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TEARS OF BLOOD

‘She was little more than a child when the end had come. It had wrapped her up like the arms of her long-dead mother, embracing her as though it were a haven or a new beginning. But she could see the true nature of things – she was the ehveline. She could see the deceptions and the illusions pouring out of the future, smothering her sight and striving to leave her swaddling in the present. She was so much more than a child when the end had come, and she had seen it for what it was: the end of days.’

– The Tears of Blood: The Chronicles of Ela’Ashbel, vol.2 by Deoch Epona, Craftworld Kaelor

The air swirled with burning dust, riddling the heavy darkness of the once glorious court with infinitesimal dying stars. It was as though the air itself smouldered with the scent of entropy, and the solitary little girl breathed it in. She stood in the midst of the ruins, with the devastation reflected in the moist sheen of her sapphire eyes. The tiny flares of sulphur and wraithbone that danced around her fluttered brilliantly like short-lived insects, and then singed her pale, grubby skin, extinguishing themselves in silence. As she swept her gaze across the rubble and through the flames, a single almost imperceptible tear trickled through the grime on her cheek, leaving a glistening trail of pure white in its wake. The tear was a crystal prism, glinting with the memories of the battle that had brought ruin to Kaelor. As it fell, dropping onto the blood-tinged and broken ground, the whole of the once magnificent court seemed to fall with it.

A soft, old voice wafted across the battlefield, like a pocket of twilight in a cloudy sky.

‘Ela.’

In response, the little girl turned her head slightly, as though cocking her slender ears to the sound. The movement made her resemble a prey-animal, wary of predators but accustomed to their presence; predators are only dangerous on their own terms.

‘Ela, come out of the rain.’

It was Ahearn, the ancient and decrepit Rivalin farseer. His stooped form shuffled towards her through the fireflies and smoke-haze. Leaving her ears cocked for a moment longer, Ela realised that she could hear the metallic strike of his staff as he used it to balance his increasingly unsteady walk.

‘It is hardly rain, caradoc,’ she replied, holding out her palms like a child collecting water from the sky. Leaning back, she looked up into the eddying constellations of embers and smouldering dust, watching them dance and whirl like an incredible shoal of fish. Her eyes stung and watered as the fires fell into them.

Turning at last, Ela looked up into the old face of the once-great farseer. For an eldar, his face was ugly and wrinkled. He had lived for longer than even the eldest of Kaelor could remember. And he had lived through such times: first the Great House Wars that had seen the ruination of the Ansgar, and then the terrible Prophecy Conflict that had brought the Teirtu and all of Kaelor to its knees. Through it all, this hunched and gnarled old farseer had maintained the Court of Rivalin in unblemished glory. Only now, with the court in tatters and flames before him, was the ancient House of Rivalin finally humbled. Yet, beneath the heavy folds of his dark hood, Ela could see a youthful sparkle in the old eldar’s eyes.

Cracks of warpfire suddenly flashed and arced like lightning through the wraithbone structure of the invisibly distant ceiling. The entire craftworld teetered perilously close to the raging Maelstrom outside.

‘Like the planet-bound rain, this weather will pass, my little morna.’ The faintest traces of a smile creased Ahearn’s wrinkled and leathery features.

For a moment, the two of them stood together amongst the flaming debris of the court, Kaelor’s past and future side by side, standing alone at the end of days. They surveyed the ruination and the despair of the scene. Here and there the broken forms of burning bodies flared amongst the rubble.

‘Come, my morna, my child. There is nothing more to be done here.’ As he spoke, Ahearn reached out his hand. ‘Let us take some shelter from this storm.’

Ela looked up at him and saw the fiery destruction reflected in the old farseer’s glinting eyes. For a moment, it seemed to her that she was looking back in time, as though she could see the battle unfolding once again in the purpling depths of his pupils. A terrified and agonised face screamed out of the reflection, but faded instantly, replaced by the dancing reflections of myriad fireflies.

‘Come.’ He smiled and turned his hand palm upwards, as though beckoning or beseeching the child protégé.

Ela nodded slowly, as though deciding that the old eldar was right: there was so much to be done, if anything was yet to be salvaged. She reached out her small, white but dirty hand and placed it into Ahearn’s. The wrinkled farseer’s eyes gleamed from under his hood and, as he smiled, Ela thought that she caught a glimpse of his tongue moistening his lips.

The command decks of the Relentless Wrath were shrouded in darkness as the strike cruiser skirted the lashes of the roiling warp storm. In the faint, green glow that emanated from the chattering monitors and terminals, Master Kalidian Axryus cast a brooding and heavy shadow into the dimly lit chamber. He stood implacably before the swirling and oily images of fire and warp torment that swirled and stirred across the main viewscreen. His battle-scarred and age-gnarled face was hidden under the folds of his coarse hood, his long flowing robes hanging heavily over his deep green power armour. A starburst of red shone out from where his right eye should have been, the eye having been replaced decades before by a bionic implant.

‘A likely place, indeed.’ Kalidian’s voice was like gravel. He rubbed his left hand over his unshaven jaw and let his index finger touch the corner of his ocular implant. Despite the long years since it had been fitted, he had never become accustomed to it. The angular and cold touch of metal on his face made sure that he could not forget the vengeance owed to the renegade Space Marine who had gouged out his eye; there was no crime more heinous than to turn against one’s own. Kalidian would never even breathe that forsaken warrior’s name.

‘The report was inconclusive, Kalidian.’ The Interrogator Chaplain was standing in the deepest shadows at the back of the control room, away from even the faintest hints of light shed by the monitors and viewscreens. He was leaning against the wall, his features hidden completely by the dark and his cloak, and he spoke in tones that were barely more than whispers.

‘They always are, Lexius.’ The master of the Dark Angels Fourth Company did not turn away from the screen, but he permitted himself a wry smile at his Chaplain’s scepticism. There was not a single Astartes aboard the Relentless Wrath with more passion for the pursuit of vengeance and righteousness than Lexius Truidan. The devoted Interrogator Chaplain would chase even the vaguest of rumours if he thought that there was any chance of an element of truth lurking in their hidden depths. He, more than any other, would see the sense in this diversion to the edge of the great Maelstrom.

‘You place such faith in the mention of his name, master. Yet his name is not mentioned in the report.’

‘There are few who would recognise his name, Lexius, and fewer still who would recognise him for who he really is. We are both fortunate and unfortunate to be amongst those few, old friend. There is enough here to warrant an investigation. The report mentions ancient, black power armour and a magnificent sword that remained always sheathed. Moreover, it lingers on the details of a stranger claiming to personify the voice of the Emperor himself. This is a stronger lead than many of those we have rushed to pursue before this day.’

At last, Kalidian turned from the gyring and curdling warpmire of the Maelstrom, looked over the heads of the mind-wiped serfs who were busying themselves at the various terminals on the bridge, and smiled faintly at the obscured Chaplain, his bionic eye easily picking Lexius out of the darkness. ‘This is our fate, brother. Prosecute repentance today, for tomorrow we may each come face-to-face with the Lion or the Emperor.’

‘We answer for our own sins, and those of our brothers,’ whispered Lexius, his face hidden in the darkness.

‘Yes, brother Chaplain. We must take no chances with the souls of Dark Angels.’ Kalidian turned back to the viewscreen. ‘Verify the integrity of the warp shields and lay in a course for the Tyrine system, just inside the fury of the Maelstrom.’

‘It should become known as the Scouring of Tyrine, but the scribes and apostles of the terrible warriors that descended on us are already hard at work, producing the documents and justifications that called it a ritual purification. For the benefit of posterity and for the use of seekers of truth, I make this last report in sincerity and with despair in my heart. I have no hope that this report will reach the eyes of any who can help, since we are already beyond the help of all but the Emperor himself. But in my soul there lies a tiny vestige of faith that tells me to set this message free into the void.

When it began, the sky burned and roiled with richly coloured clouds. Rivers of blood evaporated into the water cycle and stained everything touched by the hellish precipitation. The touch of death left its mark on all things. Huge, towering cathedrals dominated the tops of the mountains, and streams of blood poured down their spires and cascaded out from their foundations, as though they wept.

The once verdant and fecund world of Tyrine had teetered on the cusp of the Maelstrom for many centuries, like a village perched precariously on the top of an eroding sea-cliff. It had only been a matter of time before the cliff would crumble and the planet would fall. And when it fell, a strange and godlike warrior, calling himself an apostle of the law, had been poised ready to catch it.

Long ago, the people of Tyrine had placed their faith in the Emperor of Man, devoting our desperate energies to acts of penitence and worship. We had laboured with the last breaths of oxygen granted to us by our doomed world before it fell. We had dragged massive stones up to the mountaintops, pulling them by hand in chaingangs to demonstrate our piety, and then erecting them into magnificent cathedrals that aspired into the stratosphere.

Tyrine had been a monument of devotion and Imperial glory.

Despite its impending doom, Tyrine became renowned as a shrine world and drew pilgrims from across the system. Arcoflagellants flocked to the planet, spilling their own blood onto the streets, which each led up one of the many mountains to one of the many cathedrals – so it was that the first blood soaked into the forsaken soil of Tyrine, eventually to mingle with that of the tortured and violated dead.

But the Emperor never answered our prayers.

At first, as our planet finally succumbed to the lascivious tendrils of the warp, spinning into the fringes of the Maelstrom like a whipping-top, the devoted Imperial subjects of Tyrine had collapsed into despair. As the skies had boiled and the mountains had begun to twist in agonies of contortion, our pleas and prayers to the Emperor became yells and screams of accusation and hatred: our god had forsaken us. In amongst the swirling mire of psychic panic, disgust and pain, whispered voices started to call out to other powers, seeking refuge from the storm from anyone who could promise it.

This time, there was somebody who heard these calls.

The god-warrior had descended through the roiling, warp-drenched clouds in a blaze of radiance, letting his light echo around the planet like the silvered voice of the Emperor himself. He had held his cruiser in a low orbit for seven days, letting it shine like a star in the diminished and desperate heavens. And then, when the people of Tyrine had fixed their attention on his star like a beacon of new hope, defacing their monuments with impromptu tributes to the only point of steady and fixed light in their dark and warpmired world, he had pulled the Word of Truth out of orbit and let its light blink out of the skies of Tyrine, plunging the doomed world into hopelessness.

For another seven days, he watched the spires of the great cathedrals fall. It is said that he smiled as we defaced the old images of the Emperor, over-etching them with the symbols of the gods who listened to our prayers. Cults arose all across the planet, and cultists started to reconstruct the once-glorious cathedrals, forcing their broken spires back into the skies with their sweat and blood, filling the cracks and ruins with the bones and skulls of the dead. Millions of souls cried out for a power, any power that could bring them salvation or direction.

Then, when he could see that the planet was ripe with fear, desperation and a clawing desire for a saviour, the Keeper of the Faith dropped back into orbit, returning a brilliant and pristine star of hope for the forsaken Tyrinites. He had rained his Space Marines down through the atmosphere in drop-pods that had burned like meteors, riddling the curdling darkness with signs from the gods: he brought hope and order to the betrayed, the desperate, the lost and the confused. And we hailed his coming as we might have once hailed the Emperor himself, had he ever bothered to come.

So it was that the Keeper of the Faith had walked amongst us like a god, making manifest the true voice of the Emperor, giving new direction and purpose to our devotions.

Tyrine is still a shrine-world; its pious and devoted people laboured to rebuild the magnificent monuments and temples that had once been dedicated to the cult of the Emperor of Man. But now they have been resurrected in grotesque splendour, punctuated with icons and symbols of the Great Betrayal – blood runs from mutilated images of the false Golden Throne. On the altars and in other places of honour, the regalia of the Imperium has been replaced crudely by the iconography of other powers, reflecting the directions of the voice of the true Emperor.

Where the air is thickest with fecund decay and where the people are most heady, cults of Slaanesh have seduced many others, and some of the Tyrinites began to delight in the perverse pleasures of their own suffering. Pain, suffering and death quickly became synonymous with artistry for these people. Torture and mutilation replaced prayer and sacrifice. Rather than moving against these cults, the Great Apostle embraced them as his own: the apparent voice of the Emperor calls on us to bathe in the blood of the slain and the innocent.

Our world was saved from despair by the Great Apostle, and now our sickly cries of joy reach out beyond the lashes of the Maelstrom, like a giant beacon to lure fellow pleasure seekers to the orgiastic grotesqueries that have engulfed our world.

Be aware, dear reader, that Tyrine is no longer a world for the sane or the pious. I do not dare to hope that you will come to rescue us, but I do trust to hope that you will never sully your soul by approaching our atmosphere. Stay away.'

– Unencrypted, repeated signal. Originator: Slefus Pious III. Source suspected to be the Tyrine system. Intercepted by Exiel Queril, hierosavant of Dark Angels strike cruiser, Relentless Wrath. 364.M38.

There is nothing but blood. It runs like rivers, as though the gods themselves are weeping. Ela's lips moved as though she were giving voice to her silent thoughts, but she made no sound. Her words diffused the psychic ambiance with an unusual gravity tinged with a quizzical childishness. Her startling sapphire eyes sparkled with crystal tears as they gazed into an invisible distance.

The courtiers of the once-glorious Rivalin Court observed the infant seer with mixed emotions.

'This abomination knows nothing of blood,' hissed Maeveh of the Hidden Joy, pledged seer of the ancient House of Yuthran. She was herself a youthful protégé, having passed through the Ritual of Tuireann only twelve years before, but she was still more

than three times the age of little Ela. Her own youthful features were twisted into an ugly snarl that pulled a matrix of scars into an intricate web over her face. Yet something smiled within her, giving her expression a faint hint of nausea. ‘She cannot know what she sees. And in not knowing, she is also not seeing.’

The other courtiers murmured in response. Some of them in agreement, but others in trepidation: they had heard Ela’s prophesies before and knew better than to take them lightly. She was no ordinary child bothered by nightmares or daydreams. Maeveh’s relationship with the infant seer was fierce and adversarial for reasons that not everyone could properly understand.

‘Exactly what did you see, young Ela of Ashbel?’ Uisnech Anyon’s tone was calm and deep as he pushed himself back into his seat in the crumbling remains of the Rivalin farseer’s throne chamber. Although his voice seemed gentle and coaxing, it was edged with fatigue and cynicism. He was one of the oldest eldar in the court, having sat in attendance since before the House Wars. He had been one of the first of the High Eldar of Kaelor to see through to the vulgarity of Iden Teirtu and his Warrior House when they had been awarded a place of honour in the venerable court. He had watched the way that the refined high culture of the Rivalin legacy had been diluted and sullied by the lesser minds of crude eldar Houses from beyond the Styhxlin Perimeter. After centuries of change, he had learnt to be sceptical of the new and the youthful, but even he could see the unusual power that resided in the mind of this infant.

Standing in the middle of the Circle of Court, surrounded on all sides by the ancient and the prestigious of Kaelor, each seated in the crumbling remains of their family’s status, little Ela simply shook her head. She grimaced slightly, as though a flash of pain had suddenly flickered through her head. ‘You do not want to hear my visions. You want my silence.’

‘Perhaps you suggest that some members of this council wish you ill, little morna? Is that what you see?’ The farseer himself leaned forward out of his throne, propping his weight on his gnarled and twisted staff. He pushed his hooded face towards his protégé and smiled encouragingly, patronising her.

‘She is confused, Ahearn of Rivalin. She merely senses that we desire her mind to be at peace, and that we each seek a future in which this furore is replaced by quiet.’ Maeveh’s voice hissed as though her tongue were split or forked.

Ela looked around the circle again, feeling a sudden chill wisp around her like a whirling breeze. She looked again, concentrating on each of the faces of the honourable court: Maeveh, Uisnech, Bricriu of the Sloane, Celyddon of Ossian and Ahearn himself – her own avuncular caradoc. For a moment, she felt as though they were drawing in around her, contracting the circle of power and enveloping her. It

was as though they were reaching for her innermost thoughts, teasing her and playing with her intent.

She blinked and looked again, and the eldar of the court were each in their proper places, each gazing at her odd behaviour with quizzical concern written across their unaccustomedly dirty faces.

‘I see rivers of blood cascading down the walls of cathedrals. I see monuments to the Great Enemy towering into a roiling, blood-red sky. I see a mon’keigh sorcerer communing with daemonic forces that fill my soul with terror. I see…’ She trailed off, as though there was worse to come – things for which she could or would not find the words. ‘I see the end of days. It is a Fall.’

‘Look around you!’ scoffed Maeveh, rising from her ruined seat and gesticulating dramatically with her arms. ‘What is this if it is not the end of days? The court of Rivalin is in ruins, hundreds of Kaelor eldar lie in pools of their own blood under piles of rubble, with the blades of their own kin riddling their bodies in the animosity of false consciousness. This… this abominable infant does not see the future, she merely sees echoes of the present; she is yet too young to know the difference. It is fear that we should see in her words, not wisdom. We need not waste our time and meagre resources policing the fairytales of children. There are more pressing tasks at hand.’

As she finished her speech, the Yuthran seer let her flaming eyes meet those of Ela, as the infant stood in the middle of the circle of office. Maeveh’s eyes flickered with deeply rooted emotions, like windows into her soul, and Ela recoiled slightly from what she saw. As she stepped back, instinctively trying to keep distance between them, she nudged back into a figure behind her.

‘Come, my little morna, my child. Let us leave this place – there is no need for you to be part of this.’

Ela turned her head to see Ahearn gazing down at her. He was stooped over her, with the hood of his cloak concealing most of his features, even at this intimate range. Whilst one hand gripped his gnarled staff, supporting his age, the other rested affectionately on Ela’s shoulder. In the shadows under his cloak, Ela thought that she could see the glint of his well-polished teeth, and a syrupy trickle of blood seeped over his lower lip. Instinctively, she shrugged her shoulder free of his hand.

The cavernous interior of the great Basilica of the Rapture of Tyrine echoed with the voices of thousands raised in adoration. A deep, resonant chant thundered through the massive flagstones and masonry, making the monstrous building tremble as though it were alive.

The basilica was the glory of Tyrine; it towered out of the peak of Tyrinitobia, the

highest mountain in the habitable realms. It had been constructed in the most majestic traditions of High Gothic architecture: a long, triple-aisled axis reached from the main gates through a high-vaulted nave to the altar, nestled in front of the grand apse. There was space for thirty thousand worshippers in that cavernous hall, and it was full from dawn till dusk, and then again from dusk till dawn. A constant stream of devotees poured in through the gates, forcing others out into the transepts and then out through the side gates into the city beyond.

The famous transepts themselves crossed the nave in front of the altar, and at that point of intersection a magnificent sweeping dome rose out of the distant ceiling. It was made entirely of red-stained glass, and this Blood Dome filled the basilica with a deep, ruddy light, illuminating the altar with the blood of the Emperor himself, or so it was said. From the sky, the plan of the great cathedral had inspired the devotions of millions of pilgrims as their shuttles dropped towards the spaceports in the valleys: rather than being conventional rectangles crossing the main axis, the transepts had been skilfully rendered into huge wings, as though the basilica itself echoed the shape of the Imperial aquila.

‘From the fires of betrayal unto the blood of vengeance, we bring the voice of truth to your neglected and misremembered ears.’ The deep, resonant voice of the orator boomed around the cavernous space, echoing between the thick stone columns and rolling over the tens of thousands of up-turned faces. ‘For I am the Master of the Faith, first son of the great iconoclast – the bearer of the true word and the favoured son of the gods themselves.’

As he spoke, the dark-armoured giant pounded his gauntlets against the font, splintering its structure and sending chips of stone scattering into the congregation. His magnificent sword hung in silence from a harness on his leg. The people gazed up at the massive figure in awe and wondrous incomprehension, soaking in his words like desiccated, desert-weary men soaking in water. They had waited millennia for the coming of the Emperor and then, after it seemed that he had failed them utterly, this magnificent warrior had descended from the heavens in streams of fire. He told them that their devotion was welcome and proper, but that they erred in the focus of their devotions: their Emperor was false and deceitful – he called on them for obedience and obeisance, but then he ignored them. He was a false idol, and this newcomer was the voice of truth – the voice of iconoclasm and true devotion – the master of the faith.

When the congregation had first assembled in the basilica, the mysterious warrior-god had stridden to the altar and lifted the giant aquila in his own hands – a feat that could not have been accomplished by twenty men of Tyrine. With a defiant yell, he had flipped it upside down and crunched it back onto the altar, violated and ruined; an icon of its own perversion. At that moment, he had set the fires of revolution on Tyrine.

‘I ask for nothing that you have not already given to another: your faith and undying

devotion. You have lost these already, and I take them as my burden. You need pay them no more mind, since they are already in the nature of your souls.

‘I ask only that this devotion be turned towards its proper target – turn it towards truth. Turn you devotion and your prayers to those who will hear you… to those who will listen to you.

‘You cried out at the falling of your world, and who came to your aid? Who was it that brought light back into your skies and passion back into your hearts? Who was it that brought life and blood and fury back to Tyrine?

‘Did your Emperor do this?’

A tremendous roar erupted from thirty thousand voices as they hurled their rage and discontent into a cacophonous rapture. The crowd teetered on the point of frenzy.

‘No!’ boomed the master orator, letting his voice fill the cathedral as though it were the very word of god himself. ‘It was me!’ He smashed his fist against the font and obliterated it. ‘I brought your world back to life with the voice of truth and the word of the gods of Chaos!’

Another roar blasted out of the congregation, like a volcano of ecstasy, as the people of Tyrine opened their souls to the master of the faith.

‘All praise be given unto them – the gods that touch our lives with their wills and their graces – the gods that reward our devotions with their divine favours! We offer our praise to those who listen, that they might turn their gaze our way and lift us with the boon of pain, to turn the galaxy red with blood and feed the hunger of the gods!’

The Warp Spiders of Kaelor moved without moving, dipping in and out of reality like the tiny crystalline creatures of the webway from which they originally drew their name. The powerful, compact jump-generators on their backs meant that they could rip momentary holes in the materium and weave through the warp, surfacing and resurfacing in reality like threads of continuity through an impossibly black cloth.

As the squad of garnet and gold Spiders lurched into being on the edge of the crumbling sector that encompassed the farseer’s court, Adsulata raised her hand to draw them to a halt and then dropped down into cover. She had been into the precincts of the court before, and she knew the dangers. Despite the devastation that had been wrought upon it by the Prophecy Wars, the court was still well defended. There were many powerful seer and warlocks in the service of the farseer, and the farseer himself was more than capable of seeing the approach of a clumsy Warp Spider squad; the ability to slide out of material reality meant little when sentries and security systems could see so clearly into the immaterium as well.

The Temple of the Warp Spiders, hidden out in the forested regions near the Styhxlin perimeter, had also suffered during the recent wars. Its position on Kaelor was now uncertain, and many of those who had remained unquestioningly loyal to the Rivalin farseer would still consider the Warp Spiders to be enemies of the craftworld. Uisnech of Anyon was one who would not hesitate to execute a Spider on sight – his own forces had suffered greatly at the hands of the Great Exarch, when he had led the Warp Spiders into battle against the court. Thankfully, reflected Adsulata, not many of the farseer's surviving courtly supporters had any backbone for battle.

Even from the outskirts of the court sector, Adsulata could see the damage that had been inflicted on the area. The once immaculate and beautiful buildings were cracked and their perfection was shattered. Flames still flickered here and there, where jetbikes or Falcons had been left to burn out in the streets. It would probably not take long for an industrious and conscientious farseer to arrange the reconstruction of this area – after all, the court had been largely rebuilt after the House Wars, not so long ago. However, Adsulata was not convinced that Ahearn Rivalin would see this done. His priorities appeared to lie elsewhere.

The future of Kaelor lay in the hands of little Ela; Adsulata was as convinced now as she had ever been.

As she surveyed the scene, the Warp Spider arachnir – the squad leader – saw the faint flickering of warp-disturbance crackle through the wraithbone structure of the ceiling. Despite all the aesthetic and practical advantages of building with wraithbone – a substance drawn out of the warp itself and then fashioned into a material substance with rare and particular conductive qualities – Adsulata knew that the structure of Kaelor worked to its disadvantage when it sailed so close to a powerful warpstorm like the Maelstrom. She knew that the visible crackling of warp energy through the structure of the craftworld meant that it was drifting too close, that the tendrils of the warp were reaching for Kaelor and trying to draw it in, thirsting after the psychic glory of the children of Isha, which was only amplified and made manifest by the wraithbone itself.

The crackling in the sky was an ominous portent for the future.

The farseer's tower rose like a needle of light out of the flame-shadowed ruins. It had been the most heavily defended building of the entire war, and it bore few scars from the vicious battles that had raged around it. Adsulata had heard the rumours that its foundations hid a labyrinth in which lurked a pleasure cult of the kind that had not been seen since The Fall of the eldar all those millennia before, when the Sons of Asuryan had been forced to flee from their home worlds to escape the lascivious clutches of Slaanesh, the Great Enemy, set adrift into the darkest reaches of the galaxy in these monstrously large craftworlds. The ancient poems tell of how it was

the very decadence of the eldar themselves that called Slaanesh into being, and how it had hunted them ever since, like an affection-starved child.

The craftworld eldar had adopted a disciplined and austere lifestyle in an attempt to keep the lusting fingers of Slaanesh at bay. But a pleasure coven on this ancient model would act like a brilliant beacon for the Great Enemy, luring it towards Kaelor, or dragging Kaelor towards it. Perhaps the farseer himself was blind to this terrible evil; it is not unwise to hide beneath the nose of your foes.

And all the time, the massive craftworld seemed to drift closer and closer to the roiling warp energies of the Maelstrom. Only the little seer, Ela'Ashbel, sister of the Great Exarch himself, had seen glimpses of the terrors that lay in wait for the children of Isha in the lashes of the warp storm. She had seen a mon'keigh sorcerer-daemon on the planet of Tyrine, summoning Kaelor to him in a grand gesture of sacrifice and obedience to the Great Enemy. And now, one of the humans' space cruisers had been sighted entering the Maelstrom. And yet the farseer and his court did nothing. Yet again it fell to the Warp Spiders to preserve the once magnificent and honourable spirit of Kaelor. If the court would not act on the wisdom of the Ashbel, Adsulata would.

The arachnir turned to check the readiness of her squad, nodded a brief but unambiguous signal, and then blinked out of existence. One by one, her Warp Spiders vanished in pursuit of their leader, heading for the farseer's tower, where they knew the infant seer was being kept.

The scene that greeted Kalidian and his Dark Angels as they strode down the landing-ramp of their Thunderhawk filled their souls with nausea. Their gunship had crunched down onto what must once have been a bustling plaza in the centre of a white-stoned city, nestled elegantly into the side of a Tyrinian valley-basin. Tall, angular mountains aspired into the heavens on one side while the valley dropped away into a wide, meandering river on the other, and the city showed every sign of having been affluent at some point in its history.

In the centre of the plaza, just beyond the nose of the gunship, was a fountain; it was a statue surrounded by a pool of liquid. Even from the ramp of the Thunderhawk, Kalidian could see that the figure had once been a representation of the Emperor. It had never been beautiful or even competent, but its purpose and the motive of the primitive artisan who had produced it could not have been questioned. But now its form was quite changed. It was daubed in bright colours, and strange symbols had been etched into it; script had been scrawled across its base and hacked out of its surface with blunted blades. A long, broad sword had been hammered through the figure's chest, clearly rupturing the mechanism of the fountain and causing the water to stream out of the wound as blood. Some kind of amplification system had been riveted to the side of the figure's head, and a howl of hideous noise oscillated out of it,

filling the atmosphere of the plaza with the scream of ecstatic souls.

Looking more closely, Kalidian realised that the liquid in the fountain was blood. In fact, blood slicked the flagstones of the entire plaza. The city streets were running with it, as streams of bloody water flowed down the mountainsides from the cathedrals on the peaks towards the ruddy river below.

Without saying a word, Chaplain Lexius vaulted down out of the Thunderhawk, levelled his bolter and blew the fountain apart, sending bloody shards of masonry raining into the side streets and silencing the daemonic noise.

‘Suffer not the aberration,’ he muttered, as though explaining his action. The other Dark Angels passed no comment as they swept their gaze around the perimeter of the gaudily coloured plaza, securing it in their minds.

There was a suggestion of movement in a couple of side streets and the Space Marines responded instantly, bracing their weapons and levelling them ready for combat.

‘Hold,’ said Kalidian firmly.

As they watched, a few tentative people started to emerge from the buildings and streets around the edges of the plaza. They were ragged, ritually scarred and blood-drenched, and their eyes shone with a dull, lunar light. Their movements had no urgency, as though they were intoxicated, and they appeared to be utterly unconcerned about the presence of the two-metre high, cloaked and power armoured warriors standing before them with braced bolters.

The tentative few gradually became a tentative group and then a crowd. It seemed that people were pressing into the plaza from all over the city. They all looked stunned, as though teetering on a state of rapture – their eyes were wide and their pupils dilated. Kalidian realised that this was more than merely shellshock or trauma. The atmosphere in the plaza was shifting towards hysteria, and the crowd seemed to view the Astartes with hunger and anticipation. They had been drawn to the plaza by the blaze of fire that came down with the Thunderhawk, and, after a matter of seconds, the plaza was teeming with people; the Dark Angels were surrounded.

‘Do you bring the Voice of the Emperor?’ The sound was almost a chant, arising from many mouths at the same time, as though practiced or drilled into them. There was little music, but the voices seemed to rejoice in their spontaneous harmony.

‘We bring vengeance and justice,’ growled Lexius, restraining his trigger-finger until Kalidian had taken the lead.

‘Are you the Keepers of the True Faith?’

Kalidian watched the crowd for a moment, weighing up its mood and its movements. ‘Yes we are,’ he said finally. He singled out one of the men at the front of the throng, whose face was lined with self-inflicted scars and whose chest carried the carved, blood-crusted sign of Slaanesh. ‘You have seen others like us?’

‘The Voice of the True Faith has passed amongst us,’ answered the man, his eyes widening in a mixture of fear, awe and excitement.

‘This “Voice” has instructed you in how to behave with proper piety and devotion?’ said Kalidian.

‘Yes, Lords of the Word. We have been graced by the presence of the Keeper of Faith. He remains amongst us always.’

‘He is like us?’

‘Yes, Lords of the Word.’

‘You will take us to him.’ Kalidian turned from the bloodied Tyrinite and saw the venom burning in the eyes of Lexius – the Chaplain burned to annihilate these repulsive offences to the Emperor’s sight. ‘Wait, Lexius – righteous purification can come later. For now, there is a chance of vengeance. Perhaps we have found him after all?’

The master orator’s eyes flashed with daemonic fire as he watched the rapture grip the hearts of the already twisted and desperate people of Tyrine. The basilica roared and rumbled with frenzies of impassioned dedication. He had seen it on countless worlds before, and it had happened every day since he had landed there; the planet was ripe with fear and loathing. The souls of the people were crying out for his words, they had dragged him from deep within the Maelstrom like a burning beacon. Millions of souls ripe for the plucking – such a powerful offering for the gods!

But there was a more subtle plan at work behind his machinations on Tyrine. This was no mere blood sacrifice for the pleasure of Khorne, for the Master of Faith did not answer to any one single god. He had heard whispers of more refined prizes, muttered into his ears by the most seductive of temptresses. An ancient and once-glittering eldar craftworld was straying deliciously close to the fringes of the Maelstrom. If he could turn Tyrine into a rapturous shrine-world for Slaanesh, the daemon would give him the power to lure the eldar into the Maelstrom and gift him legions of daemonettes to do battle with the craftworld, which was already falling slowly into Slaanesh’s hands. In return for the souls of thousands of eldar, which would be enough to bring Slaanesh out of the warp and into the soupy space of the materium itself, the master of the faith would be granted the favours and talents of Slaanesh.

The temptation was simply too great, even for him.

Looking up through the glorious, blood-red glass of the Blood Dome above him, the once-loyal Space Marine thought that he could already see the glint of a new star in the firmament: the eldar craftworld could not be far away now.

‘All praise be given unto the gods that reward our devotions with their divine favours!’ he yelled, listening to the way that the congregation anticipated and chanted his words in unison. ‘We offer our praise to those who listen, that they might turn their gaze our way and lift us with the boon of pain,’ he continued, letting a smile crack across his face: they were his now. ‘To turn the galaxy red with blood and feed the hunger of the gods!’

At the top of the farseer’s tower, hidden in a circular room in the heart of the shining structure, away from the light, commotion and the temptations of the craftworld below, Ela’Ashbel sat in silence. Her legs were folded beneath her and her eyes were closed in the darkness as she mouthed the soundless words of a mantra, drawing her mind back in on itself and trying to push it out the other side into the timelessness of the immaterium beyond.

She did not understand why the farseer’s manner towards her was so uneven. He swung from being her doting caradoc to being hostile and patronising. He told her that he believed in her powers and her abilities, but then he reprimanded her for speaking out in the Circular Council, telling her that it was not the place for a child to speak so disrespectfully to her elders.

There was no doubt in her mind about the authenticity of her vision, and the mire of warp energy that lashed and cracked through the wraithbone structure of Kaelor seemed to support her theory with every flash. The vast craftworld was pitching into the fringes of the Maelstrom, drawn in by the power of a mon’keigh sorcerer who worked in league with the Great Enemy itself – Slaanesh was calling its creators home at last. She just couldn’t understand why Ahearn could not see this – he was the farseer!

In the distant and mythical past, Ela reflected, the powerful psykers of the hoamelyngs – the planetary eldar of before the Great Fall – had failed to see the conjuring of the Great Enemy. They were lost in the concerns of their own decadence, and blind to the swirling maelstrom of daemonic lust that had been birthed into the immaterium.

At that moment, the image of Ahearn reaching out his hand for her in the smouldering ruins of the old court flickered through her mind. There had been something wrong with that scene, but she had hardly noticed it at the time, and she couldn’t quite identify it now. And then there was the way that he had ushered her from the Circle of

Court itself. There was something about the curl of his wrinkled old lips and the dark glint of his teeth. She remembered the cold touch of his hand on her shoulder, and shivered inwardly at the thought.

A series of explosions of light flickered around her chamber, making her eyes snap open suddenly, but she did not move from her posture of meditation. As soon as the bursts of light appeared, she knew what was happening.

‘Adsulata,’ she said, closing her eyes again as though completely unconcerned. ‘It has been a long time.’ She did not need her eyes to see the actions of those she knew well. She sometimes wondered whether she needed her eyes at all. Who other than the Warp Spiders could breach the security of the tower so easily, and appear like sudden stars in her secret meditation chamber?

There was no reply, but, in her mind’s eye, Ela could see the arachnir and her squad of Warp Spiders bowing deeply in an ancient ceremonial greeting, usually reserved for the farseer himself.

‘Farseer Ashbel,’ said Adsulata eventually. ‘We come to liberate you from this prison.’

‘You are mistaken, Arachnir Adsulata. I am not the farseer, and I am in no prison.’

‘As you wish, farseer,’ bowed Adsulata, her voice betraying no capitulation on either point. ‘Nonetheless, we are here to free you from this place. Kaelor is in peril. You have seen the mon’keigh vessel entering the Maelstrom?’

‘Yes, Warp Spider, I have seen it. And I have seen other things besides – bloody things. The future is perilous and bleak, Adsulata.’

‘And yet the Rivalin court does nothing?’

‘I have told them what I have seen.’

‘And they locked you in here?’

‘For my protection and peace of mind,’ said Ela, realising that she was unconvinced by her own words.

‘It was not that long ago that the Warp Spiders stood behind you in the Prophecy Wars, Ela of Ashbel. We will stand with you now. Instruct us, and your will shall be done. Tell us, farseer, what was in your vision.’

‘I am not your farseer, Arachnir Adsulata.’ The Warp Spider’s adamance about the title was disconcerting and annoying.

‘I saw cascades of blood rushing down the walls of great cathedrals, and sacrificial pyres to the Great Enemy burning into a roiling, blood-red sky. I saw a human psyker communing with daemonic forces that filled my soul with terror. I saw the Fall of Kaelor, Adsulata – I saw the end of days.’

‘You saw Tyrine, farseer? The mon’keigh planet that floats in peril in the lashes of the terrible warp storm? If the false farseer’s court will not act on this, the Warp Spiders will act – we will escort you to Tyrine, and we will see to it that your visions of the future are not permitted to crash back into the present. If it is your will, it shall be done.’

For a long moment, little Ela’Ashbel said nothing. She sat with her eyes closed and pondered the various futures that lay before her, weighing up the consequences of her decision. She had known Adsulata for a long time, and knew her to be an honourable and devoted Aspect Warrior of the Great Exarch of the Spider Temple, and a loyal subject of Kaelor. Her intentions were beyond reproach and her instincts were reliable. On the other hand there was Ahearn – the farseer, her caradoc. Glimmering images of his face as he reached his hand for hers swam through her mind unbidden. Why could he not see all this?

Another possibility entered Ela’s head for the first time: perhaps the farseer could see what was happening, but was choosing not to act on it. The thought was full of horror. Had the court really fallen so far?

‘It is my will.’

The Circle of Rivalin was broken but it was not destroyed. The grand ring of wraithbone thrones that had stood untarnished for millennia was cracked and crumbling, but they were not all empty; a number of the courtiers had survived the turmoil of the Prophecy Wars. They had watched as their ancient and glorious ancestral homeland – the great craftworld of Kaelor – had collapsed into despair around them. One or two had rejoined their own Great Houses and taken up arms in the struggle, but most had remained hidden in the confines of the High Court itself, holding themselves above the petty violence of their degenerating people. Of the fighters, only the wizened and cynical Uisnech of Anyon had returned to reclaim his ornate, rune-encrusted seat of office. House Anyon had been battered and devastated by the wars, but it had seen them through to the end, fighting proudly in the name of the farseer.

Some of the most exclusive and secret areas of the massive court complex had remained almost untouched by the fury of the unrest, and a number of the councillors had been able to continue to live their lives in the privileged and courtly manner to which they had grown accustomed. The Yuthran Seer, Maeveh, had been one of those

who had remained ensconced in the haven and, now that Kaelor seemed to be burning into ruins around her, she felt that her disdain for the violence of her brethren had been entirely justified.

‘I cannot believe that the old knavir agreed to permit that sleehr-child a voice in this court.’ Maeveh sneered as the ancient tongue of heresy slipped into her speech. Her eyes flashed like those of a serpent. Since the farseer had left the chamber to escort the little abomination to her tower, Maeveh had been reclined into her seat with such confidence that it may have seemed to an outsider to be her own court.

The others laughed with a mixture of pleasure, anxiety and fear, nervously enjoying her irreverence.

‘You will not use such language in this chamber, Maeveh of Yuthran. It does not become this court to speak so ill of the farseer, nor of his choices. The infant seer may yet have a role to play in all this. In the absence of certainty, some prudence would suit you better.’ Uisnech rose to his feet. He was invariably the only one to stand up to the Yuthran wytch, but his solitary opposition was usually enough to silence the others. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘it seems that the mon’keigh have indeed been sighted on the fringes of the sector: it appears to be a strike cruiser of some kind, perhaps of the Adeptus Astartes. Ela’Ashbel’s vision may not be completely fabricated, Seer Maeveh.’

‘Yes, the appearance of the mon’keigh at this time should not be ignored.’ Maeveh smiled in a superior manner, without rising to Uisnech’s challenge. She shared a glance with the youthful and dark-skinned Celyddon Ossian, whose golden eyes were accentuated by his luxurious and richly coloured robes, immaculate and untainted by the tempest of destruction that had been raging through Kaelor. Only the damp stain of blood around the hem of his extravagant cloak betrayed the mark of the times on his appearance.

‘I agree,’ nodded Celyddon, his smirk masking myriad emotions.

Uisnech looked from Maeveh to Celyddon, shaking his head in undisguised exasperation. It was bad enough that these two youngsters were on the council in the first place – they were only there because the senior heads of their Houses had perished prematurely, in unforeseen and dramatic events before their times, in the early stages of the Prophecy Conflagration. It had never been the custom of the Court of Rivalin to grant senior office to such inexperienced eldar, even to the eldar of the exalted Houses of Yuthran and Ossian; the power, the affluence and the lifestyle of the farseer’s court had a tendency to change the impressionable mind. And these two were certainly enjoying the privileges of their rank, despite the turmoil of the day.

Uisnech was sick of their pretension and their snide little secrets. They never did anything; they just talked and jibed about things. When the forces of the farseer had

stood on the brink of annihilation and Uisnech had marched proudly into the flames in the place of Ahearn himself, Maeveh and Celyddon had been drinking Edreacian ale and watching a performance of The Birth of the Great Enemy by a troupe of travelling Harlequins.

‘So, you both agree that this should not be ignored. What form do you agree that “not ignoring” the mon’keigh should take in practice?’ he snarled, letting his cynicism overflow into hostility.

‘Why don’t you ask little Ela’Ashbel, Uisnech?’ Maeveh turned the senior councillor’s anger into a joke, and then she laughed, finding her own act of ridicule amusing.

The apparently careless words of the Yuthran seer contained complicated and cutting connotations. On one hand she was patronising him, implying an equivalence between him and the ageing farseer himself, suggesting that his only possible functional relationship with Ela’Ashbel was as her caradoc. As he realised this, Uisnech’s mind made an even more cynical leap: did Maeveh mean to imply that the farseer himself needed to be patronised in this way? Was this a veiled heresy?

On the other hand, Maeveh seemed to be telling him that his scepticism about youth was old-fashioned and anachronistic – her allusion to the farseer serving to demonstrate that even Ahearn Rivalin seemed to have embraced the presence of the child-like Ela on the council.

If the farseer was willing to open his soul to the abominable infant, surely Uisnech could accept the presence of Maeveh and Celyddon. Of course, the real political importance of these implications was that, despite their ostensibly similar ages and the length of their shared histories, it was Uisnech, not the young upstarts, who was the outsider in the court. Maeveh seemed to share a new appreciation of youth with the farseer that isolated Uisnech and suddenly made him feel like an impostor in a private club. The unpleasant chain of thought sparked another cynical question in Uisnech’s subtle mind: if Ahearn and Maeveh were more alike than he had previously considered, did this mean that he should reconsider the whereabouts of the farseer when he, Uisnech, had stood at the head of the Rivalin armies in Ahearn’s place at the culmination of the Prophecy Wars? Had Ahearn really been here with Maeveh and the Harlequins?

The implications of these questions opened up routes for heretical conclusions of the kind that Uisnech would never want to reach. Instead, he contented himself with cursing the infinitely subtle complexities of eldar politics and the enigmatically devious mind of the Yuthran seer. For all of their primitive and clumsy stupidity, the mon’keigh at least had the virtue of being intellectually incapable of the kinds of multi-layered meanings and intrigues that so beset his own kind. Not for the first time in his long and eventful life, Uisnech wondered what it would be like to lead the short, direct and

simple life of a human being.

‘You are not the first to fall victim to the arbitrary whims of this false god,’ said the orator, leaning forward over the shattered font at the front of the basilica of the Rapture of Tyrine, as though imparting a secret. Responding to the change in his tone, the congregation fell into a hushed silence.

‘You are not alone in this, although you may feel the isolation deep within your souls.’

Murmurs of affirmation whisked around the nave, like a breeze being pushed ahead of a great storm.

‘I too have laboured under the false promises of this self-interested Emperor of Man. I once drove his light across the galaxy in the righteous fury of the Great Crusade. I knelt at his feet, exposing my very soul to his words, bowing my head to await the touch from his golden hand. But, like you, I waited in vain. The touch of his duplicitous fingers was never bestowed on me, nor on any of his most devoted servants. Instead of honour and salvation, he rewarded us with ridicule and insult – calling our labours faulty and misguided.

‘And even then, like you, we did not lose our faith. Instead, we sank into despair, struggling to comprehend what grave offences we must have enacted on our god for him to treat us in this way. “It must be our fault! We must have failed in our devotions! The Emperor is just and would not treat us thus without just cause!” We fell into prayer for weeks without end.’

Muttered voices rippled around the basilica as the people of Tyrine recognised their own plight and reactions in the orator’s grand story. A few yelled their agreement, breaking the wash of noise like crested waves.

‘But,’ continued the orator, before pausing dramatically, letting the power of silence descend over the congregation, making every face in the basilica strain to catch his next words.

‘But the fault was not with us,’ he whispered, watching the eagerness of the Tyrinites before him as they strained to hear him.

‘The fault was not with us!’ he shouted, letting his voice boom and resonate around the cathedral. ‘It was the Emperor himself that erred. He did not listen to us. He did not care for us. He did not raise a finger to grant us even the smallest favour. He left us adrift and alone with our faith!

‘But you are not alone!’

The congregation exploded into rapture.

‘We stand here together, united in our realisation of truth! We give our devotion to those who will hear us – to those worthy of our blood and toil.’

A rhythmic chanting struck up out of the assembly, calling out the name of the great orator, even as they stamped their feet in devotion, making the basilica rock with their passion.

‘We offer our praise to those who listen, that they might turn their gaze our way and lift us with the boon of pain,’ said the orator, turning the frenzy of the congregation towards the litany, and smiling as he heard every voice in the cavernous cathedral take up his call. As a single, mighty voice, they finished the lines: ‘To turn the galaxy red with blood and feed the hunger of the gods!’

Leaving the crumbling and lost grandeur of the Circle of Court in the wake of her billowing cloak, Maeveh of Yuthran swept through the atrophied corridors of the Farseer’s Palace with the train of her robes dragging through the dust and debris, sweeping a meandering trail behind her. She turned through a series of damaged corridors and passed along a number of subsiding passages, moving deeper and deeper into the ancient complex.

After a few minutes, she paused in the middle of a rubble-strewn aisle. Looking furtively in both directions to check that nobody was watching, she reached out and pressed her soft, velvet-gloved fingers against the pursed lips of an elegant wraithbone figurine. A faint electric green crackled around the outline of the statue, then it clicked gently and slid back away, revealing a hidden passageway beyond. Checking the main corridor one last time, Maeveh ducked quickly inside and the statue moved smoothly back into place.

The narrow, dark corridor beyond the statue might have been part of an entirely different world, or from a different, more elevated period of Kaelor’s past. Its shimmering wraithbone walls were alive with myriad points of light, as though they were windows into impossibly distant star systems. The scene was immaculate, untainted and utterly unscarred by the turmoil of war.

As she stepped into the glittering space, Maeveh paused for a moment and sighed. It was as though she could feel the pollution and dirt of the corridor outside dropping off her. A wave of relaxation rippled through her body, and she set off down the beautiful passageway.

About halfway down the corridor, she could already hear raised voices and the clatter of feasting. The sound echoed up the passageway towards her, flickering through the flashes of light and shadow that betrayed the movements of the eldar that had

congregated secretly into the cavern up ahead.

By the time she emerged into the wide, low chamber, the scene was a riot for her senses. A long, ornately sculpted, glimmering wraithbone table stretched out across the room, strewn from one end to the other with expensive and ostentatious foodstuffs, carafes of whyne, and glistening decorative statuettes. There was even a jug of Eldreacian ale. Around the table, sunk into lusciously embroidered, throne-like chairs, reclined over a dozen eldar, each bedecked in glorious colours and sumptuous robes. They picked casually at the feast before them, laughing and lost in conversation and debate. It was a scene that might have been depicted in a fresco from the grand days of the height of the Rivalin dynasty. Despite its intimate scale, it made Maeveh wonder about the glories of eldar life before the Fall.

As Maeveh stepped into the chamber, bathing in the warmth, the light, and the overflowing decadence of the atmosphere, a number of the feasters turned and lifted their glasses in greeting. She nodded mirthfully in return and then watched as a pair of semi-circular double-doors on the far side of the room cracked open and the entertainment was wheeled in.

Strapped to a complicated, antique rig on the jade-coloured, metallic cart was the figure of a mammalian primate. Most of its clothing had been stripped away, exposing its ugly, pallid flesh to the intrigued and amused gazes of the assembled eldar. Maeveh had seen that particular mon'keigh before – she had captured it as it attempted to flee from the Maelstrom in a pathetic, primitive space vessel. It had been broadcasting some form of distress call, which had intrigued Maeveh sufficiently to attract her attention. Indeed, sculpting and resculpting the content of the distress call had proven to be quite a distraction from the mundane and filthy business of Kaelor recently.

'Ah,' she said, letting the sound gasp lightly out of her mouth, as though it gave her physical pleasure to utter it. 'The alien that calls itself… what was it? Ah yes: Slefus Pious III. How delightful that it is still alive for our pleasure.'

'There are more important affairs than this creature, Maeveh of the Hidden Joy.' The voice seemed to have no origin, but the rustle of faint discomfort in the room drew Maeveh's attention to a hooded figure sitting at the foot of the great table.

'Of the not-so-hidden joy, I should say.'

A wave of mirth and chuckled agreement flittered around the room, as though each of those present knew of the joys of Maeveh. Meanwhile, the sinister, hooded figure reached across the table with his gnarled staff and hooked the tankard of Edreacian ale, dragging it back towards him as though too weak or intoxicated to stand and grasp it with his hand.

Maeveh tilted her head and inspected the wizened and hunched old figure. His hood and cloak were dark beyond blackness, of a colour and fabric that spoke of incredible, unimaginable affluence. His staff was unmistakable, and his manner betrayed him instantly.

‘Ahearn,’ whispered Maeveh, projecting her aspirated words across the room. ‘How wonderful to see you here again. I confess that I had begun to wonder whether you had abandoned us for that hideous stickler, Uisnech of Anyon. He seems so earnest, dear farseer, and I am sure that he would not approve of our little pleasure dome, here.’

The farseer looked up from his tankard, with a froth of drink lining his wrinkled lips, and he smiled. ‘You were always my favourite, Maeveh, but you should not belittle the Anyon. He is loyal to me, and he has his uses; how else could we sustain this… this level of civilisation amidst the violent atrophy of our times if it were not for the industry and earnestness of our friend Uisnech. He fought in my place at the head of my armies! Without him, none of this,’ continued Ahearn, swirling his staff in a dramatic gesticulation that toppled his tankard and sent a sheen of liquor flooding over the already food-thick table. ‘None of this would remain possible.’

Maeveh nodded and dropped herself into the seat at the head of the table, facing the farseer from a long distance. The eldar nearest to her hastened to provide her with a glass and to shuffle the table arrangement so that the seer’s favourite dishes would be within her reach.

Letting her eyes flick over the face of the servile eldar, she realised with satisfaction that it was actually Bricriu of the Sloane. How delicious, she thought, to have one of the Circular Council pouring her drink; only here in her hidden world of pleasure could this happen. It was a testament to the appeal of her secret coven that even eldar of that stature were willing to humble themselves to gain entry – this life spoke to something essential in the soul of every eldar, whether they were willing to admit it or not.

Only a few years before, this chamber had been nothing more than the frustrated and lusty dream of Maeveh and a few of the more visionary seers of House Yuthran. Now it was a veritable cabal of bliss, exclusive and hidden like a glistening pearl in an ocean of ugly and primitive destruction.

‘You are right, of course.’ She smiled. In all honesty, none of the politics of the Circle of Court really interested her at all. She only sat on that sober and boring council because the status associated with it opened a great many doors on Kaelor, not least the secret doors into this very chamber. Since the start of the Prophecy Conflagration, things had only become worse on the rest of the vast craftworld and the earnest Uisnech had only increased his influence at the steadily crumbling court. At the end of

the day, however, she didn't really care what Uisnech did, as long as he didn't prevent her from enjoying the finer and more developed aspects of eldar life. From time to time, however, she had to admit that she took some pleasure from coaxing and teasing the head of House Anyon – he always responded with such delightful violence.

'At least the old warrior has not yet come to appreciate the… special qualities of our little Ela,' said Maeveh, toying with the food on her crystalline plate. 'He finds the little abomination to be too young and beautiful, it seems.'

'He is a wise old fool, Maeveh. None of us can see the future of that infant seer. It is clouded even from me.'

'Perhaps it is time for us to bring her here, Ahearn?' The idea tantalised her, and her expression thrilled as though pulsing with physical pleasure. She felt as though she had given voice to something forbidden. 'Perhaps she would be… receptive.'

'Do not think that I have not thought of this. But her visions suggest that her concerns lay beyond those of this delirious chamber. She is… distracted from these truths about the eldar soul. She sees blood always behind her eye-lids; whenever she sits into meditation or lies down to rest, blood cascades into her mind.'

'We are not strangers to blood here,' toyed Maeveh, her eyes slipping over towards the bound shape of the mon'keigh, who was caught in between raptures of bliss and agony, held in the clutches of a group of sensuous eldar.

'She may yet be our enemy, Maeveh. Do not presume that the innocence of her youth will make her pliant in your hands… delightful as that thought may be.'

The Yuthran seer said nothing; her attention was transfixed for a moment by the enthralling performance of Slefus Pious III. In her mind's eye, she imagined that the squirming mon'keigh was the little abomination of Ashbel.

'She has left Kaelor. Were you aware of this? The infinity circuit has been deprived of her presence: Kaelor has felt her departure. The Warp Spiders have escorted her to Tyrine, the nearest planet on the cusp of the warp storm. She seeks to prevent the fall of Kaelor into the Maelstrom, Maeveh. She believes that we are being drawn in by the powers of a mon'keigh sorcerer in league with the Great Enemy.' Ahearn mouthed the last words with theatrical emphasis. 'She believes that this is the only possible explanation for our craftworld's trajectory.'

'Then we may yet be able to rely on the innocence of her youth, farseer.' The rhetorical flourish pleased Maeveh, and she smiled broadly. 'Besides, it seems as though her dear caradoc has already earned the trust of his little morna.' Her words dripped with theatrical sarcasm as she imitated Ela's and then Ahearn's voice in turn.

‘As for her activities on Tyrine, you may rest assured that I have already arranged for a little extra company for her.’ As she spoke, she cast her eyes back over to the bloodied and broken figure of Slefus, who had finally slumped into motionlessness. ‘The Adeptus Astartes themselves are going to offer their assistance, thanks to our recently deceased friend there. These mon’keigh are such simple-minded, primitive creatures – they have no self-discipline: dangle a temptation before them and they run to it.’

‘And temptation is something that you understand better than most.’

A swirling vortex of warpfire erupted spontaneously in the sky, hanging low over the ruins of a once-ornate and grand stone plaza. It spun with an eerie, deep purple whirl of flame, pulling in the clouds from the darkened sky and rippling against the bloodstained, colour-daubed buildings. As though in dramatic sympathy, smaller eddies of dust started to swirl into miniature tornadoes around the plaza, sparking and crackling with warp energy.

Jagged lances of lightning flashed into the whirling portal, transforming its vaporous circle into a shimmering pool of reflective energy. After a few seconds, the pool ruptured and a group of slender figures dropped out of it into the plaza below, their garnet and gold armour glinting in the dull light of Tyrine. Amongst them, as they landed lightly on blood-slicked flagstones, was a small, hooded figure that might have been a child.

As soon as their feet hit the ground, the Warp Spiders deployed into a ring around the little, ruby-robed Ela, guarding her from the unknown. They were anticipating a hostile reception; a group of glittering eldar souls dropping into the mire of a world in the grip of temptation by Slaanesh would be sure to attract attention.

Even as the Warp Spiders swept the scene with their death spinners, checking the terrain for signs of daemonic infestation, the cyclones around the edges of the plaza whirled into solidity. They drew in air and energy, spinning them into sleek, humanoid forms. After a few seconds, the once-secure and deserted plaza was punctuated with the elegant and pale forms of Slaaneshi daemonettes. It was as though the Great Enemy could smell the presence of the children of Isha.

At the same time, mutilated and blood-streaked mon’keigh started to seep into the plaza from the side streets. They came clutching tools and bladed weapons, whips and primitive projectiles. Covered in vividly coloured paints where clothing should have been, the mammals chanted and sang in a hideous cacophony of noise that assailed the sensitive senses of the eldar.

As the daemonettes started to move towards the eldar, slipping through the

unfamiliarly dense caresses of material space, slicing casually through the gathering throng of humans, thrilling as they slid and danced in breathtakingly lethal displays, the Warp Spiders lurched into action. Ela had foreseen the presence of daemonic forces on Tyrine, and they were not unprepared.

Without a word, Adsulata blinked out of existence, reappearing abruptly on the far side of the square, surprising a group of mon'keigh from behind. Her death spinner spluttered and spun like a gatling-gun, mowing down a swathe of the mammals before they even had a chance to turn. The nearest daemonette was faster, ducking and spinning in a nauseatingly graceful turn, before springing into a slow flip that brought it to rest only a couple of meters from the arachnir.

Adsulata did not pause or hesitate, but left her weapon spinning with fire, strafing it through the crowd towards the lithe and exquisite shape of the daemonette. But the maid-servant of Slaanesh moved as quickly as the ballistic spray, hopping, turning and springing around the fire until the range was closed to nothing. At which point, the daemonette swatted the death spinner from Adsulata's hands and lashed out with a viciously curving blade.

Letting her gun fall, Adsulata met the daemonette's strike with the powerblades that ran along the backs of her forearms.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Warp Spider squad had followed their arachnir's lead, warp-jumping to strategic positions around the combat zone from where they could outflank the massing foe and ensure that the daemonettes could not co-ordinate an assault on the infant seer.

Three Aspect Warriors remained positioned around Ela, cutting down any of the mon'keigh that were pressed towards them by the weight of the crowd, and spraying out fire in support of their brethren who were engaging the daemonettes.

Ela herself stood in the eye of the storm, feeling the sickly fury swirling around the plaza like a maelstrom of blood lust. For a moment, her mind flashed back to the ruination that had engulfed the once-glorious Kaelor – something in the air on Tyrine shared the same nauseating taste as that terrible event. Looking up the mountainside, past the fury of combat that raged around her, she saw the towering shape of a majestic basilica rising into the clouds. Its sides ran slick with blood, just as in her vision, and she knew that the sorcerer was there, waiting for her.

Fate waited for nobody.

Muttering a few words of power, the infant seer pushed her arms out from her cloak and summoned a corona of crackling energy from her hands, sending streams and arcs of lightning jousting out from her fingers, as she conjured the Storm of Eldritch into

the plaza.

The Dark Angels paused at the end of one of the long boulevards that opened up into the wide courtyard before the gates of the towering basilica dominating the mountaintop. The squad stopped to survey the lay of the land before entering the open space, their suspicions having been raised by the atmosphere of the city itself. They stood, magnificent and colossal, amidst the crowd of Tyrinites that had followed them through the streets, chanting and howling with delight at the second coming of the Voice of the True God.

'I do not like this,' said Lexius, staring up at the awesome edifice before them.

Even with the massive gates closed, and even from the other side of the wide courtyard, the Dark Angels could hear the chanting of heretical prayers and sonorous cacophony that echoed around the interior of the cavernous building.

'…lift us with the boon of pain, to turn the galaxy red with blood and feed the hunger of the gods!' The muffled words wafted across the square.

The journey through the streets of the sprawling city had been long and enlightening. The buildings were beginning to crumble through a combination of neglect and violence; they had been transformed from the simple, pious dwellings of pilgrims and penitents into gaudily coloured and decadently arrayed abodes for hedonists and pleasure-seekers. Images of the Emperor had been desecrated or torn down and left in pieces in the dirt. Crude statues of unspeakable things had been hastily erected to replace them. And everywhere was the relentless howl of ungodly noise, piped through amplification systems, tumbling out of the cracked windows of the gaudy abodes, or simply yelled out of the lungs of the people that staggered through the streets. The effect was a barrage on the senses.

'I cannot believe that he is here,' snarled Kalidian, looking back down the boulevard along which they had just travelled. The red light of his bionic eye shone constantly, as though always in focus. He lowered his voice even further, until it was barely audible: 'Surely there are depths to which even a fallen angel will not fall.'

Lexius made no reply, as though he were considering the question. He had followed up dozens of leads over the last couple of decades, chasing across the galaxy in pursuit of the merest murmur or the smallest hint in a report. As a result, he had become extremely sceptical about his chances of fulfilling his vocation. But, despite his scepticism, he had to admit that the report from Tyrine had been the most promising in years. It was a virtual plea for them to investigate the planet.

For a moment, the thought crossed his mind that the perfect, cryptic certainties of the report might imply that someone was trying to lure them into a trap, but then his

senses returned to him: who could possibly know of the shame of the Dark Angels. Who could have set a trap such as this? The logical answer sent a thrill through his augmented and reinforced spine: only Cypher himself could do this. So perhaps he was here, after all? More likely that it was an act of misdirection – luring the Dark Angels to Tyrine while he vanished off in the Belt of Ophorine.

'So close,' growled Lexius eventually. 'We should purge this place, Master Axyrus. Its existence is an aberration and an offence to the light of the Emperor.' But then his thought lurched in a new and unexpected direction: if anyone ever discovered their hidden shame, they would be able to use hints like this to lead them all over the galaxy, rendering the Interrogator Chaplains into little more than puppets. As a simmering rage of resentment started to boil in the Chaplain's soul, his mind raced through the various possible manipulators.

'Eldar!' The cry came from behind him as the Tactical Marines started to move in response to the sighting. A line of heavily armoured, red and gold eldar warriors had appeared abruptly in the plaza before the cathedral gates. Looking closely, Lexius realised that there also seemed to be some kind of child with them, shepherded along in the middle of the formation, as though for protection. For a few moments, they appeared unconcerned or unaware of the presence of the Dark Angels. Instead, they were busying themselves planting charges around the frame of the gates.

'Lion damn them!' whispered Lexius as he spun his crozius arcanum ready for battle. He could only hope that their presence on Tyrine was a coincidence – anything else was far too appalling to contemplate. Whatever the case, his patience for the terrible afflictions of this fallen planet was already exhausted, and the appearance of these vile, xenos creatures only made Tyrine more disgusting. He would see it burn. All of it.

'Repent!' yelled Kalidian, sharing his Chaplain's thoughts, with his bolt pistol aloft in one hand and his chainsword brandished in the other. 'For today you die!'

With that, the Dark Angels broke into a charge across the plaza.

The bolter shells punched into the gates of the basilica, behind the Warp Spiders, chipping out shards of shrapnel and making the Aspect Warriors spin. The impacts shook the gates and sent booming sounds echoing into the nave beyond – so much for the advantage of surprise.

Adsulata slid instinctively in front of Ela, shielding her from the sudden barrage from the other side of the plaza. A squad of cloaked, power armoured Space Marines were storming towards them, with their weapons blazing. Looking around her warriors, Adsulata saw that the Warp Spiders were springing away from the gates, abandoning the thermal mines that they had been planting as they braced their weapons ready for the fight.

She scanned the surroundings, but could find nothing that would afford them any cover: they were completely exposed, standing before the gates of the basilica like red and gold targets for the mon'keigh warriors. Her immediate instincts were to get her Aspect Warriors clear of the site – they could blink through a series of warp jumps over to the side of the plaza and then take the fight to the Space Marines from a better position. But then there was little Ela – she could not make the jumps, and Adsulata would not leave her alone.

There was nothing for it but simply to exchange fire.

As though sharing the same thought processes, the rest of the Warp Spiders suddenly opened up with their death spinners, sending sprays of tiny, explosive projectiles screaming across the plaza. They had formed into a line in front of Ela'Ashbel, shielding her from the fray.

The Space Marines simply charged at them, ignoring the volleys of fire as though they were impervious to the weapons of the eldar. The death spinners' projectiles just seemed to bounce off their deep green armour. They were yelling battle cries in the crude, ugly tongue of their species, and behind them Adsulata could see a pressing crowd of bloodied and gaudy Tyrinites, squealing with pleasure at the violence that was unravelling before them.

A shriek of pain made Adsulata turn. At the end of the Warp Spider firing line, one of the Aspect Warriors dropped to his knees, clutching at his throat. Blood bubbled and jetted from the open artery, spraying over the white flagstones before the figure slumped forward into his own blood.

As the Warp Spider fell, Adsulata realised that its wound must have been caused by a blade, not by a bullet. She scanned the flanks quickly and saw that they had more to worry about than the charging Space Marines. Out to both sides of the gates, she could see spinning cyclones of daemonettes whirling into the materium. Already, there were three lithe and nauseatingly graceful figures working their way towards the eldar position. One of them had paused at the end of the line of Warp Spiders to lick the blood of the fallen off her poisoned blades. At least four more cyclones spoke of worse to come.

Two more Warp Spiders shrieked as hails of bolter fire punched through their slim bodies, throwing them back against the gates of the basilica and leaving them crumpled, shredded and ruined in heaps on the ground.

Adsulata checked behind her and saw Ela standing calmly and unmoved. Her sapphire eyes glistened with ineffable, distant fires, and her smooth face betrayed no signs of emotion, even as her honour guard was slaughtered around her. The arachnir could

not believe the composure of the infant.

At that moment, the great gates of the basilica burst open and hails of bolter shells lashed out of the yawning space within, accompanied by the roar of tens of thousands of raised voices. The sound wave was like a tsunami crashing over the Warp Spiders and throwing them off balance. In the distance, the pressing crowds in the street behind the dark green Space Marines returned the rapturous noise as though it were a sign from the gods themselves. Adsulata could hear them flooding into the plaza in their thousands, raising their voices and their weapons in tune with the grotesque noise that crashed out of the basilica.

As the blast of sound and air threw her off her feet, Adsulata just had time to turn and see a rampage of red and black Space Marines emerging from the shadows of the cathedral, their weapons blazing. Without knowing who they were, the arachnir realised instinctively that these were different creatures from the Astartes that had charged through the plaza.

The great gates crashed back against the massive stone walls, crushing the thermal mines that the Warp Spiders had set into the hinges, triggering a huge detonation that blew the immense doors into the air amidst an inferno of radiation and flame.

Rolling back up onto her feet, Adsulata saw that the eldar force was spent. Her Warp Spiders lay shredded and dead on the white flagstones, bathed in the fires of their own thermal charges. Mon’keigh warriors stormed towards them from in front and behind, trapping them in a lethal crossfire of bolter shells. To either side danced the sinister and deadly forms of daemonettes of Slaanesh, and all around were tens of thousands of mammalian cultists, all of them baying for blood.

In the very heart of it all stood little Ela. She seemed tiny and innocent amidst the fury and brutality of unrestrained battle. The corpses of her brethren were strewn around her feet, and their blood was gradually soaking into the hem of her long cloak. Yet somehow she remained untouched by the sullied reality of the combat. Bolter shells, projectiles and blades just seemed to slide past her, as though they could not find purchase in the pure form of an infant. She stood unmoving, with her brilliant blue eyes shining like distant stars.

Adsulata nodded a sorrowful farewell to her charge just as volleys of shells punctured her abdomen from both sides at once. The impacts seemed to balance each other, leaving her standing upright before the gates. But then a daemonette slid past and swept her blade through the arachnir’s knees, severing her legs and sending her crashing to the ground. Howling with pleasure, the daemonette sprang onwards, landing down onto the corpse of another fallen eldar and ripping at its flesh in search of its soul.

Lying in amongst the corpses of her Warp Spiders, with the last of her long life bleeding out onto the once-white flagstones of a forsaken world, Adsulata lifted her face to see Ela one last time. I have failed you, my farseer.

No, came the gentle reply as Ela walked calmly through the furious battle that raged around her. You have brought me safely to this place. Your duty is done, and your soul will be returned to the infinity circuit of Kaelor to join its ancestors. My destiny lies within this basilica – you can take me no further.

With that, Ela reached down and took Adsulata's waystone from its place of safety in the chestplates of her armour. Then she turned and walked slowly towards the yawning entrance into the cathedral. Thousands of stinking mon'keigh were rushing past her, pouring out into the plaza to join the fray. But they paid her no attention at all. She moved through them like a little fish swimming up-stream, heading up the main aisle towards the orator in the apse.

For a brief moment, Ela realised that the coincidence of forces in the plaza implied the machinations of a great intelligence. She could not believe that all those various warriors, daemons and cultists had converged on that point at that time by accident. It had been arranged in order to thwart her mission.

She put the thought aside as the crowds began to part before her and she saw the towering figure of Kor Phaeron for the first time in real life. He was just as he had appeared in her vision. Standing behind the crumbling remains of the font, the massive, power armoured warrior-god looked down on the little infant seer and laughed.

'And so it was that the seer-child, the ehveline of Kaelor, walked hand in hand with destiny, taking it with her like a crippled caradoc, guiding it through the quagmires of the present like a farseer. She passed slowly through the ugly confusion of the basilica, parting the congregation like water around a finely honed blade. Until finally, ancient before her time, and possessing the prescient fortitude of her forebears, the infant seer stood her ground before the monstrous form of the Dark Apostle.

And looking down upon her tiny and frail figure, the giant warrior of Chaos roared with ridicule and mirth, throwing back his head and yelling his laughter into the crude Blood Dome above. His daemonic patrons had warned him of the power of the Sons of Asuryan, whispering promises of carnage and bloodshed on an epic scale, pushing thoughts of legions of Aspect Warriors and of the Avatar of Khaine himself into the roiling fury of the Apostle's mind.

Yet, in the place of these blood-drenched legions came Ela.

There were none to witness the events that transpired before the mutilated altar of the

Emperor of Man, and yet it was there and then that the myriad futures of Kaelor resolved into a single path. The decisive moment had nothing to do with the thwarted plans of the decadent and treacherous few, which burned like the fires of Vaul in the plaza beyond the great gates, smouldering in the corpses of the valiant Warp Spiders.

The moment came in the blink of an eye.

As the mirth of the daemon-warrior subsided, and he cast the gaze of his blazing eyes down onto the hooded form of the ehveline, mocking her with his intensity of purpose, the once and future farseer of our fate reached up her hands and slid the hood from her head.

And that was the moment.

Ela of Ashbel looked up, with her glittering sapphire eyes shining with the radiance of the eyes of Isha herself, and she met the cursed gaze of the monstrous Apostle.

It was a transfixion.

In that instant, the great gates of the basilica slammed shut and sealed with powers beyond the whit of any to open, leaving the infant and the monster alone in the cavernous space within. They stood unmoving, like a grand fresco from the golden era of legends, holding each other’s will in the clutches of their souls.

The moment stretched out of time as the fury of battle rose and abated in the plaza outside. What passed as a fraction of an instant passed simultaneously as an age – the deep and mysterious minds of the two adversaries amplifying time into impossible durations.

It cannot be known what the darkest of Apostles saw in the soul of little Ela. It has been conjectured that the visions she gave to him challenged his faith to its core, riddling the Master of Faith with doubts and uncertainties that turned his will against itself and drove the perverse mon’keigh to new heights of fury and rage.

Whatever it was that Kor Phaeron saw in the glittering, sapphire eyes of the ehveline, it turned his laughter into fury and drove him ranting from the surface of Tyrine on that very day.

But this victory came at such a cost.

When the infant seer finally lowered her eyes from the font, there was only darkness in her sight. Even the ruddy, red light that flooded down from the Blood Dome had vanished from her view. There was nothing.

Reaching her hand to her face, Ela traced her fingers over her cheeks and found them slick with liquid. Blood was seeping out of her ruined eyes like a torrent of tears.

Kor Phaeron's twisted mind had lashed at her soul and her eyes, granting her visions of such horror that her very being had rebelled against them. Her senses had striven to shut out the sensations, shielding her soul from the insanity that the Apostle had held out to her like a gift, as though tempting her with sheer terror.

She saw visions of the future. She saw Kaelor rebuilt and glorious. She saw it burning and in flames as mon'keigh warriors and daemonettes of the Great Enemy stormed through its boulevards and forests – she saw an Apostle like Kor Phaeron himself standing in the heart of the Circular Council with the broken and battered corpses of the courtiers strewn around him. And she saw that Apostle throw back his head and laugh at the ruination of the ancient craftworld. He held out his hand towards Ela, and she saw that it was overflowing with the spirit-stones of her people. As she looked back up into the Apostle's face, a name smashed into her mind: Erebus. But then the face morphed and twisted, transmogrifying into the visage of Slaanesh itself. In a slow, deliberate and mocking gesture, the Great Enemy brought its hand to its face and pushed the waystones into its mouth, chewing slowly as drool poured over its lips.

And it was with these horrors in her mind that Ela of Ashbel, the ehveline of Kaelor, struggled back through the warp portals of her fallen Warp Spiders, stumbling and staggering under the weight of her efforts and under the ineffable, terrible pressures of the future.'

– The Tears of Blood: The Chronicles of Ela'Ashbel, vol.2 by Deoch Epona, Craftworld Kaelor

Cracks of warp lightning lashed through the distant wraithbone ceiling of the Styhxlin forest sector, flickering vividly into the fecund zone and rendering the atmosphere into a rainless, electrical storm. The lashes of the Maelstrom whipped against the vast form of Kaelor as it skirted the fringes of the massive warp tempest. Tendrils of daemonic power scraped over the ancient structure, riddling it with flecks of daemonic energy as it pitched and yawed on the very cusp of its own damnation.

Farseer Ahearn Rivalin stood uncertainly amongst the vegetation, his staff sinking slightly into the moist earth as he leant his weight onto it. He did not enjoy these trips out towards the Styhxlin perimeter – it was not the danger, although that had been considerable recently, but rather it was the organic filth of the forest zones that appalled his cultivated sensibilities. Even debris, flame and rubble seemed to have a pristine quality in comparison.

Besides, the Warp Spiders of Exarch Aingeal had been particularly unsympathetic to the needs of the Rivalin court, and they had been the first to end the long tradition of

political aloofness by the Aspect Temples of Kaelor when the Prophecy Conflagration had first started to simmer. Aingeal was now called the odai-exarch – the Great Exarch – by those who had been loyal to his cause.

Trust the little abomination to pick this place as her point of return to Kaelor: she had not even communicated it to the court – one of the seer covens of House Yuthran had forewarned the court of her imminent arrival and the farseer had been forced to hasten to this distasteful place to await her, entrusting the earnest Uisnech Anyon with his security in transit.

Thankfully, Ela'Ashbel was on time.

The grand warp portal of the Spider Temple, half hidden amongst the singed but still-lush foliage, shimmered with power. A curtain of mercurial energy in-phased within the circular frame, glistening with reflections like the surface of a lunar pool.

Ahearn peered into the sparkling images, seeing himself and his honour guard distorted in the reflections, rendered ugly and misshapen by the power of the warp. For a moment, he wondered whether this was how he actually appeared to the other, more innocent eldar of Kaelor – those still committed to the overbearing Eldar Paths. As he turned the thought in his mind, playing with it like a flawed gemstone, a shiver of unapologetic superiority thrilled through his spine. Why should he care what others saw?

'She is coming,' said Maeveh, leaning down to whisper into the farseer's ear, her voice edged with excited dread. Her scheme to remove the little abomination and ease Kaelor's passage towards its destiny had been thwarted. For just a moment, she wondered at the incredible power that Ela had revealed through her ordeal.

'Yes,' answered Ahearn, letting sibilance draw his reply into a hiss.

The curtain of warp energy rippled suddenly and violently, bubbling as though a child were blowing air into it. Then a spot appeared in the middle – a point of darkness in the centre that grew gradually into a circle and then a void, pushing the energy curtain into a furious, boiling frame of light. After a few seconds, a tiny, female figure appeared in the darkness.

Little Ela'Ashbel, the abominable infant seer, stepped out of the warp portal and back into the sanctity of the forested grounds of the Spider Temple, where she had spent her earliest years. She was quite alone – her Warp Spider escort having been wiped out on the surface of Tyrine. She was stooped with exhaustion and weariness. And she was bleeding.

Farseer Ahearn shuffled forward, reaching out his hand for the suffering child. 'You

have saved us from a great enemy, my little morna. The eldar of Kaelor owe you a great debt of gratitude – their souls are their own, for a while longer at least.'

Maeveh's lips snarled in undisguised disgust and disappointment, making Ahearn turn to encourage her decorum. But then he realised something wonderful: the blood that cascaded down Ela's face was coming from her eyes. It looked as though she was weeping tears of blood. She had been blinded. She could no longer see the decadent ugliness of the farseer's visage; she could no longer discern the snarling disparagement of Maeveh. She would now rely on her caradoc even more than before. Perhaps things had worked out rather well after all.

'My little morna,' he continued, with a moist smile creasing his wrinkled face. 'Come with me. I know a wonderful place where you can rest and gain distraction from your pain. Come with me and Maeveh Yuthran – we will look after you.'

Stumbling with fatigue, pain and sensory disorientation, Ela'Ashbel reached out her hand into her world of absolute darkness and grasped what felt like the old, dry fingers of Ahearn. Too weak to say or do anything else, she simply nodded and let him lead her away.