

WARHAMMER
40,000

ETERNAL CRUSADE

DEATH AND THE MAIDEN WORLD



A Short Story by Graham McNeill

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Laughter always made Ishar sad. It reminded her of the time before the Fall, when the laughter had been real. This sound, this imitation was not what she remembered. It was forced and empty, as if they all understood what had been lost, but could never admit that to one another.

The children knew. They heard its counterfeit nature and immediately turned from it. In their innocence, they were wiser than the adults.

Ishar lay on a mossy rock in the Glade of Autumn's Waning, letting the last rays of sunlight warm her ivory skin and listening to the faint sound of laughter from across the water.

She'd thought she was alone.

She wondered who was here and what they had to laugh about.

Her father repeatedly told her not to come to the Glade. He said it was a dangerous place; a reminder of grief and golden times passed. Ancient starlight glittered in the water, light freighted with dark memory. The stars saw farther and they saw deeper. They wept for the fair eldar, and to swim these cold waters was to taste that grief.

Ishar closed her eyes, wondering if today would be the day she would swim. Was it time for her bones to join the others at the bottom of the pool?

She sat up and let her feet dangle.

The water's cold was piercing. It drew a gasp from her.

She tasted the sorrow of the stars and wept for her race.

Entire worlds fallen to madness, cities cast to ruin, and a race that once beheld the galaxy in all its wonders burned to ash in a single cataclysmic night.

They called it the Fall.

Ishar thought that too small a word for a race's death.

Many years had passed since the anarchy of that terrible, endless night, but her memories and dreams were as potent as ever. Ishar doubted she'd ever be rid of them.

She looked down and her lips parted in shock.

Her mother's face floated beneath the surface, serene and beautiful. Spectrally pale, flame red hair billowed around her shoulders. A shroud spread from the lifeless skin of her arms like feathered wings.

Ishar slid from the rock and plunged into the water.

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Her eyes opened and she sat up with a cry of fear, clutching her breast and feeling her heart beating like the wings of a night-feeding moonfisher bird.

Night had fallen, and any charm the glade once held had vanished. Now it was a place of the dead. Water lapped beneath her, and the reflected stars were no longer sad, they were hungry.

She slid from the rock and followed the path back through the trees. Night mists crept from the water's edge, and branches curled overhead like clawing talons. Cold winds snatched her clothes and twisted the mist into moaning ghosts.

She shouldn't have fallen asleep, shouldn't have let the dreams come. Now she must deal with the aftermath. Nor was sight her only sense memory of dreams from the Fall.

She tasted the ash of cindered corpses, felt the savage joy so many had taken in their murder. Echoes of lust surged through her and her skin reddened with the thought of secret desires given free reign.

'I will not fall, for I walk the Path of Balance,' she said, reciting the mantra her father had taught her since they had first come to Velioss,

fleeing the disintegration of eldar society and its headlong plunge into excesses of all kinds.

Velioss had been a paradise, and its world spirit had welcomed them to its bosom. It became the paradise their birthworld had been before the cults of pleasure had taken over, a Maiden world. Life had been joyous, a new beginning where fear and doubt were unknown.

Less than ten years after their arrival, the Fall had come.

The people of Velioss thought themselves safe. So far from the heart of their once-great civilisation, they believed the horrors their kin embraced would not affect them.

They were wrong.

The seeds of destruction that bloomed to dreadful life and destroyed the eldar lay in them all. Everyone on Velioss felt it, the surge-tide of psychic madness that gripped the hearts and minds of those they had left behind. It spread from the eldar homeworlds like a sickness, a species-wide insanity that almost dragged them into the same bloody abyss.

Yet they had endured, and upon the new dawn's break a bloated new star took its place in the firmament. It glowered where the greatest empire the galaxy had yet known had once shaped the heavens.

It was a leering, secret star. A star only ever half glimpsed. A terrible, unblinking eye that only ever revealed itself in the darkest nights. It stared down upon the eldar of Velioss with monstrous appetite and infinite patience.

It waited, unblinking. Always thirsting.

Ishar cried out as she saw a figure on the path before her.

He shone in the darkness, clad in a simple robe of pale cream and with his hands laced before him. Starlight dappled his silver hair and the shadows retreated from the radiance in his amber-flecked eyes.

‘Father,’ she said, relief flooding her.

‘You were at the Glade.’

She saw little point in denying it.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I was, what of it?’

‘You should not go there without me,’ said her father. ‘The Eye is always hungry. It always seeks us, and our anguish draws its gaze like nothing else.’

‘I like the Glade,’ said Ishar. ‘I go there when I desire solitude.’

Her father nodded and said, ‘Solitude is valuable, but seek it elsewhere. When painful thoughts turn inward is when she comes.’

‘The Thirsting God again?’ said Ishar, smiling and raising an eyebrow. ‘You still think she is real?’

‘I know she is. I see her in my dreams. So do you.’

The smile fell from Ishar’s lips.

Her father’s name was Asurama, but no-one called him that.

On Velioss he was known simply as the Prophet.

He had the shealladh, the sight.

It had been Asurama who had spoken loudest against the corruption he saw at the heart of the eldar empire. His warnings had been scorned, his doomsaying drowned out by lunatic screams and lustful cries.

Even knowing his pronouncements would go unheeded, he never stopped, and his powerful oratory swayed tens of thousands to follow him to Velioss. Here, amid the bounty of this paradise world, he shunned any thoughts of leadership and spent his days seeking the places where springs sourced at the heart of the world bubbled to its surface.

Ishar had not seen her father in over a year, an almost insignificant span to a race as long-lived as the eldar, but which suddenly felt far too long.

He opened his arms to her and she let herself be embraced.

‘It is good to see you again, father.’

‘And you also, daughter.’

‘What brings you back?’

‘You,’ he said. ‘And the survival of our race.’

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To Ishar’s surprise, her father led her back to the glade, where the dark waters were a black mirror. All was silence. No night-birds sang, and the whispers of chill wind were left behind in the forest.

‘Why are we here?’ she asked.

‘I need you to see something,’ was his cryptic answer.

Hand in hand they climbed the rock from where Ishar had heard the sound of laughter. She didn’t want to look down, fearful of what she might see, but did anyway. This time there was no sign of her mother, just the still waters.

‘You saw her, didn’t you?’ asked her father.

‘Who?’

Her father shook his head as though disappointed in her obtuseness. ‘You know who, your mother. I saw her too, in a place where the waters had become trapped. Where the energy of the world had grown stagnant with evil.’

‘What did you see?’

‘I saw her suffering,’ said her father, and Ishar saw how old her father had become. She had never seen it before now, but the weight of millennia bore down on him like a curse of Morai-Heg. ‘The Thirsting God has her.’

‘There’s no such god,’ said Ishar.

‘Once I would have agreed with you,’ sighed Asurama. ‘But there is now.’

He looked up to where the secret star glinted like a faint crack in the facet of the perfect gemstone.

‘We birthed her,’ he said with the regret of a man carrying a burden of guilt not his own. ‘She slumbered long, but the death scream of the eldar awoke her, and the ages yet to come will damn us for our folly.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Ishar, wanting to deny his words, but suddenly feeling their truth.

‘We will never be safe from her,’ said her father. ‘She is thirsting, always thirsting, always hunting us.’

‘But we are safe here?’ said Ishar. ‘That’s why we came here, to get away from the danger and the horror. You said we would be safe.’

‘Aye, child, and for a time we were,’ said her father. ‘In life she cannot claim us, but in death...’

His head bowed, memory of lost love robbing him of his words for a time.

‘When we die she takes us,’ he said. ‘When we die she devours our souls and torments us for all eternity. Death for us is no longer a release, no longer a return to the galaxy’s natural cycle of birth and rebirth, but an eternal nightmare of pain and suffering.’

The horror of what her father was saying paralysed Ishar.

‘Why are you telling me this?’ she asked at last.

‘Because our race must endure,’ he said, taking her hand and placing something rounded and cool there. She looked down to see a milky gemstone of polished marble in her palm, set in a golden clasp upon a leather thong. It shimmered with lambent light that swiftly matched her own heartbeat.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said.

‘Put it on.’

She did so and felt a curious warmth enfold her, a sense that she and the stone were one. It was part of her now and she knew she would never lift it from around her neck.

‘I call it a spirit stone,’ said her father. ‘It will keep you safe from the Thirsting God. So long as you wear it, you will be a ghost to her.’

There was something her father wasn’t telling her about the spirit stone’s properties, but that could wait for another day.

‘You didn’t bring me here just to give me this.’

‘No,’ agreed her father, taking her hand. ‘I didn’t. Look out over the water and let the shealladh guide you.’

‘I don’t have the sight,’ she said.

‘You are my daughter, of course you do,’ replied her father. ‘In time you will see farther than any of us.’

He smiled, something rare for him. ‘Who knows, perhaps you could even be the one to bring the Path of Balance to our kind.’

Ishar didn’t know what that meant, but did as he asked. She sent her gaze across the water. The reflections of the stars were brilliantly crisp, stark and clear.

‘I don’t see anything.’

‘You will,’ her father promised her.

The surface of the water rippled, and she gripped her father’s hand tightly as she saw things moving in its depths. Images churned below, terrors conjured from the skein of time and viewed through the warped lens of the water.

Too many to see all at once, too many to believe.

She saw monsters with leathery green skin; howling, tusked brutes with bloodstained axes and roaring contraptions of claws and spiked rollers. Smearred with blood and warpaint, they roared like beasts as the world burned around them.

The image was overtaken by battling phalanxes of warrior giants, clad in metal armour emblazoned with the sigils of their masters. They trampled this world beneath their booted feet, ramming gold-winged banners into the earth.

Hundreds of gangling, clumsy, creatures fought beside them, like hairless jokkaero dressed in painted rags. She gasped as she realised the clubs they carried were in fact firearms.

Who would risk giving weapons to such primitive beings?

‘What are they?’ she said, disgusted by their appearance.

‘A race that will outnumber the stars in time and drive all before them. Even us.’

‘Never!’ cried Ishar. ‘They are animals.’

‘There’s truth in that, but they are many and they have a ferocious appetite for life. It is what makes them strong and what makes them so vulnerable. Their desires are so banal and so callow that the Thirsting God and her kind will ensnare them with ease.’

‘Are we to fight them?’

Her father shook his head. ‘One day they will come, but not until the galaxy completes its current revolution. All the hosts of the stars will come to the worlds orbiting the stars at the heart of this system.’

‘Why? What is there here for them?’

‘Many of them will not even know why they come,’ said her father. ‘To destroy and shed blood is enough to sate their base appetites, but in time they will learn the truth of what has called them here.’

‘And what is that?’ asked Ishar.

‘Look again,’ instructed her father.

Ishar sent her sight deep into the pool, now recognising the elliptical dance of planets, the trinary stars at the heart of the Arkhona system. Her sight was drawn to the fourth planet, a blue green orb that rivalled Velioss in its verdant perfection. To all appearances, nothing Ishar saw warranted the murderous avarice she saw in the warring factions of the future.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

‘Look closer,’ said her father. ‘Look deeper.’

Ishar did, and as the truth of what she saw became clear, she slid to her knees.

‘No...’ she whispered, hoping she was wrong, but seeing the truth of it.

Tears flowed down her cheeks at the thought of having escaped one cataclysm only to have settled in the face of another.