

The Silent Death

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

Glass-smooth where acids and bio-plasma had melted the bedrock, knapped where chitinous claws and grinding teeth had gouged it. The walls of the subterranean tunnels cored through the heart of Arkhona were a mixture of the two, streaking past in a blur of twisting, intestinal loops.

A column of graceful, sleek-prowed vehicles sped through the tunnels, though to label them as such belied their effortless grace, their artful curves and deadly aspect. Wrought from crystalline glass and wraithbone, the thirteen Falcon grav-tanks flew in the wake of a host of shrieking jetbikes and Vypers.

The riders of the darting jetbikes were Saim-Hann, wild riders armoured in flex-armour of cerulean and ruby, bare-headed and tattooed. They whooped as they flew looping spirals, flamboyant double helix patterns and lunatic zigzags through the narrow tunnels, a feat of flying only the inhumanly fast reflexes of the eldar could achieve.

Hunched low on the back of a speeding Vyper jetbike, a figure of impossible grace bent into the hurricane wind of their flight. Barely a handspan separated her helm and the rock.

Armoured in bonesung plates of gold-edged white and azurite, the figure's blood-red mane streamed from her snarling helm like a whipping tornado. Slender limbed and feline in grace, she was a hero of the ancient days, returned from death to serve her people and slake an unquenchable fury in the blood of her foes.

Her name was Jain Zar, and she was a mortal god reborn.

Once, long ago in a forgotten epoch, she had been a single soul, but now she was legion.

Uncounted life-threads were woven into the tapestry of her being, a legion of eldar souls ensnared over millennia to sustain her vampiric existence. An endless procession of jumbled memories and stolen lives, each one jagged edged and hostile, warred within her. They fought for dominance, but the *thing* she had become, yoked them to a singular purpose.

She was a cutter of threads, an ender of lives.

She was the Silent Death.

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She remembered running the branching paths of the webway like this. Fleet of foot and laughing with the joy of a hunt. A soul rose from the ocean of her violent memories, its potency a white hot spike of pain.

She knew that soul; a warrior of Alaitoc, consumed a thousand years previously as he fought alone on a burning wraithship.

Ydresil, the Blade of Khaine.

He too had run the webway. Was this his memory or hers?

She could no longer tell. She saw images of chittering spiders of diamond and starfire, laughing warriors in splintering rainbows of light who danced as they slew. Jain Zar had fought with them, but was this a battle in which she had *actually* fought or a memory woven into her imperfect recall?

In truth, it no longer mattered. What one had lived, she lived. What they knew, she knew. Experience and memory fused as one, making her a killer unmatched in skill or lethality.

Whatever she had once been, whatever she had once dreamed was gone forever and no longer mattered.

All that mattered now was the hunt.

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She sensed the breath of corpse-ripened air before the light of the world above glimmered from the fairings of the Vyper. Burned metal, flames, vitrified earth and hot, aerosolised blood misting the air.

The smell of battle was her boon companion, an old friend to be welcomed with a glad heart and bared blade. With barely a flex of movement, Jain Zar had her weapons in her hands; one a black-edged triskele, the other a shivering polearm with a wickedly hooked wraithbone tip.

'Be ready,' she said, her voice grating with the pressure of myriad interleaved souls. Her words enflamed the hearts of her warriors, blowing the fires behind their war-masks from embers to furnaces. She felt their eagerness to be unleashed; Khaine's legacy a curse and blessing both. She felt the souls of every eldar within the grav tanks and aboard the jetbikes, tasting the duality within each and every one of them.

This one a poet whose mask shut away all thoughts of rhyme and meter as she opened the throats of her victims. That one a crafter of the finest jewellery who painted her gauntlets in blood. Take away the masks and they could never do the things they must, the things the eldar needed to survive.

Only by walking the Path of the Warrior could the eldar revel in such slaughters. And only by stepping from that path could they endure the things they did to ensure the survival of their race, letting them fade as nightmares must.

There! Light ahead, tainted a sickly purple by the mesh of writhing vines fringing the edges of the sinkhole giving egress from the tunnels.

The rock beneath the diffuse light was undulant, carpeted in thousands of wriggling, grub-like creatures. Each had six limbs – all but vestigial – and they ripped apart the dead meat tossed in from above. Their bodies were segmented, fat and glossy, little more than lamprey-like jaws and digestive systems.

Shuriken fire from the jetbikes burst them apart like milky bladders, the acidic stink of their internal fluids rank beyond belief. They screeched as they died, and Jain Zar felt the tearing of the raw psychic connection they shared with the rest of their vile species.

The host above would know something was wrong.

The Wild Riders whipped their speeding jetbikes around in right angled turns, shooting skyward with underslung shuriken tearing the net of vegetation above.

Jain Zar twisted as the Vyper spun skyward. The other jetbikes tipped over and angled back towards the ground, the riders standing tall in their saddles and loosing wild yells as they dived into the fray.

Jain Zar felt the souls within her gather, their keening battle-lust like the pregnant tension before a thunderstrike. She let the stampede of memories come, a jostling flood of a million blows struck and hordes of foes slain; battles a host of others had fought that now combined in a dizzying array of perception. Pain came too, for no boon was without a price.

She channelled that pain into a building crescendo in her chest, holding it fast and letting it build and grow stronger with each quickening breath.

Purple-hued fronds whipped past her, their touch as repugnant as she imagined they would be.

Then, from darkness into light.

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The jetbike inverted. Jain Zar dropped, a bladed angel from the skies. Arms wide, one leg straight, the other out to the side. The enemy host filled the valley, a sea of heaving, alien bodies with chitinous carapaces and pallid flesh the texture of mummified meat. She could not say for sure how she knew what a tyrannic beast's flesh felt like. Had she laid hands on one or was that a memory of another?

She hoped the latter.

Overhead, jetbikes duelled with leprous, bat-winged things with hooked tails and barbed teeth. They swooped and dived like insects in a bizarre mating ritual. She paid them no heed; their fight was their own. She had her own kill to make.

She landed on the run, the flexing haft of the *Zhai Morenn* quivering in her grip. A pack of hunched, screeching things turned to face her, Hormagaunts with clacking, fanged jaws and massively overgrown sickle-claw forelimbs. They rushed towards her in bounding leaps, barging each other in their frenzy.

She bent a knee and unleashed the *Jainas Mor*, the triple blades flaring with dark-edged flame as it scythed into their midst, slicing through hardened carapaces and soft flesh with equal ease. It flew as if with a life of its own, killing silently and reaping a decapitating path through the alien pack.

They scattered and Jain Zar leapt into the gap, whipping the long polearm around her body in blindingly swift arcs that left nothing alive in their wake. She punched through the Hormagaunts without breaking stride, killing anything that came near her with barely a breath.

She was aware of every aspect of the battle, the souls within her giving her an unparalleled situational awareness. Killing blows, lethal streams of flesh-eating borer-beetles, sprays of acid bio-plasmas. She evaded them all with ease, twisting her lithe body around in feats of acrobatics to match even the dancers of the Laughing God.

Shuriken fire carved paths through the aliens as the eldar cut into the host's flank. She slew horde killers, and leader beasts. Floating minds without limbs, serpentine burrowers and lumbering biological battering rams that spat fire.

All died to her blades and all were irrelevant.

She was not here to defeat these tyranids, only to split their attention.

Her true objective stood at the far end of the valley; an ugly *mon-keigh* stronghold, its towering walls of poured stone breached by insidious creepers and secreted acids. A gory ramp of alien corpses lay piled before the walls, hook limbs buried in acid-eaten stone that ran like heated wax.

A handful of brutish humans fought from behind the stronghold's tumbled walls and makeshift barricades of folded metal. Titanically armoured in plate of dark green and swathed in knightly robes, these were the best of the human fighters. Bred in laboratories and wrought from ancient science to render them stronger, they were faster and harder to kill than their flimsier brethren.

Though the notion of any kinship between these Space Marines and mortal humans was laughable.

Their guns were clumsily effective, relying on pure kinetic force and explosive force, rendering a kill all but certain. What skill was there in wielding such a weapon, what finesse?

She saw them register the presence of the eldar, felt their simplistic psyches react at the lessening of the pressure on their defence. She grinned as she understood they were warily relieved to see the eldar, utterly mistaking their intent.

The sun climbed over the edge of the valley, glittering from a gold finial atop a war-banner of green and ivory held aloft by a warrior on his knees and whose torso was a molten ruin.

‘This is the moment,’ said Jain Zar, grinning beneath her mask. ‘This is a doom of which Farseer Kseniya spoke.’

A pair of aircraft flew in over the mountains with the rising dawn, a transport with graceless lines and a primitive, fire-breathing fighter. The *mon-keigh* named them Thunderhawk and Dark Talon with a bombast typical of their literal species. The fighter banked low, strafing the onrushing horde with explosive gunfire and blasting a cratered path of shattered corpses.

Jain Zar planted the blade of the *Zhai Morenn* and vaulted a towering beast with vast swords of crackling, psychically charged chitin. The *Jainas Mor* cut through the beast’s neck as it returned to her hand, and she felt the abrupt howl of a thousand minds suddenly shorn from the yoke of its enslaving thoughts.

She sprinted up the ramp of broken bodies, vaulting from corpse to corpse and gaining height with every leap as she climbed to the walls of the stronghold.

With a final diving bound, Jain Zar cleared the chewed up parapet and landed in an elegant crouch upon the rampart. Metallic casings lay thick upon the stone and blood that was too bright, too *chemical*, to be natural gathered in thick, coagulated pools.

Jain Zar heard the roar of the Thunderhawk as it banked, feathering its engines as it dropped hard to the stronghold in a blaze of landing jets. The eldar attack had bought the stronghold’s beleaguered Space Marines precious moments, but Jain Zar’s strike had never been about aiding the *mon-keigh*.

It had been about keeping them alive long enough for the gunship’s commander to risk a combat extraction. The Thunderhawk’s frontal ramp slammed down and a Space Marine in a surplice of palest cream tied with a belt of keys over darkest plate emerged. His armour was elaborate, hung with knotted cords and emblazoned with personal heraldry of an ebon fist gripping a split-bladed sword. His white, fur-edged cloak billowed in the raging jetwash from the engines.

A Dark Angels battle captain of rank and station, one who had fought hard already, the eagle on his shoulder guard cracked where a blade had struck it.

_The Broken Eagle and a Broken Sword.

The veteran of Vraks, a servant of Belial.

A slayer of seers._

Jain Zar had pictured this warrior since Kseniya had spoken of his fate-line, hating him for the eldar seers he would kill if he were allowed to live. She had pictured how she would kill him a thousand times, and now that the moment was at hand, she revelled in the power such foreknowledge granted.

She sprinted over the cracked ramparts as the tyrannic horde spilled over the parapet. Gunfire shredded them, alien flesh detonating as explosive rounds blasted them apart.

The Dark Angels' captain saw her coming and unlike the warriors he sought to rescue, he did not misread her intent. Too wise in the ways of war to ever mistake her approach for anything other than a killing dance. He swung his weapon to bear, a gold-chased gun with eagle carved fairings.

Fast for a human, but laughably slow to an eldar.

To Jain Zar it was as though he wanted to die.

She was happy to oblige such a death wish.

Jain Zar bent low and unleashed the crescendo held fast in her chest and lungs, a cry of purest rage and hate that buckled the air between them. Amplified by the ancient artifice woven into her helm, her shriek all but lifted the battle captain from his feet.

He dropped to one knee as the psychosonic assault blew out his armour's senses and rendered him insensible. He recovered a moment later, but it was already too late. She skewered him through the chest with the *Zhai Morenn*, moving like liquid to spin around behind him as his warriors saw what she had done.

They shouted with voices that were the rumblings of grinding stone, grunts little better than greenskin savages. She ignored them and dragged the *Zhai Morenn* out through their captain's back, cranking

the blade as it went and ripping apart his heart and lungs. Bitter experience of multiple lives had taught her just how resilient such warriors could be.

Death had its claws lodged in him and even without the sight of a Farseer, she felt the thread of his fate snap.

He twisted in her grip, still fighting though his life was over. Part of her admired that even as she brought the enflamed blades of the *Jainas Mor* to his throat.

His last breath was not a curse upon her as she might have expected, but a question. The most important question of all.

He simply said, 'Why?'

'Because the Farseers will it,' she spat. 'Because of the lives I save by ending yours.'

She wrenched the *Jainas Mor* across his throat, cutting down to the bone. Blood jetted, hot and urgent from the warrior's neck.

And because it pleases me.