



WARHAMMER

SONS OF ELLYRION

GRAHAM McNEILL

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

**SONS OF
ELLYRION**

Ulthuan - 02

Graham McNeill

(A Flandrel & Undead Scan v1.0)



This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl-Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.



BOOK ONE

HEROES

CHAPTER ONE

TEARS OF ISHA

Ulthuan was weeping.

Waterfalls and wailing rivers carried its tears to the sea. The clouds gathered in solemn thunderheads and the wind howled its sorrow through the air, which hung torpid and heavy over even its most carefree inhabitants. Not since the days of the Sundering, when brother had slain brother and a race favoured by the gods turned on one another, had the realm of the elves known such grief.

The skies above the mist-shrouded island faded to black, the sun unwilling to bear witness to such horror. Only the shimmering emerald orb of the Chaos moon dared show its face on such a night, but the clouds over Ulthuan hid the torment of its inhabitants from such a leering gaze.

Ulthuan's brightest and most beautiful star had been torn from the heavens, and that grief was for her people alone.

The masked statues upon the Shrine of Asuryan wept blood from their hidden eyes, and the waters around Tor Elyr broke and seethed with anger, shattering crystal bridges that had stood for thousands of years. Roaring waves heaved the surface of the Inner Sea, capsizing the few silver-hulled ships that plied its waters and dragging sorrowful mariners down to their doom.

The lands of the Inner Kingdoms, golden realms of eternal summer, knew at last the touch of winter as cold winds blew from the north and ignoble rains battered the balmy plains. Magical sprites, capricious things of glittering mischief, transformed in an instant, their mischief turned to spite, playfulness to malice. The forests of Chrace echoed with the sound of enraged beasts, and lone hunters abroad in the shadowed depths sought the sanctuary of caves or tall trees.

Towering breakers battered the rocky coastline of Cothique as the ocean surged with fury, desperate to spill over the land. Within the Gaen Vale, the mountain of the crone maiden rumbled as though ancient geological faults tore open, and black smoke clawed from its summit. From Sapherian villas and the coastal mansions of Yvresse, to the rocky, cliff-top towers of Tiranoc and palaces of such beauty that they may only be told of in song, the land of the elves knew pain and sorrow.

The great statues of the Everqueen and the Phoenix King that stood sentinel over the mighty port of Lothern trembled upon their mighty footings. The light of a

thousand torches illuminated Lothorn, but the marbled Everqueen remained shrouded in the deepest shadows, and all who looked upon the regal features of the Phoenix King saw the stern and unflinching countenance crack, like the carven track of a single tear.

Ulthuan's warriors, mages, poets and peacemakers alike wept with their magical home. That shared woe passed from the elves to the land, and from the land to the air. And as Ulthuan mourned, it spread on the winds of magic throughout the world until even distant kin in ports as far away as Tor Elithis breathed in the sorrow of the Everqueen's fate.

The distant asrai of Athel Loren grieved with their long lost brothers and sisters, the slumbering Orion and fey queen Ariel dipping the branches of their forest home in shared anguish. Though the paths of the asur and asrai had taken very different turns through the ages of the world, their shared heritage was still a bright thread of connection between them.

Even the crude and unsophisticated race of man felt something amiss in the world. Children—who alone of the race of men retain their sense of wonder—woke from troubled dreams with a scream on their lips, and those forced to pass the long watches of the night in wakefulness felt the touch of the grave draw ever closer. Dramatists and dreamers felt an aspect of beauty pass from the world, while those whose lives had been touched by the asur in some way felt an unreasoning grief they could not explain when the sun's rays once again illuminated a world that seemed just a little less bright than before.

If the dwarfs of the mountain holds felt anything of these events, none could say, for elf and dwarf had long since lost any love for the other.

Only the fallen elves of Naggaroth revelled in this time of suffering. As drops of blood fell to the loamy earth of Avelorn, cold laughter echoed from the crooked towers of the druchii's accursed cities of dark iron and bloodstained stone.

Leading his army of invasion against the gates of Lothorn, the Witch King himself, greatest and most hated son of Ulthuan, bellowed with laughter astride his midnight-skinned drake perched atop the Glittering Lighthouse. The ocean boomed and crashed far below him, but his mirth drowned the noise of the furious water.

In her gaudy pavilion of debaucheries before the embattled Eagle Gate, Morathi the Hag Sorceress whipped her devotees into bloody paroxysms of opiate-fuelled madness before bathing in a cauldron of their hot blood.

The myriad voices of the world spoke with a million voices in a million ears, subtly different every time, but all singing the same lament.

Alarielle, the Everqueen of Avelorn, was dead.

Eldain saw Caelir stab the Everqueen, yet still could not believe what his own eyes were telling him. He'd known his brother's purpose in coming to Avelorn, but to see it enacted was worse than he could ever have imagined. Though it was over in an instant, Eldain saw everything, from the tiniest detail to the full panorama of the murderous deed. Alone of all those in the garlanded arbour, it seemed that he must bear witness to the full horror of events as they unfolded.

Was this his punishment for being the treacherous architect of this assassination, to

see every detail and feel every nuance of the bloody deed?

He saw the black sheath of Caelir's dagger crumble away, blown by perfume-scented winds like cinders from a dead fire. The blade itself, dulled by old blood and reeking of ancient murders, crossed the all too short distance between Caelir's fist and the Everqueen's chest. Yet though he had come to Avelorn on a mission of murder, Caelir's face was not the face of an assassin, but that of a horrified witness.

Eldain willed the magic of the Everqueen to turn aside the blow, hoping that some innate power possessed by the chosen of Isha to undo harm or malicious intent before it could be wreaked would save her. No such magic intervened, and the black wedge of ensorcelled iron plunged into her breast. Blood welled from the wound, each droplet that stained her gown of silk and starlight shockingly bright in the darkness that fell like the last night at the end of the world.

The Everqueen did not cry out or scream or give voice to the pain of her wounding. A single tear spilled down her cheek as her body fell like the most graceful tree in the most magical forest hewn by the axe of an unthinking dwarf. Though no living race was quicker and more agile than the asur, not one amongst those assembled before the Everqueen's gilded pavilion moved so much as a muscle to save her.

Acrobats, poets, warriors, singers, musicians and tale-tellers had gathered in this leafy bower of Avelorn to witness the Everqueen walking among her people, to bask in her divine radiance and feel the joy of her breath play across the sculpted lines of their perfect features. The land had welcomed her arrival, fresh blooms springing up in her footsteps, and the leafy canopy parting with every grateful sigh of the wind to allow the sunlight to caress the Everqueen's radiant skin. Those blooms now withered and died, and the treetops closed over this scene of murder with an ashamed rustle of branches. The patter of rain fell from a cloudless sky.

The Maiden Guard, resplendent in their ivory robes, bronze breastplates and long spears, could do nothing as their mistress fell. Not since the days before Finuval Plain had they lapsed in their duty of protection, and each warrior woman felt as though Caelir's blade had pierced her own heart.

Eldain saw those closest to Caelir, a soft-bodied poet and a wiry woman with the body of a dancer. The male fell to his knees, his hands clasped theatrically over his cheeks as he howled with loss. The woman's fists were clenched, the corded muscles in her arms and legs bunched in readiness to fight.

No matter where his gaze fell, Eldain's eyes were always drawn back to the Everqueen as she fell with languid grace to the soft grass. She struck the ground with a sigh of silk and a gasp of pain. Her eyes met those of Eldain, and he felt the awful weight of his betrayal in that tawny-gold gaze. She saw past the mask he presented to the world, and into the secret heart of him. In that unbreakable moment of connection, Alarielle did the one thing he could never do for himself.

She forgave him.

Her head rolled to the side and golden tresses woven from sunlight and joy fell across her face, mercifully covering her alabaster features. The moment of connection ended and Eldain's splendid isolation from the flow of the world's time was at an end.

He slid from the back of his horse as an inchoate roar of aggression sounded from a hundred throats. Though the grief was too raw and too powerful for mere words, the

sentiment was clear.

Blood must answer for blood.

* * *

Caelir's hand burned from holding the dagger, his palm scarred with the imprint of its hateful grip and his soul rebelling at the memory of the thousand assassinations and uncounted lives it had ended on the sacrificial altar. He watched the Everqueen fall away from him, as though she tumbled into the deepest chasm from which there could be no escape. Her gaze did not condemn him, such eyes could hold only love, and he looked away, unable to bear the shame of her forgiveness.

Instead he looked across the twilight glade and saw an elf whose countenance was the mirror of his own. Softer and without the harsh lines of Caelir's angular cheekbones, he finally recognised his older brother, Eldain. Rhianna stood beside him, and his heart broke anew to see the matching pledge rings upon their hands. Next to them, a warrior woman in the garb of a Sword Master had her blade drawn, but Rhianna's restraining hand was on her shoulder.

Caelir knew everything now. Washed up on Ulthuan's shores without his memory, he had been a weapon primed by the Witch King and his hellish mother, and aimed at their most powerful enemies. Teclis of the White Tower had already been laid low, and now the Everqueen had fallen victim to Caelir's unwitting treacheries. Yet even as he saw his part in these attacks, he knew that none of this would have been possible but for Eldain's betrayal in Naggaroth.

"You left me to die, brother," he said, his voice softer than a whisper, but flying like blazing arrows to Eldain's heart.

His life was forfeit. There could be no return from a deed of such unadulterated evil, and Caelir awaited the pain of a hundred arrows piercing his flesh and silver lances plunging into his body to split his worthless heart in two. Briefly he cursed the Fates that he would die without first taking his revenge, but the fading light of the Everqueen spoke of the futility of such notions. Vengeance only begat vengeance and thus was the cycle of hatred perpetuated.

Yet even as he awaited death, a voice in his head whispered his name. The sound was a zephyr of wind across the Ellyrion plains, the rumble of hoof beats from the Great Herd, and the boom of thunder from the Annulii. Soft, yet with a power stronger than the roots of the earth itself, it told him one thing, and Caelir could not disobey.

Flee, it said. Flee and forgive...

Rhianna saw Caelir's blow as it landed, the magic within her leaping to her fingertips as soon as she felt the weight of the hateful dagger's evil. As the Everqueen fell away from Caelir, she wanted to unleash that magic in a torrent of fire. Hotter than Vaul's forge and brighter than Asuryan's fire, it would unmake Caelir in a heartbeat.

No sooner had that intent surfaced in her mind than it was quashed.

This was the boy she had loved and had planned to wed.

Caelir was the reckless scoundrel who had taken her on wild rides across the plains of Ellyrion upon the backs of the most incredible steeds of Ulthuan. He had taken her

into the Annulii, higher than anyone else would have dared, and shown her the majesty of the untamed magic that boiled within the thunder-haunted peaks. His roguish charms had won her away from Eldain, but his loss in the Land of Chill had ended their dream of a life together before it had begun.

She could not bring herself to undo the memory of that young boy. She had loved him once, and saw the same innocence behind his tortured face she had seen that day in the mountains when she had first lost her heart to him.

Those around her showed no such restraint and she saw their horror turn to anger in a heartbeat. Bows were bent and silver-bladed lances brought to shoulders, ready to spill the blood of this traitor. Caelir stumbled away from his black deed, turning to Eldain and running towards him as though the whip of a Tiranoc charioteer was at his back. As fast as Caelir was, there was no way he could possibly reach his brother before the arrows of the Everqueen's protectors cut him down.

The dark-haired leader of the Maiden Guard that had brought them to the Everqueen's bower had her horsehair bowstring taut, an arrow fletched with feathers from a white raven aimed at Caelir's heart.

Save him and you will save me...

The words lanced into Rhianna's mind, the mantra she had kept close to her heart ever since her journey into the cave of the oracle. Though they seemed contradictory, she knew better than to doubt the words of the high priestess of the Gaen Vale.

A score of Maiden Guard bows creaked and loosed in the same instant, and each shaft arced through the air with accuracy no other race could match.

This time the magic flew from Rhianna's hands without restraint and she poured it into the towering oak beside her. Shimmering light spilled from its cracked bark, and the flurry of arrows arcing towards Caelir veered from their course like iron drawn by a navigator's lodestone to hammer the ancient wood.

Splinters of bark made her duck as a second volley was similarly torn from its natural course. Cries of anger and frustration echoed from the forested glade as the Maiden Guard cast aside their bows and took up their lances. They bounded through the crowds of panicking elves, intent on slaying the killer in their midst.

"Caelir, wait!" yelled Eldain, but his brother was in no mood to listen. He vaulted onto the back of Eldain's steed with the grace of one to whom being on horseback was as natural as breathing. Caelir settled onto the back of Irenya, the reins leaping into his hands as he turned the beast's rearing into a curving turn.

With a wild yell, Caelir leaned low over the horse's neck and it surged to a run in the time it took to take a breath. The Maiden Guard were superlative warriors, but their martial skill could not defeat the horsemanship of an Ellyrion rider. Their lances struck only empty air as Caelir twisted his mount left and right, and no arrow, no matter how skilfully loosed could find its target thanks to Rhianna's magic.

Caelir galloped into the depths of the forest, the trees closing around him as though accomplices in his escape. Groups of bronze-armoured warrior women set off after Caelir, but Rhianna knew they would not capture him. An Ellyrion horseman would only be caught if he wished to be caught. Only the forest could prevent Caelir's escape, and Rhianna had a suspicion that the ancient sentience that dwelled in the soil, air, water and wood of Avelorn had prescience beyond even the asur, and would thwart

every attempt at pursuit.

Rhianna felt the magic drain from her and dropped to her knees as a keening wail of abject loss split the night with a depth of fury no mortal could know and sorrow beyond the reach of even the most broken hearted. Yvraine was at her side in a heartbeat as groups of warriors and poets gathered around the fallen Everqueen.

“What did you do?” asked the Sword Master in disbelief.

“What I had to,” said Rhianna, staring at the fallen Everqueen.

Alarielle’s hair spilled around her head like a pillow of spun gold. A single droplet of blood marred the illusion that she was simply resting, and tears welled in Rhianna’s eyes.

She looked up as a shadow halted before her.

Through tear-blurred vision, Rhianna saw the leader of the Maiden Guard, her dark hair wild and unbound beneath her bronze helm. Cold fury glittered in her amber eyes, and a terrible grief was held in check only by centuries of training. Her lance was aimed at Rhianna’s heart, and the urge to drive it home was evident in every taut sinew and bunched muscle.

“You will come with me,” hissed the Maiden.

Ten warriors of the Maiden Guard led Eldain, Rhianna and Yvraine into a deeper part of the forest, one where what little light remained to the day was filtered through a damp mist of drizzle. Though the ride from their landing at the River Arduil had been frantic, Eldain had not been blind to the soaring magical nature of the forest, yet here its beauty was as flat and dull as any forest of the Old World. The trees here looked dead and withered, devoid of magic and light.

Eldain felt the potent anger of the Maiden Guard, the hostility that came off them in waves, but also the fear that they would be held accountable for this disaster.

“Are we prisoners?” whispered Rhianna.

Eldain shrugged, unsure of their status in Avelorn. “I don’t know, maybe.”

“But we came with a warning,” said Yvraine, chafing at the loss of her greatsword. The Maiden Guard had divested them of weapons, and to take away a Sword Master’s blade was like taking a limb. “We tried to stop this.”

“But you did *not* stop it,” said the Handmaiden with midnight tresses. She removed her helm, setting it down on a moss-covered rock carved with spiralling vines. Her face was beautiful, but with its angular lines and narrowed eyes, her beauty took on a twilight aspect that chilled Eldain’s blood. “You aided the Everqueen’s attacker in his escape.”

“And he’s only getting farther away,” pointed out Yvraine. “You are wasting time.”

“Your deeds are known to me, Yvraine Hawkblade,” said the Handmaiden, “so I will not take you to task for your youthful impudence. I am Lirazel, Chief Handmaiden of Everqueen Alarielle, and I do not like others telling me my business.”

“Every moment we tarry here, Caelir slips beyond our grasp,” pressed Yvraine.

Lirazel said, “For now he is beyond my reach,” and Eldain saw how much it hurt to say those words.

Rhianna saw it too and said, “Then let us go. We know Caelir. We have been following him since the attack on the White Tower. I have to save him.”

“Save him?” demanded Lirazel, stepping close to Rhianna with a white-knuckled grip on her silver lance. “After what he did? Who are you, and why would you say such a thing?”

“I am Rhianna Silverfawn, child of Saphery and daughter of Mitherion Silverfawn,” said Rhianna. “And I can say this because I once loved Caelir. We were to be wed in a gentler time I can scarce recall.”

Lirazel’s eyes flicked from the pledge ring on Rhianna’s hand to the matching one upon Eldain’s. Her eyes narrowed as she took in the contours of his features.

“You are kin to Caelir,” she said.

“I am his brother, Eldain of House Éadaoin,” said Eldain, feeling the Handmaiden’s gaze strip him bare. Lirazel had failed to protect the Everqueen from one assassin’s blade, and she wasn’t about to take the chance that murder ran in the family.

“You are one of the horsemasters?”

“Indeed,” agreed Eldain. “My family has trained with the herds for a thousand years, and none know the way of the horse as we do.”

Lirazel nodded, and said, “Do you also desire to save Caelir?”

“I do not wish him dead,” replied Eldain, hoping she believed him. In truth, Eldain wasn’t sure what he desired. To see Caelir dead would allow him to live the life he had only recently won back, but the chance for redemption that had come with the reawakening of his brother’s true self would die with him. The Everqueen might have forgiven him, but hers was not the forgiveness he craved.

“Tell me how you came to be in Avelorn,” said Lirazel. “Leave nothing out.”

Eldain told how Yvraine had escorted them to the Tower of Hoeth at the behest of Rhianna’s father, of how they had arrived in the midst of a terrible battle between the Sword Masters and nightmarish creations of raw magic unleashed by a trap laid in Caelir’s memories by Morathi.

Rhianna took up the tale as they sailed across the Inner Sea to the Gaen Vale and travelled the hidden paths on the isle of the Mother Goddess. Her voice fell to little more than a whisper as she spoke of what happened at the island’s heart, her soft tones heard only by Yvraine and Lirazel. Eldain made no attempt to hear what passed between the oracle and Rhianna, for it was clearly not meant for the male of the species.

“Save him and you save me,” said Rhianna as she concluded her tale of events on the Gaen Vale. “I do not understand what it means, but it is all I have.”

From the island of the Mother Goddess they sailed for Avelorn and there the tale ended as Yvraine described their ride through the forest to reach the Everqueen before Caelir. When their tale reached its conclusion, Eldain saw Lirazel’s suspicion ease a fraction, and let out a pent-up breath.

Lirazel planted her spear in the earth and ran her hands through her hair. Her skin was tanned from a life spent in the forest, yet her pallor was deathly, as though her wellbeing was contingent on some external factor.

Eldain realised there was one question no one had yet asked.

“What of the Everqueen?” he asked. “Did Caelir... I mean...is she...?”

“No,” snapped Lirazel. “And do not say the words. Her mortal flesh hangs in the

balance, and the connection to the power within her remains intact only by the slenderest of threads.”

“She’s alive,” breathed Rhianna.

“For now,” agreed Lirazel. “All Ulthuan would feel it were it not so.”

“How can we help?” asked Yvraine, as one of the Maiden Guard appeared at her side bearing her sheathed greatsword. The Sword Master looped the belt around her shoulders, the soft shagreen scabbard slipping exactly into place. “I am bound to House Éadaoin and Silverfawn by the Oath of the Sword Masters. Where they go, I go.”

“There is little that can be done,” admitted Lirazel. “Though perhaps the soft wretches that brought Caelir within the borders of Avelorn can shed some light on how they managed to avoid the snares and delusions that should have enraptured any evildoers.”

Eldain looked over his shoulder as he heard a commotion at the edge of the trees, and saw several Handmaidens usher a group of gaudily dressed elves into the clearing. He recognised two as the poet and dancer who had been next to Caelir as he plunged the dagger...

No, don't think it!

“Please!” begged the poet, “this is all a terrible misunderstanding. We had no inkling that Caelir was a killer. You have to believe us!”

“Shut up, Narentir,” hissed the dancer, with a venom that surprised Eldain. “You might not have known he was a killer, but I did.”

“Sweet Lilani,” said the poet. “You have a most delectable mouth, but please, for the love of Loec, keep it shut or you will see us all slain! And lover of new sensations though I am, the embrace of Morai-Heg is not one I am keen to experience.”

“I don’t think that is up to me,” said the dancer as Lirazel plucked her spear from the earth.

“Actually it is,” said the Handmaiden.

* * *

In the spaces between life and death, magic and reality, Alarielle floated in an ocean of pain. Her lifeblood was all but spent, drawn out by the dark magic bound to the blade of cold iron, and her spirit was adrift in a place where she was alone.

No, not alone. Alone would have been a blessing.

She heard the howls of the banshees in the distance, far away, but closing on her with all the dreadful hunger for which they were rightly feared. The hounds of Morai-Heg, their keening wail was a portent of death, and Alarielle wondered if this was to be her time to pass from the embrace of the Everqueen.

Her body lay on a bed of leaves somewhere impossibly distant, held fast to her spirit by the slenderest of silver cords wrapped around her wrist. What floated in this abyssal darkness was not the crude matter of flesh, but her ageless, immortal essence of magic. One could not exist without the other, and as one sickened so the other faded.

Alarielle felt the banshees gathering, like ocean predators with the scent of blood

in the water. Their wailing laments echoed in the void, but their cries were not for her. All around the island of Ulthuan, elves were dying. War had come to her fair isle, the druchii once again bringing hate and blood to the land they had forsaken all those centuries ago.

That age was a time of legend to Alarielle, but little more than a blink of an eye to the power that dwelled within her. Chosen since before her birth to take up the mantle of Everqueen, she had studied and trained for decades before rising to become one of Ulthuan's twin rulers. She remembered the day of her coronation, the terror and awesome sense of multiple threads of fate converging upon her.

Though complex rituals of magical preparation had readied her for the moment of surrender, nothing could have prepared her for the surging torrent of power that coursed through her. The crown upon her brow was a living connection to every queen who had ruled in Avelorn, their memories were her memories, and she struggled to hold on to all that was Alarielle.

What the asur called the Everqueen rose up within her, claiming her for its own ancient purpose. The lives, loves, hopes, dreams and nightmares of all who had held the title before her filled her mind with ancient knowledge. Her mother and grandmother rose up to greet her, easing her into the embrace of the Everqueen and welcoming her to their numberless sisterhood. The line of motherhood stretched back to time immemorial, and Alarielle felt the strength of her lineage steel her to retain her own identity in the face of the vast, elemental power of the Everqueen.

That power was a distant memory, lost to her now as though carved away by a butcher's blade. She could feel it somewhere in the darkness: directionless and unfocussed without a mortal host. It was angry, though such a small word did no justice to the roiling fury that sought her in the darkness. Alarielle felt a great weariness closing in on her, and the magical cords binding her spirit and flesh loosened, unwinding from her wrist like a silken glove, and she felt herself drifting away from the earthly realms. The swirling black shapes of the banshees closed in, their faces hidden, but with gleaming fangs bared and sharpened claws uncurling from gnarled fists.

Hold fast, my daughter, your time in the realm of mortals is not yet over...

It was not one voice, but many, and she knew them all. Hundreds of voices layered into one spoke to her, and each was right to call her daughter. The banshees wailed, this time in anger as this most succulent of morsels was drawn away from them.

Alarielle gripped the silver cords tighter.

"I cannot hold on," she whispered to the voices within her.

You can. You must. Ulthuan yet needs you...

The voices spoke with one purpose, but a hundred voices, each one subtly different and seeming to come from a multitude of places within her skull. So many voices, so many lives, she could only retain her sense of self thanks to the decades of preparation and her own mastery of the winds of magic. A lesser being would have been driven to madness the instant the crown had been placed upon their brow.

Alarielle held to the voices, letting them guide her back towards her destiny. She followed their gentle urgings, feeling her strength grow the closer she came to the colossal power that lay at the heart of Ulthuan. Leave the Phoenix King his comforting

fiction of a shared rule, the power of the Everqueen dwarfed that of any male sovereign.

In her was embodied the true power of creation, what *king* could match such a gift?

At last she felt the power that made her whole, the power she had been wedded to since her birth and which had been waiting for her since before even that.

The banshees retreated, realising there would be no prize beyond the hundreds of souls being sent to them daily from the blood being spilled on Ulthuan's ancient soil. Alarielle felt the pain and suffering of her children, and surrendered herself to the gathering power of the Everqueen.

Her body was wounded unto death, but the frailties of a mortal vessel were insignificant in the face of the Everqueen's ability to heal and renew. She knew there would be pain, and braced herself for a return to the world of flesh.

With a cry of agony, Alarielle opened her eyes.

And the Everqueen looked out.

CHAPTER TWO

WAR CALLS

The blue-fletched arrow leapt from Alathenar's bow, arcing through the cold air to punch through the cheek-plate of a druchii helm. The warrior fell from the ramparts of the Eagle Gate, and Alathenar nocked another arrow to his bow. His fingers were raw and callused, his limbs weary beyond imagining. Once again he loosed, and once again a druchii warrior was pitched from the ramparts.

Beside him, the Shadow Warrior, Alanrias, loosed shafts with a speed and precision that put his own rate of fire to shame. Each black-shafted arrow thudded home in the belly or neck of an enemy fighter, hits that would take them out of the fight, but leave them writhing in agony for days.

Alanrias paused only to take a drink from a ceramic wine jug placed behind the toothed parapet.

"Thirsty work, killing druchii," he said, as though they were shooting at targets instead of fighting for their lives.

Alathenar wasted no words on the Shadow Warrior, seeing in him a reflection of the druchii army that battered itself bloody against the mighty fortress that guarded this route through the Annulii to Ellyrion. He reached for another shaft, but his hands closed on empty air. His quiver was spent.

"Here," said Alanrias, tossing him a full quiver of black leather.

"My thanks," said Alathenar, drawing an arrow from the quiver. It was lighter than he was used to, fashioned from some withered tree of Nagarythe, and the iron tip was barbed to make it next to impossible to remove. Its length was spiked with tiny thorns that would cause ghastly torment to any victim as they writhed in pain.

Alathenar said nothing, but nocked the arrow to his bow. The string was woven with strands of hair from his beloved Arenia, and her love gave his arrows an extra ten yards at least. The string slipped, as though rebelling at so vile a barb, but Alathenar whispered words of soothing magic and the bow was appeased.

He scanned the walls of the Eagle Gate, looking for a target worthy of his bow.

There were plenty to choose from.

The walls of the fortress stretched across the mountain pass, its white and blue stonework marred by weeks of war and magical attack. An unbroken line of elven warriors, wondrously arrayed in tunics of cream and gold, blue and silver, held the

wall against thousands of dark-armoured druchii and human fighters in burnished plates of iron and baked leather. The defenders of the Eagle Gate were magnificent and proud, yet there was a brittle edge of desperation to their fighting.

An assassin's blade had ended the life of the Eagle Gate's commander, Cerion Goldwing, and the heart of the defenders had died with their beloved leader. Alathenar glanced towards the Aquila Spire, and a splinter of ice wormed its way into his heart. The warriors of the Eagle Gate were fighting to protect their homeland against the bitterest of foes, yet Cerion's successor had yet to wield a blade alongside them.

A flitting shadow darted overhead, and Alathenar cursed his inattention. Screeching, bat-like creatures with a repellent female aspect swooped overhead, darting down to tear at the defenders with ebony dewclaws. He sent a shaft into the breast of one of the flying creatures, sending it tumbling down to the floor of the pass, where druchii beastmasters goaded even more terrible creatures into battle.

Chained draconic things with a multitude of roaring heads sprayed the wall with caustic fire and bellowed in pain at their master's tridents. Beside them, mindless abominations with elastic limbs and forms so abhorrent they resembled no creature known to the Loremasters of Hoeth, clawed and howled as they smote the reinforced gateway. The air crackled and fizzed with unleashed magic as elven mages countered the sorceries of the druchii, and protective runes worked into the parapet blazed with powerful light.

Druchii warriors clambered up black ladders, only to be met with asur steel, and the carnage was terrible to behold. Precious elven blood made the ramparts slick, and the healers were stretched far beyond their ability to cope with the number of wounded being carried to them by stretcher bearers.

Alathenar saw Eloien Redcloak fighting at the centre of the wall, where once a mighty carven eagle head had stared into the west. His sword was a blur of silver, his cloak a darting wing of blood as he wove a path of destruction through those druchii who gained the walls. The warrior of Ellyrion was the master of war from horseback, but was just as lethal on foot.

A towering brute in crudely strapped plates of iron daubed in lurid blue rose up behind Redcloak, and Alathenar sent a borrowed arrow through the gap between his neck torque and helmet. The enemy warrior dropped and Eloien raised his sword in salute, knowing full well who had loosed the fatal shaft. Alathenar soon found other targets, a druchii climbing the face of the Aquila Spire, another poised to deliver the deathblow to a fallen asur warrior, a screeching monster that swooped down on a wounded archer. Each time his arrow slashed home with deadly accuracy, though none were killing strikes.

"Is it my imagination, or are these arrows spiteful?" he shouted to Alanrias.

The Shadow Warrior grinned. "I crafted them from the trees upon which the blood of the druchii fell after Alith Anar nailed seven hundred of them to the walls of Griffon Pass. If there is spite within them, it is of their own making."

"They say your people are touched by the Witch King," said Alathenar, slotting another arrow to his bowstring. "I can well believe it."

"Do not presume to judge me, warrior of Eataine," snarled the Shadow Warrior. "Wait until your land and home is destroyed by the druchii and see how much mercy

fills your heart for their worthless lives!”

Alathenar recoiled from the warrior’s anger.

“I will kill them, and I will return to them the pain my people have known tenfold.”

“Your people?” hissed Alathenar. “We are one people. We are the asur.”

“Think you so?” said Alanrias nodding in the direction of the tallest tower still standing upon the Eagle Gate. “You would count him amongst us?”

Alathenar knew exactly to whom the Shadow Warrior was referring. Within the impregnable walls of the Aquila Spire, Glorien Truecrown, the commander of the Eagle Gate was ensconced with his dusty books and ancient treatises on war. While the defenders fought and died upon the walls of the Eagle Gate, Glorien fretted over the words of long dead scholars instead of leading his warriors with the courage and nobility expected of an elven prince.

“The commander of a fortress is its heart,” said Alanrias. “And no living thing can fight without its heart. You know this to be true, archer.”

“I know those words could see you executed,” said Alathenar.

“The warriors of this fortress look to you to lead them, not Truecrown,” replied Alanrias. “I know what must be done to win this day, and I see from your eyes that you know it too.”

Alathenar bit back a furious retort. He wanted to chastise the Shadow Warrior for his sedition, to reprimand him for his lack of loyalty, but he could not find the words. The realisation tasted of ashes in his mouth, and he felt the splinter of ice harden his heart.

For he knew Alanrias was right.

* * *

With every mile he rode, Caelir expected death. With every mile that passed without it, he wondered why. He had slain the Everqueen. The fact of that deed was evident in the grey sky, the weeping rain and the sagging branches of every tree. The life had bled out of the forest, the magic that had sustained it for an eternity now ended in one treacherous dagger thrust.

His clothes were plastered to his body in the rain, an impractical mix of silks and satin that looked like they belonged to some courtly nobleman, not a horseman of Ellyrion. The rush of memory was still raw and rough edged, his abused mind struggling to cope with the return of a life unremembered. He thought his skull might burst with the torrent of images, sensations and vivid recall that flooded his senses. He could remember the succulent taste of roast stag, hear a forgotten sound of crystal bells and feel the lost warmth of a mother’s embrace.

Caelir fought to hold onto the present, blinking tears and raindrops away as he rode madly through the depths of Avelorn Forest. Blurred shapes passed him, oaks, ash, and willow. He heard chattering voices, capering sprites and the ancient creak and groan of creatures older than the elves as they moved unseen in the darkness. To ride like this was madness; a hidden burrow or a concealed root could trip his horse and break its leg. This beast was no Ellyrian mount, but one of Saphery, its coat lambent

and silky with magical residue. The black steed he had ridden to Avelorn...

Lotharin!

Yes, Lotharin, that was Eldain's mount. His brother had scoffed at the naysayers who said that a black horse would bring its rider ill-fortune. He remembered the vision he had experienced in Anurion the Green's overgrown villa on the coast of Yvresse, that of a dappled grey stallion galloping through the surf.

Aedaris...

On the heels of that memory came the pain of knowing that his beloved Aedaris was dead, her flanks pierced by druchii bolts in the dockyards of Clar Karond. He recognised the mount that bore him now, a powerful mare by the name of Irenya, who galloped with sure and steady grace through the haunted forest. Once she had borne a retainer of his father's villa, but that warrior had died...

More memories intruded, Rhianna, Kyrielle, Lilani and all that had happened since his return to Ulthuan. Caelir wept to know that he had been used as an instrument of murder, but the guilt he felt was tempered by the knowledge that there were few alive who could have withstood the tortures and unclean magic that had been worked upon his flesh and spirit.

"You should have killed me, Eldain," he wept. "Better dead than left to the druchii."

His horse flicked its ears in annoyance at the name of the dark kin from across the ocean, and Caelir rubbed its neck as it ran. Trees and lightless arbours flashed past him, and Caelir could not fathom why the forest had not killed him.

He sensed its hostility in every looming tree, every grasping branch that whipped him as he passed. Yet for all their bitter spite, they did not stop him, did not unhorse him and seemed to close up behind him as though reluctantly aiding him. The steed rode paths of the forest unknown to even the Maiden Guard, traversing the secret ways known only to the trees and denizens of Avelorn who had made their home here before the coming of the elves.

Caelir had no idea where the paths of the forest were leading him, or where his horse was taking him. In truth, he didn't care. There was nothing left to him now, no refuge, no friends and no loved ones to take him in or offer him succour. Caelir was alone in the world and every place of goodness and decency would surely reject him. In such times where could anyone go?

The first Caelir was aware of how far he had ridden was when he heard the sound of rushing water, and smelled the scent of the Inner Sea. His head came up and he saw the forest thin ahead of him; thick, ancient-bodied trees giving way to younger, more vigorous saplings hungry to break the borders forced upon them by elfkind. Though still many miles before him, the escarpment of the Annulii reared up in a towering white cliff that soared beyond the clouds. The majestic peaks of the distant mountains were shawled with tumbling streams of raw magic drawn to Ulthuan by the long lost mages of Caledor Dragontamer.

He rode from the trees, seeing a wide river before him and knowing it as the Arduil, the watercourse that marked the boundary between Avelorn and Ellyrion. A small ship rode high in the water, a mid-sized sloop with runes etched into its prow that named it *Dragonkin*.