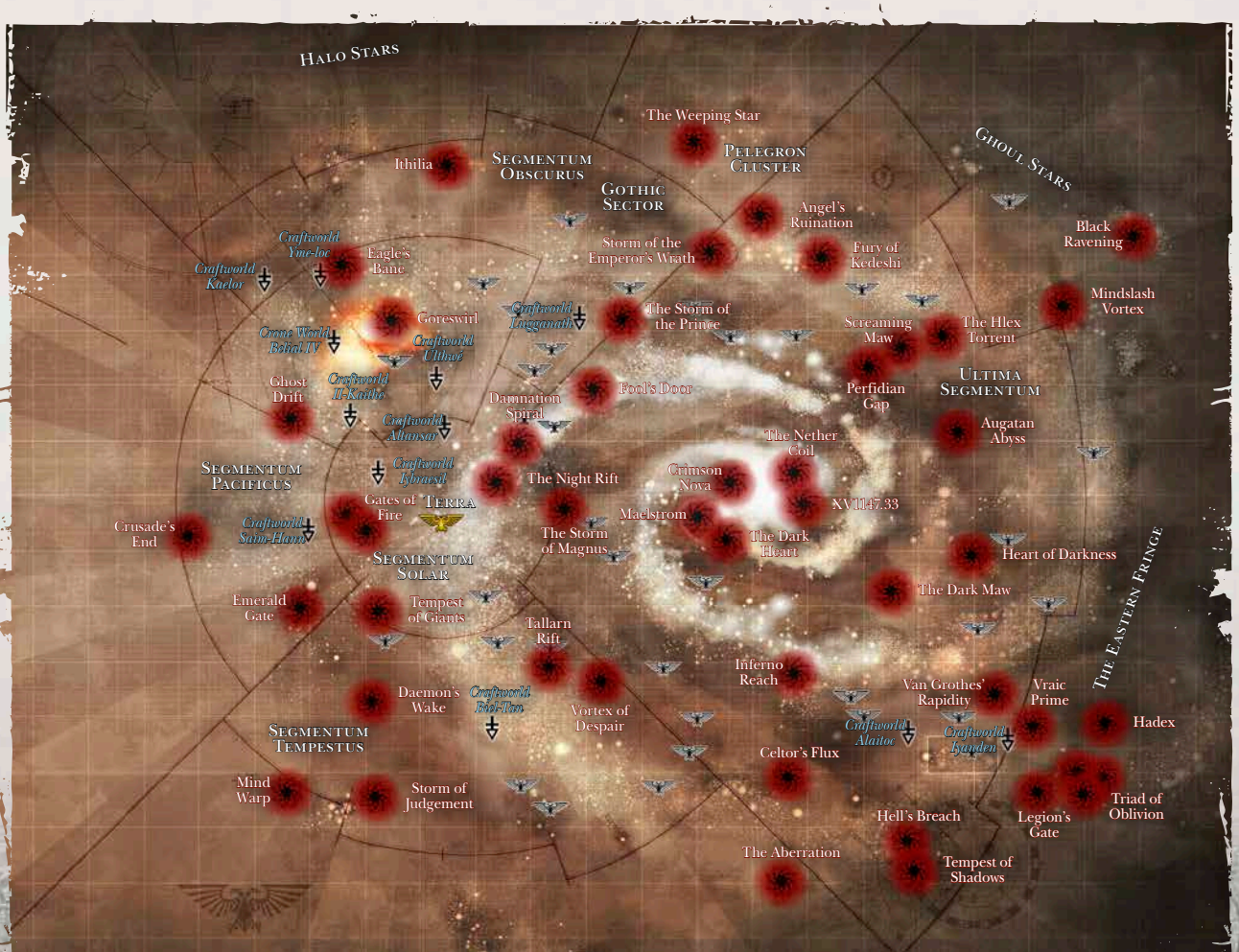
Greyfax counselled caution at all times, but agreed that their mutual task was more important than the immediate gratification of the kill – the Eldar could always be put down once their mission was complete. Though he still suspected trickery, and vowed to remain vigilant at all times, even Marshal Amalrich of the Black Templars eventually sheathed his weapons, giving the order for his battle-brothers to do the same.

It was agreed. The Imperials would accept the aid of the Eldar, placing themselves in their total trust – in actuality, they had little option, for to stray into the endless maze of the webway unguided is amongst the worst of follies. The Ynnari delegation had promised they would make good speed, outdistancing the Chaos Space Marines that pursued them and ensuring the Archmagos Dominus' precious ward remained intact.

So the two crusades became one, crunching through fresh snow to reach the giant glittering orb of the fractal webway gate. Their procession was lit by the swirling Warp storms that blighted the heavens high above, the splitting seam that threatened to disgorge the riotous unreality of the Warp into the order of the material universe. The Eldar filed through first, rejoining their craftworlder kin on the far side with solemn nods. The Imperials ventured through last, every one of them shocked at the size of the warhost beyond, and looked upon a world of marvels.

As incredible as the webway's lambent architecture was, it was a mere precursor to the glory that would follow – the vector by which the allies would strike out for their true destination.

The realm of Ultramar, and Macragge.

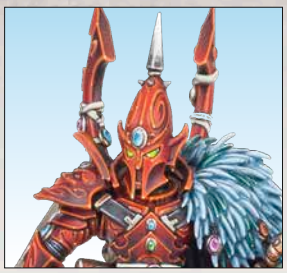


'EAVY METAL



The Visarch, Sword of Ynnead

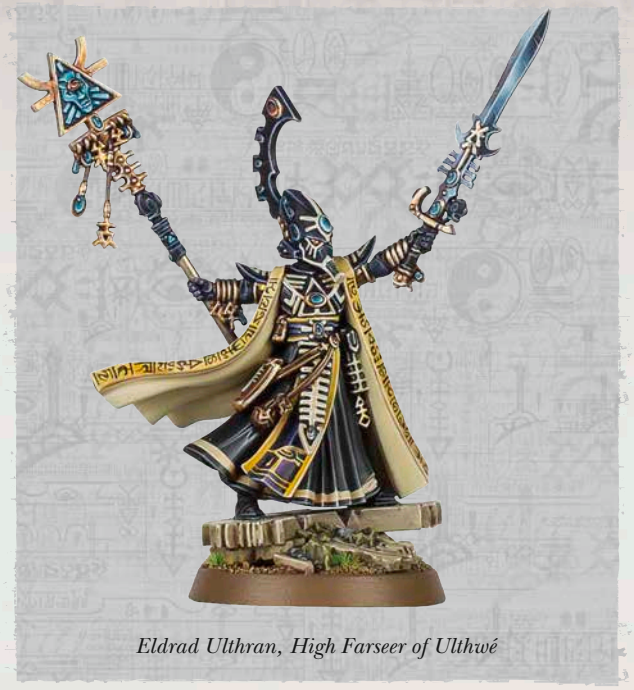








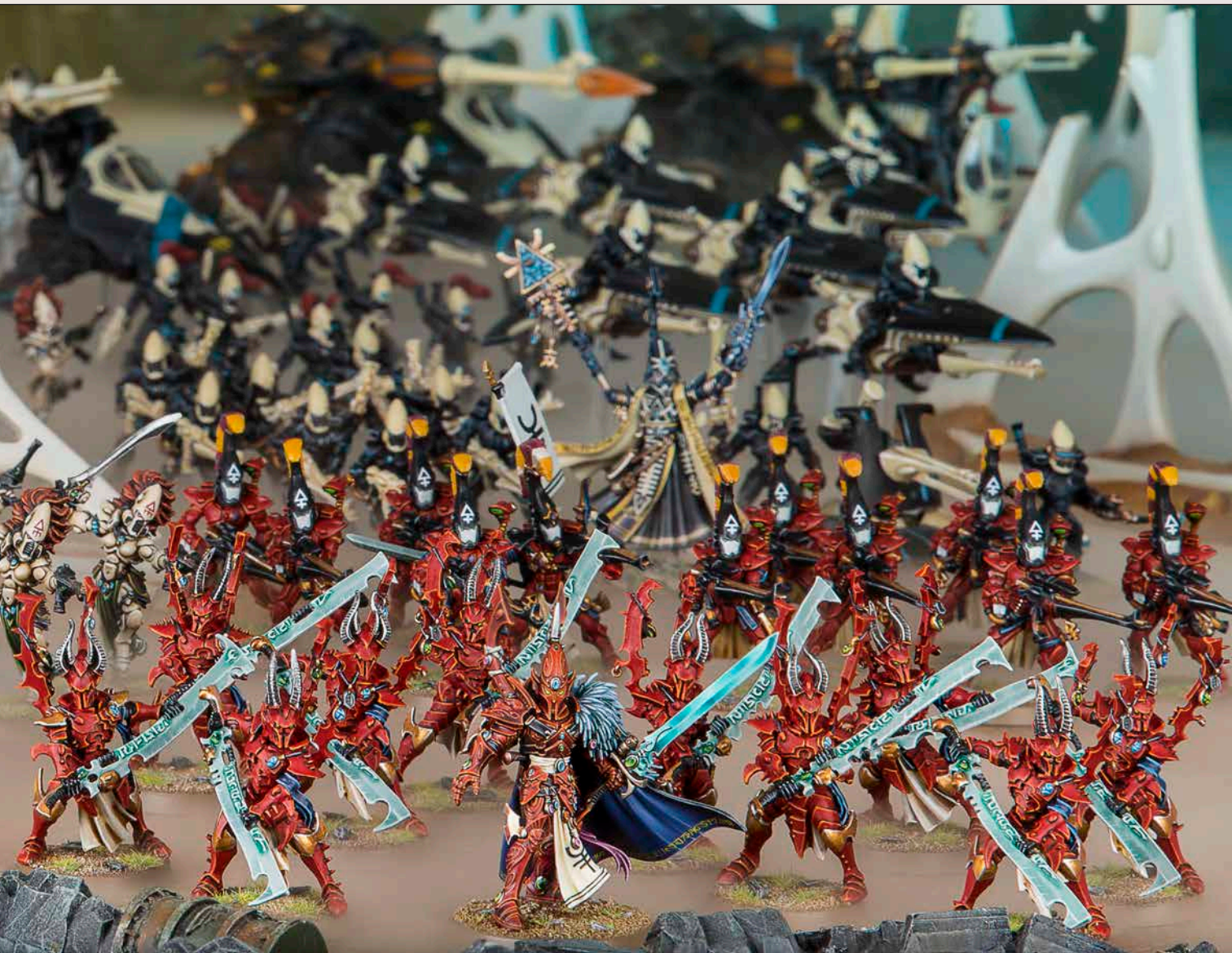




Eldrad Ulthran, High Farseer of Ulthwé

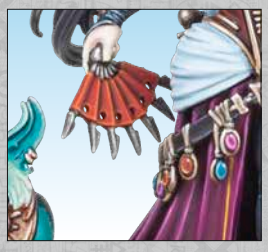


Phoenix Lord Jain Zar, the Storm of Silence







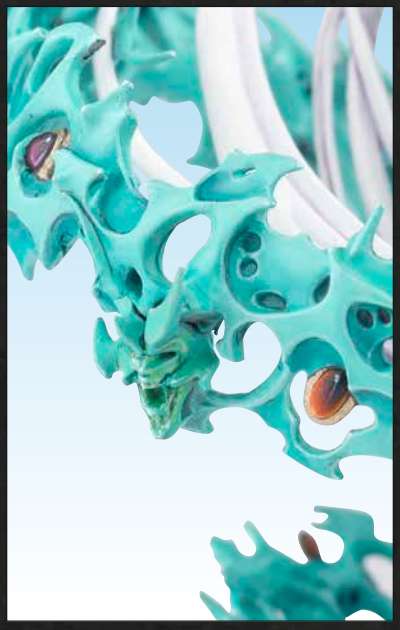


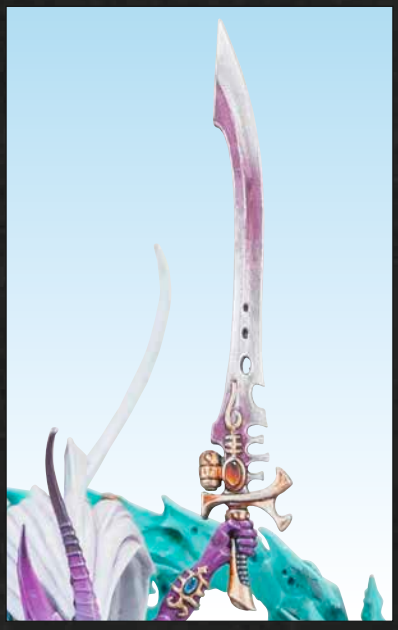


Yvraine, Daughter of Shades, Emissary of Ynnead









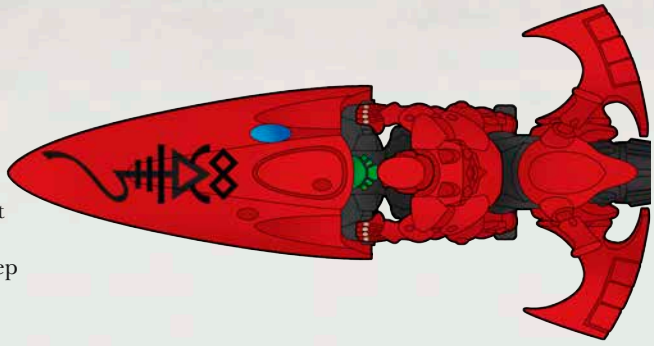


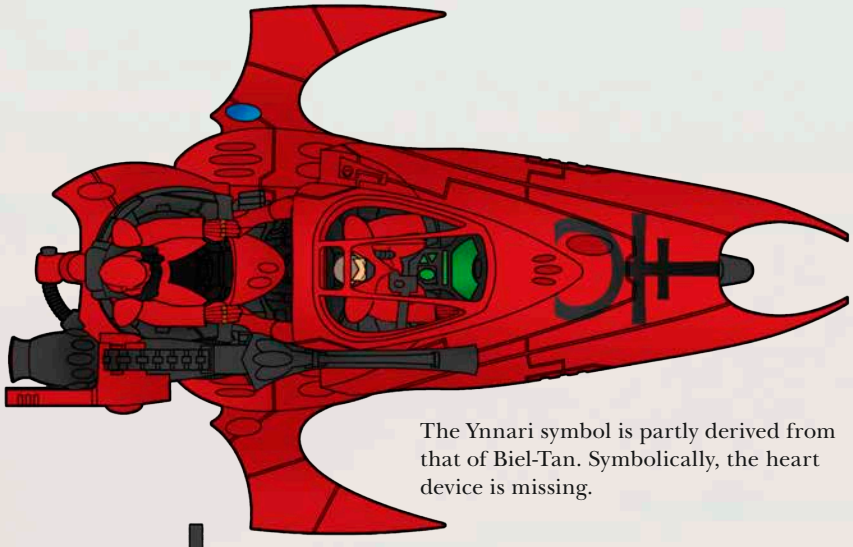
The Yncarne, Avatar of Ynnead

FOLLOWERS OF YNNEAD

The Whispering God has found many willing disciples amongst the Aeldari, even beyond those who flocked to the banners of his prophet Yvraine. Those who declare themselves Reborn show their allegiance in a number of ways.

Some craftworlders who swear permanent allegiance to the Ynnari adopt the deep red colouration Yvraine's vanguard, accentuating it with allegiance runes of black or white; others keep their new agenda secret.





The Ynnari symbol is partly derived from that of Biel-Tan. Symbolically, the heart device is missing.



Some ghost warriors bound to Yvraine wear complex Ynnari runes on their helms.



Dae'reac Starhunter, reborn after a visitation from Yvraine, wears the colours of Yvraine.



The first Farseer to don the crimson of Yvraine's vanguard was Lathriel of Biel-Tan.



The Ynnari symbol is often worn with a stylised oval at its apex, symbolising the spirit stone taken within.



Eldar Guardians are a common sight in Ynnari warhosts, often wearing their symbol on the helm.



Adalian of the Sable Sword wears the Ynnari rune on his forehead and helm.



The Azure Crescent shrine shows their allegiance to Ynnead on their tabards.



The Fire Dragons of the Molten Spear bring death to the enemies of Yvraine.



The Hegrian Banshees complement their bone armour with crimson.



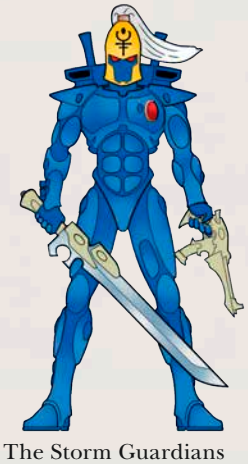
Some of those who first resisted the Ynnari have now taken their rune and become fervent converts.



Many of Biel-Tan's Storm Guardians believe they can keep their Craftworld's spirit alive through battle.



Only a few hundred of Alaitoc's warriors have left their former conservative philosophies behind.



The Storm Guardians known as the Slicing Sabres aspire to channel their slow wrath into swift victory.



The Black Guardians of Ulthwé joined the Ynnari's cause, for they are no strangers to the esoteric.



Some Black Guardian Strike Forces inverted their colours to symbolise the victory of death over life.



Warlock Liirhanthradh wears the spirit stones of fallen Ynnari psykers, bolstering his powers.



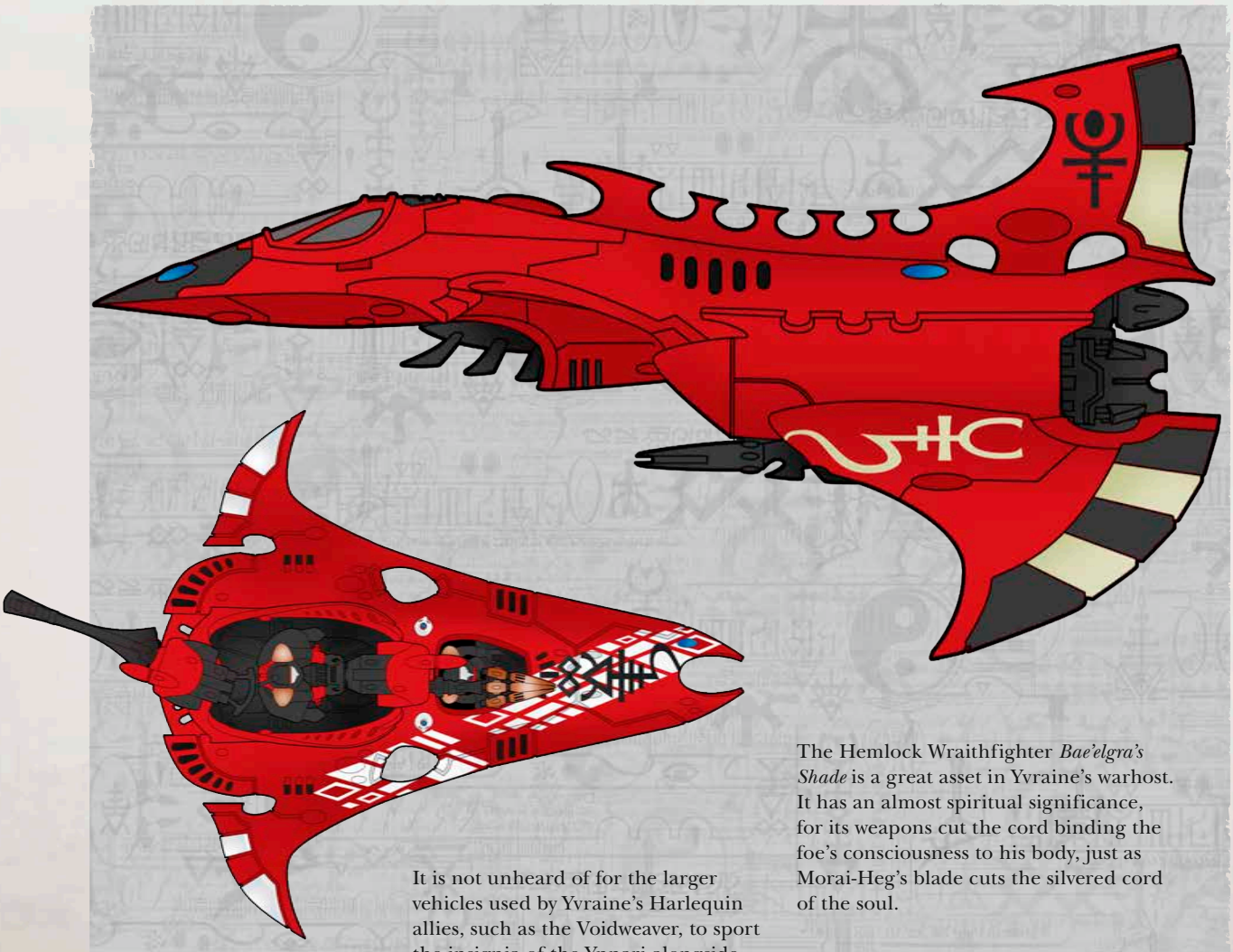
Elheir Dawnstar, since conversing in private with Yvraine, has uttered only threats and dire war cries.



Though the Masque of the Midnight Sorrow were first to fight alongside the Ynnari, the Penumbral Masque have become their most ardent Harlequin defenders.

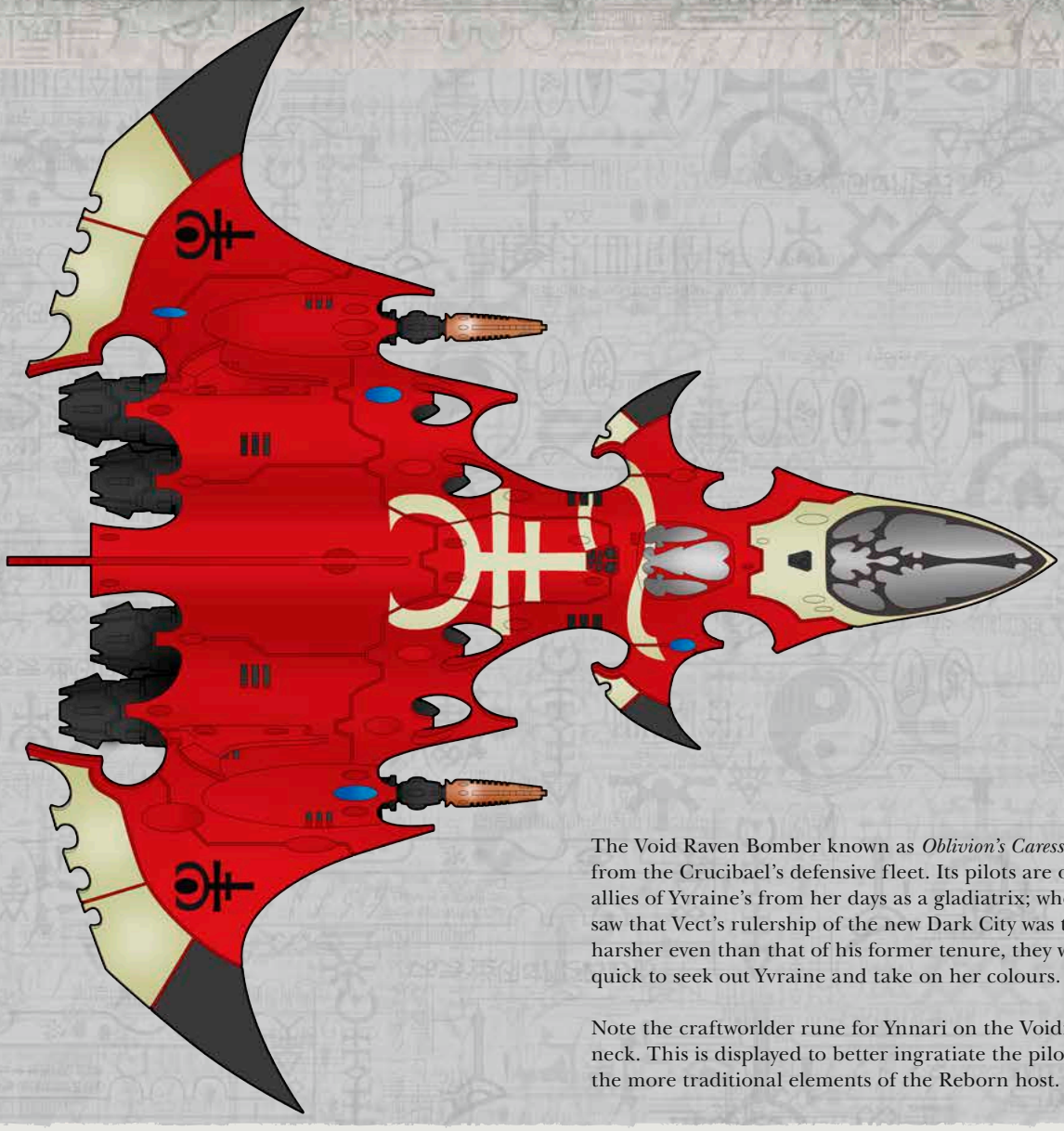


The Incubi of the Coiled Blade have long followed the Visarch's lead – some say their master was once a Dire Avenger Exarch, others that he fought as a Klaivex for many years.



The Hemlock Wraithfighter *Bae'elgra's Shade* is a great asset in Yvraine's warhost. It has an almost spiritual significance, for its weapons cut the cord binding the foe's consciousness to his body, just as Morai-Heg's blade cuts the silvered cord of the soul.

It is not unheard of for the larger vehicles used by Yvraine's Harlequin allies, such as the Voidweaver, to sport the insignia of the Ynnari alongside their own favoured markings.



The Void Raven Bomber known as *Oblivion's Caress* hails from the Crucibael's defensive fleet. Its pilots are old allies of Yvraine's from her days as a gladiatrix; when they saw that Vect's rulership of the new Dark City was to be harsher even than that of his former tenure, they were quick to seek out Yvraine and take on her colours.

Note the craftworlder rune for Ynnari on the Voidraven's neck. This is displayed to better ingratiate the pilots with the more traditional elements of the Reborn host.



Some of the Wych Cults who hear Ynnead's call tattoo Ynnari symbols onto their skin, or paint the runes onto their Wychsuits.



A number of Commorragh's Kabalites left the service of their dark masters to join the ranks of the Reborn. Some show their adopted allegiance with colours or icons, whilst others keep it a close secret.

