

# Eldar

*An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill*

Sarielle was a creator of delicate sculptures, but with the donning of her Banshee war-mask, she was now a howling killer. The urge to fight, to drop in amongst the lumbering orks was almost too great to resist.

But Farseer Kseniya and Jain Zar's orders were clear.

*When the fallen eagle shines as gold. Strike. Kill.*

She and her fellow Howling Banshees perched amid the velvet shadows of protruding roof beams in what had once been a human temple structure. A shattered rosette window, all but one of its coloured panes shattered, filled the end wall. A toppled altar to the human's wizened corpse-god lay shattered opposite the broken window. A buckled effigy of their winged idol lay sprawled across it.

The temple was grandiose by human standards, but little more than a hovel to one raised on the eldar Craftworld of Biel-tan. The soaring wraithbone towers and graceful palaces, wrought into being by the bonesingers were majestic and beautiful in a way human structures could never be.

The walls of the temple were fire blackened, its roof little more than a shadowed ruin of jutting iron spars and twisted girders. A striated sky, like a watercolour left out in the rain, pressed down on the city.

That the temple was still standing at all was a miracle. The orks of Warlord Skarblitz were stripping the abandoned city of every scrap of metal, timber and stone. This was one of the few structures that had yet to feel the fury of their scavenger mobs and demolisher hulks.

Sarielle watched the greenskins with a haughty disdain, the purity and depth of which no race but eldar could attain. They barged and roared and spat like beasts. One squatted to empty its bowels in the corner. Even from high in the rafters, the stench made Sarielle want to gag. None of the orks had seen the eldar Aspect Warriors, even though a few had looked up to assay the structural members that once supported the roof.

The orks wore rough garb fashioned from oil-and-mud-stained rags, over which scraps of hammered sheet metal plates were strapped to their broad, powerful bodies to serve as armour. Many had horned

helms pressed onto their brutish, tusked skulls. A few sported mechanical arms or legs that hissed and wheezed, leaking oil and hydraulic fluid.

‘It is a wonder to me that such uncouth, savage beings can function at all, much less traverse the stars,’ whispered Drytha, shaking her head.

Sarielle looked up in surprise.

Exarch Drytha was not given to speaking in the moments before blood was to be shed. Sarielle’s squad leader was a warrior beyond compare, whose skill with her twin mirror swords was sublime.

Sarielle envied Drytha her slayer’s prowess, but in her more introspective moments, feared what the exarch represented. At battle’s end, Sarielle could remove her war-mask and return to her artistry without guilt for the lives she had ended, but Drytha’s life had become wedded to the Path of the Warrior.

The exarch was doomed to be a killer until the end of her days.

‘They are no better than club-wielding savages,’ continued Drytha. ‘What cities do they build? What works of art do they create? Their legacy is naught but death and destruction writ large on the canvas of the stars. Their race serves no purpose.’

‘Their existence may serve no purpose,’ said Sarielle, ‘But that they can fight is in no doubt.’

Drytha’s aspect helm turned to Sarielle. Even though the exarch’s sculptural features, all angles and hard edges, were concealed, Sarielle could picture her sneer.

‘Fight?’ said Drytha. ‘Their clumsy flailings cannot be called fighting.’

Sarielle said nothing, feeling the exarch’s aggression filling her with killing lust. To be near an exarch was to feel the touch of death upon you, for they walked with it as their invisible companion.

What must it be like to stand in the presence of the reborn Jain Zar? Since the Phoenix Lord’s arrival through the damaged webway, the lust for war had dug its claws in deep with every warrior on Arkhona. The other craftworlds had also sent their representatives, and the thought of fighting in the same host as a Phoenix Lord filled Sarielle with pride.

Her fingers curled into fists, and she filled her lungs with the stale, metal-tasting air of this world. She heard the clanking, rumbling of an ork vehicle nearby. Corrosive exhaust fumes billowed from beyond a far wall, and the heavy grinding of spiked tracks tearing up the roadway set the walls vibrating.

Sarielle swayed with the motion, her balance flawless.

The clouds shifted and shafts of dirty sunlight shone into the temple. Clouds of dust caught the light, glittering like gold dust in the air. On any other day but today, it would have been beautiful. A beam of sunlight shone through the last piece of coloured glass in the rosette window, and suddenly Sarielle understood the Farseer's words.

A shaft of golden light pierced the gloom. It struck the fallen effigy of the human's holy icon, and she saw it now for what it was. A winged eagle of polished steel and glass. It reflected the beam of light and blazes with golden light as though afire.

Its radiance filled the temple.

Drytha saw it too, and drew her twin mirrorswords with a hiss of razored edges. The blades glittered like wrought ice.

The exarch dived from the beam, arcing downwards like a hunting shrike. Sarielle and the other Howling Banshees were in motion an instant later, every one of them screaming in battle fury.

Sarielle released the breath she had taken, giving form to her killing wrath and lust to wreak bloody murder through the psychosonic amplifiers of her aspect helm.

Their screams shook the dust from the walls. It shattered the last pane of glass in the rosette window. It hit the orks like a physical thing, an aural assault that battered their senses and left them reeling.

Their howls were amplified in the confines of the temple and the very walls began to crumble.

Sarielle somersaulted down into the midst of the orks, drawing her shuriken pistol and bone-bladed sword the instant before she landed. Her blade sliced upwards, and the ork she'd selected as her first target stood dumbly as her pale sword cut through its neck.

Iron-hard sinew and dense bone parted like molten glass before a shaping wire.

It pleased Sarielle that the blood jetting from the ork's body matched the vivid red of her helmet plume. The headless body took a swing at her, but Sarielle was already in motion. She had her next target in her pistol's sights.

The orks were reeling from the sonic assault, but the very crudity of their alien nervous systems was working in their favour. A human would be paralysed, convulsing and soiling himself as his body rebelled. The orks shook off the wailing of the Banshees as easily as Sarielle might shake off a moment's surprise.

Ork guns, more like portable carronades than sidearms, boomed with deafening roars. Acrid black propellant fogged the air. Heavy shot punched the stonework, and the revving of heavy, chain-edge cleavers and axes belched filthy clouds of oilsmoke.

The Banshees sliced through the orks like a troupe of dancers at play. Swords moving too fast to see clearly, pistols firing razor-edged shuriken discs that sliced flesh and severed limbs.

A Banshee was the aspect of the eldar war god in all his savagery. Harbingers of death and grief, even other eldar feared this most vengeful of warrior aspects. Sarielle fought with her fury in precise balance; using it, turning its passion into a weapon that drove her sword arm with greater strength, her pistol shots to heightened accuracy.

To lose control of that fury would be dangerous, but she had trained for years in the Aspect Shrine to master it. For years her anger had threatened to consume her.

Now it served her.

She killed two more orks without breaking stride, swaying aside from chugging cleavers and heavy mauls of welded steel and spikes. To Sarielle, the orks fought as though enveloped by some sluggish, viscous fluid. She saw their attacks coming far in advance and was already evading to launch a counterstrike before the blow was even halfway complete.

To Drytha, it must seem like the orks were not in motion at all. The exarch spun and leapt as though engaged in nothing more strenuous than a training session against those newly-called to the Banshee shrine.

An ork armed with a heavy rotary cannon of rusted iron turned a crank on the boxy firing mechanism. A two metre flame belched from the muzzle as a hail of shells exploded from the weapon. They stitched a path through the temple as the greenskin bellowed with coarse, guttural laughter.

Drytha sprinted towards the ork gunner. She sprang into the air, pushing off the adjacent wall and spinning like an acrobat to land behind the grunting creature.

Her mirror swords flashed and the gunner found himself on his knees without knowing how. Sarielle saw the ork's iron-shod feet standing on the cracked flagstones of the temple a metre behind it. Scissoring blows from the exarch's glitter-sheened blades took the ork's head, and it crashed forward with its clawed finger still curled around the trigger of its monstrous gun.

Pressed into the ground, the weapon bucked and heaved, flipping the enormous bulk of the ork onto its side. Ricocheting shells flew through the temple at random. Most blew out brickwork from the walls. Some struck the orks with satisfying explosions of green flesh.

Sarielle saw two of her sister Banshees struck by the wild fire. An eldar frame was nowhere near as robust as that of an ork, and the shells blew them apart.

Sarielle knew them both: Yirent and Raera.

Two lives ended that could never be replaced. Their loss would diminish Biel-tan and the eldar race. When she removed her war-mask, Sarielle would mourn their passing in full, but for now, fury was all that ruled her.

Barely a handful of the orks still lived.

Some, displaying a faculty for clear thought that surprised her, were fleeing through the splintered doors of the temple. Others, gripped by the mania common to the greenskin, remained to fight, because fighting was all an ork ever cared about.

Sarielle felt the ground shake and heard the throaty bellow of the approaching ork vehicle in her bones. She stepped away from the wall as she saw its shadow drawing near. She heard stone split and crack under the tracks of something enormous.

'Fly my Banshees!' cried Drytha, sprinting away from the source of the crushing, deafening noise. The Banshees gathered up their dead as they left. As well as Yirent and Raera, two others had fallen. Inderia and Allareq. Drytha would not leave their bodies for the orks to defile.

Sarielle ran up a pile of heaped bricks fallen from the upper reaches of the temple, and vaulted onto the sill of a high lancet window. Daggers of glass still jutted from its splintered frame, but none touched her.

She looked over her shoulder as the far wall exploded inwards. A hulking behemoth of patchwork metal roared inside, a vast tank with a crushing, spiked roller welded to its frontal section. Heavy blocks of masonry were crushed beneath its clanking tracks and solid wheels as its bulk slammed down.

Drytha and the Banshees were already gone, and watched the temple's destruction from the remains of a fallen hab-block a hundred metres away.

Farseer Kseniya was waiting for them, her long cream and rune-stitched robes billowing in the wind. The eye lenses of her antlered helm shone with eldritch light, and the wraithbone staff she carried writhed with psychic energies.

'You killed the ork with the great cannon,' said Kseniya, but Sarielle could not decide if her words were a statement or a question.

'I did,' said Drytha.

'Good,' replied Kseniya. 'The threads of Arkhona's doom weave tighter. Though what part the orks have to play eludes me.'

'You already know why they are here,' said Drytha. 'You are just afraid to be right.'

'Do not presume to imagine that the weave of the future can be known by unpicking the threads of the past, Drytha,' said Kseniya. 'The events that brought our people to this world have been in motion for longer than you can imagine, perhaps even longer than our race can comprehend.'

Sarielle forced her gaze from the terrible power of the Farseer and the doom contained in her words. To be a Farseer was to be privy to the secret potentials of the future, and the power they wielded was not for simple warriors to know.

She looked back at the temple as the ork vehicle rampaged through its ruined precincts. Two dozen greenskins rode atop its armoured cupola or clung to its sides. They wore heavy pot helmets and thick round goggles. Each wore a long coat of black hide stitched with the crude representation of a horned skull.

The demolisher vehicle slewed around and smashed the altar and its glowing eagle beneath its tracks. The roller tore into the wall behind the altar, and it came down on the vehicle in a thunderous avalanche of debris.

Even as it crushed many of their number the orks brayed with porcine laughter. Sarielle watched with incomprehension.

‘They kill themselves and still they laugh,’ she said.

‘It is all they live for,’ said Kseniya, and Sarielle saw her glance at the exarch as she spoke. ‘The fight is all that matters. The greenskin has no grand strategic goals, no desperate fight to stave off species extinction.’

‘Then why fight at all?’ asked Sarielle.

‘Because it is all they know,’ said Kseniya. ‘It is all they care for and all that drives their savage culture.’

‘To fight is to live, and to live is to fight,’ said Drytha, turning and sheathing her glittering swords.

And Sarielle wasn’t sure who the exarch was talking about.