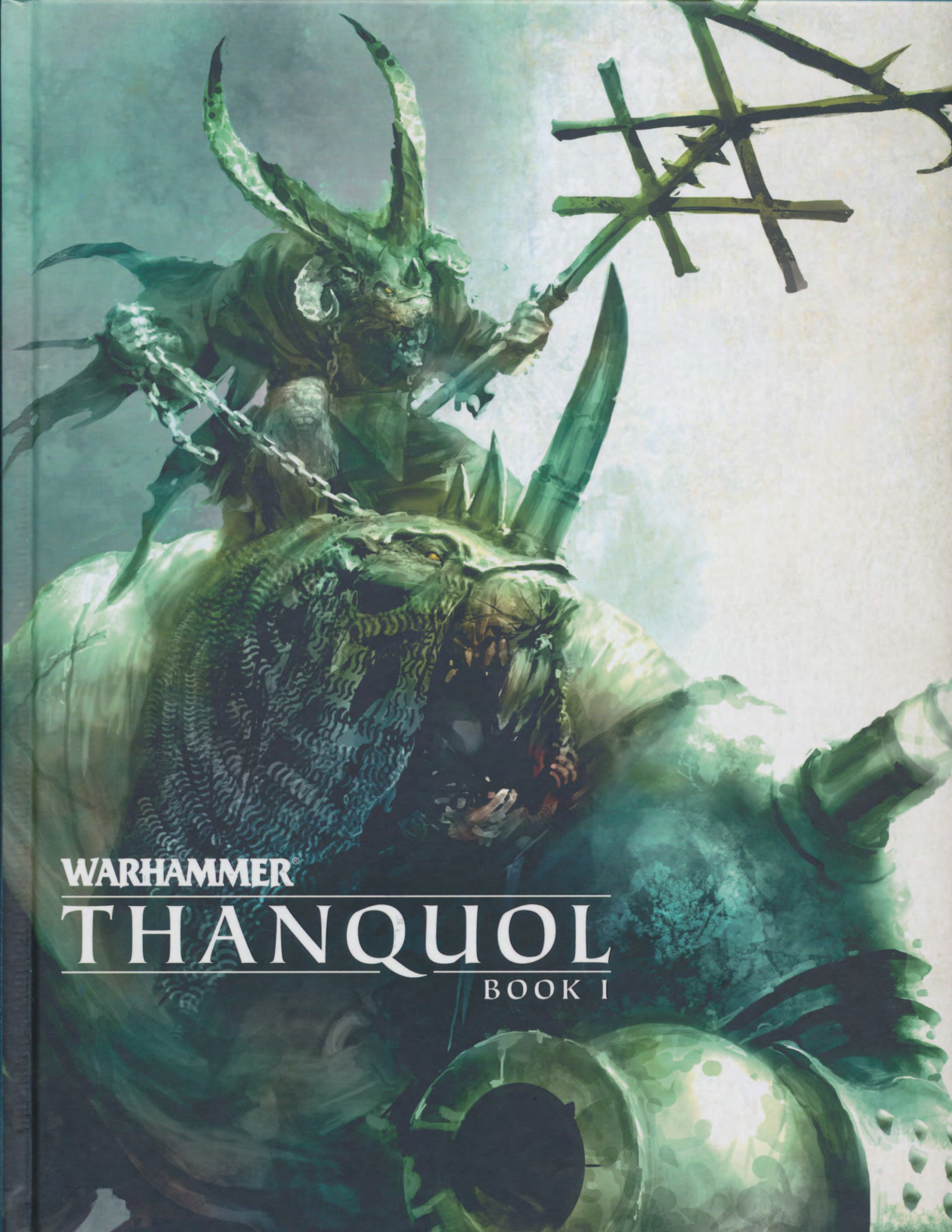

WARHAMMER®

THANQUOL

BOOK I



THANQUOL

The End Times - Volume IV

PRODUCED BY THE GAMES WORKSHOP DESIGN STUDIO

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British Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library. Pictures used for illustrative purposes only.

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I have seen this world's demise. Morrslieb, the accursed orb, waxes large. Impossibly large. The moon will fall, the oceans will boil, the mountains will break. To the stars some will go, but the stars themselves will abandon this world. The scratching beyond the walls can only mean one thing – the vermin are here. It is they that gnaw at the frayed ends of the world. Ceaselessly they plot, tirelessly they agitate. Yet never once do they imagine that they too are puppets, moving upon strings they never envisioned. The worst is still ahead...

These are the End Times.





THE RISE OF THE UNDER-EMPIRE

In the year 2522, the date the Imperial Scholars would later call the beginnings of the Black Years, the skaven war upon the surface began. The Great Uprising spread out from the hidden capital of Skavenblight and devastated Tilea and Estalia. On one claw, this was the greatest skaven success since the Red Pox Wars, when the skaven nearly defeated Bretonnia. On the other claw, the invasion was a failure, as the destruction of the southern Old World was meant only to be the beginning stage, not the sum total of the campaign.

The skaven suffered higher losses than expected during the campaign to take Tilea and Estalia. The Children of the Great Horned Rat, however, have never measured anything by the number of lives it cost. In the Under-empire life was cheap, and there was always plenty more on the way. After the human nations were crushed, the ensuing infighting amongst the skaven clans actually claimed more lives than did the original war.

For the majority of clans, losses were quickly replaced. Some of the lesser Warlord Clans had been exterminated fighting the humans, but they were the weak ones. Culling the hordes only made the skaven stronger. What hampered the ratmen now was not a lack of numbers or resources – for they had never been higher. It was a lack of impetus – the clans soon lost drive and fought amongst themselves. For the moment, all thoughts of surface invasion were lost amidst internal scheming.

Meanwhile, the world was changing. Every day the winds of magic grew stronger, sweeping out of the north. Streaking warpstone meteors lit the skies, and daemons once more walked the mortal realm. The fires of war raged across the lands. The skaven knew it was their time to rise, to seize what should be theirs by right.

A meeting of the Council of Thirteen was called with the intention of heading off another devastating civil war, and instead restoring focus to the Great Uprising.

As always, the Council's meetings were held far below the Temple of the Great Horned Rat. The room was so deep, and so inundated with warpstone energies, that the chamber itself was closer to some realm beyond than to the surface world. There, gathered around a thirteen-sided table were met the leaders of the twelve most powerful clans in all of skavendom. As always, the thirteenth seat was empty, symbolically saved for the Great Horned Rat.

At the meeting, the Lords of Decay bickered. Instead of resolving their differences, the members brought forth long-held accusations. Fingers pointed in blame, tails twitched in anger. Most criticised Kritislik, the Lord of Grey Seers. As he held the first seat of the Council, it was he that wielded the most power. The other Council members accused the grey seers of rampant manipulation. They claimed the white-furred sorcerers were more interested in maintaining their own supremacy than in the true goal: world domination. As the legend tells it, the shadow of the Great Horned One himself came forth. After consuming Kritislik, he chided his children, telling them they must work together. Only when the world was in ruin would they inherit its rule.

After the Great Horned Rat's departure, the remaining Lords of Decay hastily voted the grey seers off the Council. Grey seers were still feared, but would no longer be the main executors of the Council's designs and plots. With none of the sorcerers present, save for the scattered ashes left of Kritislik's blackened bones, there could be no vote of dissent.

Next the Council should have discussed how to progress the surface war. The conversation turned, as is the way of skaven, towards the more immediate gain. There was an empty seat upon the Council of Thirteen.

Immediately, each Lord of Decay began weaving ploys that would win their clan a second seat. Sometimes this was an open bid, but most often it was a convoluted plan. They sought to put forward one of their sycophantic thrall clans as the most deserving of the new seat of authority. After a lengthy period of deal brokering and squabbling, it was at last agreed that the chair should be left vacant for a period. Short of open violence and civil war, this seemed the only recourse.

It was agreed that the Council would meet after thirteen more cycles of the moon Morrslieb, or the warpmoon, as they knew it. At that time, the empty seat would again be discussed – but the determining factor would be based upon the long planned war upon the surface. The seizure of enemy territory was already a path to power, and each clan coveted scavenge-rights and slaves. Now, however, an additional promise of reward was placed before each Lord of Decay.

For the Warlord Clans, this was a chance to rise in status, to join the Greater Clans in power and prestige. For Clans Skryre, Pestilens, Moulder and Eshin, a single allied vote upon the Council would catapult them into true dominance. When the Council of Thirteen ended their meet, each Lord of Decay was eager to be off. It had been years since the aged lords had moved so quickly, for each wished to set their top lieutenants in motion, stealing a march from their rivals.

And so an intense period of scheming, alliance-brokering, backstabbing and plotting began in earnest.

The first target of the skaven offensive was the furthest away – the sickly green-tinted moon that men called Morrslieb. Ever since the skaven first crept out of their lairs, they had gazed upon the second orb – the warpmoon – in awe. Something about its pallid, pulsing light drew them, an unholy allure that only the true children of Chaos could feel.

It was many years later, in a different age of the world, when warlock engineers began to theorise that the second moon was made of pure warpstone. They had been tracking the coveted warpstone meteors that rained from the sky when they traced their fiery contrails back to their point of origin. Later, as the inventors refined optics, they created a far-see scope that allowed them confirm what they suspected – the warpstone meteorites were coming from the warpmoon. By that time, the quest to reach the moon was already a growing obsession amongst the upper clans of the ratkin. Skaven crave that weirdly glowing substance with a maniacal greed beyond the ken of other, saner races.

When Kritislik still lived, he had promised that a coven of grey seers would begin the new war by drawing the warpmoon closer. This was powerful magic of a kind never attempted. It was the grey seers' theory that the radiant powers would greatly aid spellcasting – therefore furthering their own hold over the first seat upon the Council. Not that they shared that information, but instead promised a tenfold increase in skaven vitality, as if they each chewed upon a warpstone shard.

The grey seers had gathered many of their most powerful members. They worked at the top of the tower of the Temple of the Great Horned Rat. Despite their efforts, the Tilea Campaign came and went without Morrslieb being drawn any closer. The grey seers claimed to have reached an impasse – their most powerful spells were blocked by some unknown source. They simply needed more time, assuring that the moon would be drawn closer in time for the next phase of the Great Plan – the even larger surface invasion. It was only shortly after that proclamation that Kritislik was deposed.



Clan Skryre had always been jealous of their horned rivals. They had started a competing moon plan shortly after the grey seers announced theirs. It would be a great power coup to snatch the glory from the grey seers. Although not addicted to warpstone to the same degree as the grey seers, Clan Skryre also craved the substance above all others. Warpstone was used in all of their weapon making, the ultimate source of all their wealth and power. It was not Lord Morskittar's intention to draw Morrslieb closer, however, for he never fully understood how that would aid him. Instead, Clan Skryre's Lord of Decay saw more to be gained by smashing the moon apart. Morskittar believed this would cause large chunks of the coveted warpstone to rain down upon the world's surface. Unlike the arrogant grey seers, the Clan Skryre plan was not to be achieved through the casting of spells, but rather through the genius of invention.

Since Ikit Claw first brought back the secrets of rockets from the far east, warlock engineers had configured many variants of what came to be called the doomrocket. The proposal was to construct an enormous version of this device. Grown rich from selling their advanced weaponry, only Clan Skryre had the resources to fund such costly experiments. It took a nearly unlimited supply of slaves and entire hoard-troves of warpstone. After many costly failures – each of which inflicted levels of destruction and death unsustainable by any race but the skaven – Ikit Claw pronounced the Moonstriker almost complete.

When the Council of Thirteen ousted the grey seers from their ranks, Morskittar wished to further shame them. Besting a rival was never enough; they must be ground beneath foot-claws and truly shown who was master. Morskittar vowed before his fellow Lords of Decay that a hail of meteors would herald the attack upon the surface world. It was only fitting that the change in the warpmoon's appearance would be the signal to rise. As the launch of the main attack was scheduled to begin in just three cycles of the moon, this did not leave much time.

Meanwhile, the grey seers, once the emissaries of the Council of Thirteen and the self-proclaimed prophets of the Great Horned Rat, were now pariahs. Some pledged themselves to Warlord Clans, acting as advisors, rather than as leaders. Most, however, were too proud to accept such tasks. Many grey seers wound their way back to Skavenblight. Their base was at the blighted heart of the capital, the Temple of the Great Horned Rat. It was debatable how long they could maintain this claw-hold on power with so many forces conspiring openly to seize portions of their former duties and respect.

Desperate, and without Kritislik to guide them, the grey seers turned to what they considered was their last resort. They summoned forth a Verminlord.

Threatening to call upon the services of a Verminlord was a common enough ploy in the arsenal of the grey seers, for they alone of all the skaven knew the necessary rituals. It was, however, most often a bluff – a ploy to steer various warlords and chieftains into falling in line with

the grey seers' wishes. Being able to claim conversations, foretellings and advice from the otherwordly heralds of the Great Horned Rat was a standard ruse to manipulate others. Actually summoning the rat daemons was deadly work. The ritual itself was demanding, and mistakes proved fatal – or worse. However, the true danger of bringing forth such a spirit from beyond was that Verminlords were far more wicked and rapacious than any mortal skaven could hope to be. It was true that a Verminlord might grant one's desires, but the cost was always more than expected. They were greedy and cunning creatures that could twist words, insinuate thoughts and ideas and manipulate others like puppets upon a string.

Those grey seers fortunate enough to survive the experience usually found they wholly regretted calling upon a Verminlord for aid.

Their current misfortunes clouded any reason from the grey seers' minds. They sought advice on how to reclaim their position of power. Over fifty of the white-furred seers were present when the darksome claw stretched from the abyss. The legion of seers threw themselves upon the floor in abasement before what strode forth.

In cryptic words that could carry many meanings, the Verminlord bestowed upon the grey seers much wisdom. Or so it seemed at the time.

The Verminlord spoke to the grey seers of hidden words of power, giving to them one of the Thirteen Secret Names of the Great Horned Rat himself. It scratched into their minds forgotten images, claw-marked runes of utmost potency. It told them what was blocking their great spell to draw forth the warpmoon – the cursed frog-things that sat upon the pyramid-temples of the southern jungles. Furthermore, into their greedy ears, the Verminlord poured forth the incantations to defeat the cold-blooded willpower that denied them. The immortal creature said they must bring the warpmoon closer, hinting that doing so would open many new doors. Only in hindsight did the grey seers realise that those doors were opening not for them, but for others. And that some doors are best left shut.

Fuelled by the raging winds of magic, the Verminlord did not fade back to the nether realms, as was normally the case. Instead, the rat daemon nimbly sprang out of the mystic rings of containment and disappeared into shadow. The last of it the grey seers saw was its long, twin tails slithering into blackness. Where it went and what further self-centred mischief it wreaked was never realised, the summoners never fully understanding what they had set in motion.



Focussed on their own immediate needs, the grey seers implemented the Verminlord's advice. The sorcerers bypassed the arcane defences cast by the slann mage-priests, and slowly started to pull the warpmoon closer. This began a battle of wills, an arcane duel that was fought by creatures on different continents, a battle waged within minds and beyond the borders of the world.

In another quarter of Skavenblight, Clan Skryre's project to blast the warpmoon into pieces suffered several major setbacks. A warpfuel disaster had been followed by a brief and highly unsuccessful slave revolt. Months behind schedule, it seemed doubtful that the rocket would ever lift off, much less reach the moon. Yet it was impossible not to notice the Chaos moon growing larger. All skaven who dared venture to the surface felt waves of warp energy washing over them beneath those pale green moonbeams. Realising that the grey seers had once again bested him with their spells, Lord Morskittar was furious. Incensed by the failings of his Chief Warlock, he sent Ikit to join the campaign that would soon be launched against the dwarfs.

Day by day the grey seers dragged the warpmoon nearer, its unbelievable mass wrenched closer sometimes by a matter of mere inches, at other times by many miles. The strain grew, and each day a handful of the horned sorcerers dropped dead, their brains ruptured by the effort. As the grey seers burnt out the resistance that vied against them, the Tower of the Temple of the Horned Rat was attacked and a huge explosion rent the building.

In addition to losing many of the most knowledgeable of their kind, the grey seers lost all focus on their coven spell. The moon was halted in its place. Although they tried to restart the ritual, they found their invocations less powerful. Due to a counterspell, or perhaps the mysterious intent of the Verminlord, none of the horned sorcerers could fully recall the spell, runes or words of power the creature had told them.

There was no proof of who had performed the sabotage, but it was suspected that a covert Clan Eshin team had planted one of their powerful bombs high up on the teetering tower. Such a bold deed would have been ridiculously expensive, and there were few clans who could afford such a thing.

So the Great Uprising began, while many plots continued within the city of Skavenblight...

CHILDREN OF THE HORNED RAT

The skaven were a nefarious and multitudinous race. They were too numerous to list here, their machinations too labyrinthine to follow. What follows is a cursory glance at the most important of the skaven clans and the greatest of their leaders, whose stories are told in this tale of the Great Uprising.

THE COUNCIL OF THIRTEEN

Known as the Lords of Decay, the Council of Thirteen was comprised of the leaders of the twelve most powerful clans. They were always twelve in number, for the thirteenth seat was sybollically reserved for the Great Horned Rat, who knew all and saw all.

The Council of Thirteen held total power. Its rules for governance were convoluted and labyrinthine, as was laid down by the Great Horned Rat himself, scratched into the Black Pillar of Commandments in glowing runes. It was a complex and intricate system that led to the constant machinations of its players. Each of the major clans believed that they were the closest to assuming absolute authority, and needed only one more supportive vote to shift everything in their own favour. The struggle to upset the balance of power was as old as the Council itself. So it had always been, until now...

THE POWERS FROM BEYOND

In the past, Verminlords could only have been summoned by grey seers. The otherwordly rat daemons could not long abide in the mortal realms, but while manifesting their wicked forms they proved to be treacherous in the extreme, able to wield power and sorcery in the name of the Great Horned Rat. With the growing winds of magic and the increase of Chaos flowing into the world, the veil that separated their realm from reality had weakened. As the warpmoon moved closer, more Verminlords appeared, and they began to insinuate themselves into skaven plans, manipulating deeds to their own nefarious ends.

It was hinted at, but never explicitly stated, that a Shadow Council existed – a council of Verminlords that mirrored the Council of Thirteen.

THE GREATER CLANS

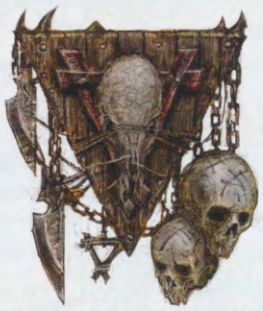
The four most powerful skaven clans had ascendancy over all the Warlord Clans. Each had always maintained its own tangled web of alliances and its own ever-growing number of thrall clans. With the Great Uprising to conquer the surface world underway, and an empty seat on the ruling Council of Thirteen, it was a time of upheaval for the Under-Empire. Naturally, the amount of truces, double-dealings and treacheries had never been higher.

CLAN SKRYRE

Clan Skryre had always been the richest of the clans and their wealth grew by the day. By selling their warpstone-powered weaponry, which blended science with the arcane arts, they had become fabulously prosperous. It was they, more than any other clan, that gave life to the various plots to discredit the grey seers. Clan Skryre's leader, Lord Morskittar, had twice before taken over Skavenblight and declared himself its rightful ruler. The next time, he insisted, it would be a permanent position.

With the grey seers no longer able to purposefully siphon their influence, Clan Skryre had seized the prime position in the hierarchal play of power. Their closest ally was Clan Moulder, and recently the two had collaborated upon many projects.

Ikit Claw – Chief Warlock and emissary of Morskittar, Ikit had proven to be the best of the clan's weapons designers for hundreds of years – yet the role of creating the most important invention yet had not gone to Ikit, but to his protégé. This had caused a rift between Ikit and the Clan Skryre leader. Tired of Ikit's plots, Morskittar had sent the Chief Warlock to join the attack on the dwarfs at Karak Azul.



The Great Skreeductor Zingetail – A deviously gifted inventor and tinkerer, Zingetail had been given the title of Great Skreeductor and placed in charge of the Warpmoon Project. With many warpforges, lightning coiled reactors and countless millions of slaves at his disposal – who could tell what the end result will be?

Zingetail himself had guaranteed his diabolical device would be many times more powerful than the great inventions of the past, such as the fabled doom hemisphere or the ill-fated quakecannon.

Great Warlock Skribolt – The rising star of Clan Skryre, it was Skribolt who had masterminded the fall of the Tilean city of Pavona and the great slave-take from the Badlands. Currently, the Great Warlock was leading the upcoming attack upon Nuln. His orders were to take that city's forges, and to steal their resources, including blackpowder and a working steam engine, for the Great Skreeductor Zingetail.

CLAN PESTILENS

Clan Skryre's greatest rival was the second most powerful of all the skaven clans: Clan Pestilens. None were more successful in creating thrall clans than the plague monks of Clan Pestilens, and none were less trusted. The clan's leader was Arch-plaguelord Nurglitch, and he would stop at nothing to further his zealous cult of corruption. Clan Pestilens did not sell their services or warriors, but granted aid wherever it would help their own cause. By taking command of the Lustria Campaign, Clan Pestilens hoped to parley that success into another concentrated bid to take control of the Council of Thirteen.

Lord Skrolk – The undisputed first of the plaguelords, Lord Skrolk was in total command of the operation in Lustria. Upon his orders, the devout and rabid followers of Clan Pestilens prepared to unleash their greatest Plague War yet.

The Plaguelords – As it said in the Book of Woes, there were seven plaguelords, and their number would remain unchanged. With typical Clan Pestilens order, each of the titles carried with it specific duties related to the post. Including their leader, Lord Skrolk, six of the seven plaguelords were currently in Lustria. The whereabouts of the seventh, and what his role and title might be, was unknown – a cause of consternation amongst the other major clans.

CLAN MOULDER

Slowly, and with far more deliberation than the other clans imagined, Clan Moulder had positioned themselves exactly where they wished to be. Although the beastpacks they sold to all other clans were short on cunning, the same did not hold true for the leader of Clan Moulder, Lord Verminkin, nor was it true of any of his top lieutenants, the nine Lords of Hell Pit. Both Clan Skryre and Clan Pestilens viewed the flesh-mutators as their closest ally, a view Clan Moulder continued to propagate. As the second richest of all clans, they too were slowly building their legion of followers from the Warlord Clans.

Throt the Unclean – One of the nine Lords of Hell Pit, Throt had been assigned to aid Clan Skryre. Although Ikit Claw's arrogance wore upon the three-armed Throt, he had learned much of science and sorcery from the Chief Warlock. In return, Ikit could not have cared less about flesh-blending and breed-mutating, finding such things beneath him.

Grootose – A Great Packmaster, Grootose had been sent to the City of Pillars – known by the dwarfs as Karak Eight Peaks – in an attempt to win favour with Queek Headtaker of Clan Mors. If civil war erupted and Clan Mors joined Clan Skryre, Grootose had been instructed to kill Queek outright. Should the need to eliminate him arise, the Packmaster had trained a single giant rat rigged with explosives to latch onto the Clan Mors warlord.

Grand Packmaster Manxrot – A Master Mutator and one of the nine Lords of Hell Pit, Manxrot had been assigned to aid the Clan Skryre-led campaign to take the human city of Nuln. In case of the expected Clan Skryre attempt to take over the Council, Manxrot and his warbeasts intended to slay the expedition's leader, Great Warlock Skribolt.

CLAN ESHIN

Very little was known about Clan Eshin and its designs. This was exactly how their leader and Council of Thirteen member Grand Nightlord Sneek preferred matters. In the past, it was claimed they had an implicit relationship with the grey seers, although this was always denied. Only when Clan Eshin withdrew their support from the horned sorcerers did the other clans feel safe in doing so.

Deathmaster Snikch – With the skaven launching an all out war upon the surface-dwellers, it had been assumed that the Clan Eshin Master Assassin had been assigned a covert mission. As time had passed and no word, news or rumours of the Deathmaster's deeds had surfaced, many were beginning to question whether the most stealthy of killers had been slain. Perhaps, some whispered carefully, he was being withheld until Clan Eshin themselves made their move to claim the Council of Thirteen as their own?

The Black 13 – This shady group was responsible for Tilea's Night of One Thousand Terrors – a shock wave of assassinations. In a single evening, the Black 13 slew hundreds of generals, governors, nobles and other leading human authority figures, leaving the various republics ripe for the attack waves that began the following night. The Council of Thirteen themselves assigned the Black 13 their next target. The formation had secretly made its way to Lustria, where Lord Skrolk had given them their orders.

THE GREY SEERS

The most powerful sorcerers in all of skavendom had lost their way. Mistrusted by those they had manipulated for countless years, the grey seers now found themselves alone and with precious few allies. Still feared and respected by all clans, the horned ratmen would go to any lengths to regain the power and status they had recently lost.

Kranskritt – One of the most powerful of the grey seers, Kranskritt had been assigned to assist the skaven at the City of Pillars. He was being pushed into conflict with Queek Headtaker by the Clan Mors ruler, Lord Gnawdwell. Desperate to avoid death at his rival's claw, Kranskritt had summoned a Verminlord, the treacherous Soothgnawer.

Thanquol – Thanquol's history of failed operations on behalf of the Council of Thirteen had done little to dissuade him from seeking to seize the empty seat for himself. He had been assigned to aid the Great Warlock Skribolt in taking the city of Nuln, but was determined to increase his own standing in the process.

THE WARLORD CLANS

The Warlord Clans provided the true numbers that made up the vast skaven armies. There were too many Warlord Clans to list, and their goals too disparate to name, but few were true players in the skaven game of power. The following were some of the major clans, although Clan Mors and Clan Rictus were the only clans powerful enough to compete for the secondary position of power beneath the dominant Greater Clans, and even they fell far short of this lofty position.

CLAN MORS

Clan Mors had long been the most powerful of the Warlord Clans. They were to destroy the dwarf forces at the City of Pillars, and drive the night goblin warlord Skarsnik out of the mountains. Clan Mors was led by Lord Gnawdwell, a Lord of Decay. Eager to cement a new alliance with Clan Skryre, Lord Gnawdwell had begun taking steps to remove his skilled, but stubborn-minded top warlord.

Queek Headtaker – The right claw of Lord Gnawdwell, Queek had long stated his open distrust of grey seers. He was an arrogant warlord, prideful of his claim to martial dominance. He would see Clan Mors rule without allying with any of the Greater Clans.

CLAN RICTUS

Second only to Clan Mors, Clan Rictus longed to move their powerbase from the Dark Lands closer to Skavenblight. In an effort to gain more power, they allied themselves to Clan Skryre.

CLAN VRRTKIN

Thralls of Clan Skryre, Clan Vrrtkin rose alongside their patron. Few could match their ruthless backstabbing, even amongst a race that prided itself on the quality of its ruthless backstabbers. Their leader, Trikstab Gribnode, was overeager for more power.

CLAN GANGROUS

This thrall clan was pledged to Clan Pestilens. Their leader, the Exalted Imperator Szik Vilepot, won fame as a pit fighter.

CLAN FEESIK

Another of the clans subservient to Clan Pestilens, Clan Feesik's warlord and Grand Potentate was Rikzik Seepage – a known secretor of the Red Pox.

CLAN FESTER

Clan Fester was rabidly pro-Clan Pestilens.

CLAN MORBIDUS

Although Clan Morbidus had chosen to follow Clan Pestilens and the way of disease, they maintained strong ties with Clan Moulder. Their Beast-Chieftain was Packmaster Grotchrot.

CLAN GRIBLOBE

Clan Griblobe were eager members of the Pestilent Brotherhood. Their chieftan was Drib Bentblade.

CLAN VOLKN

Known as the Molten Warlord, the leader of Clan Volkn was Moltskin Searflesh. Moltskin owed allegiance to none, and bristled at being referred to as leader of a thrall clan. Clan Volkn sold their warrior services to the highest bidder, meaning they fought most often alongside Clan Skryre, for they were the richest of all clans.

CLAN EKTRIK

Another clan that had claw-marked many pledge-pacts with Clan Skryre, Clan Ektrik was led by the Warlord of Foul Peak, Griktrode Boltspear. Boltspear had captured and traded tens of thousands of slaves to Clan Skryre in exchange for more weapons of war. Clan Ektrik had recently begun tinkering with their own designs and inventions, a habit Clan Skryre deeply frowned upon.

CLAN GRITUS

An offshoot of Clan Mors, Clan Gritus rebelled against their former clan and gained their freedom. They were heavily sponsored by Clan Rictus. Any clan wishing to plot against Clan Mors always had strong connections with the Great Gritlok, warlord leader of Clan Gritus.



THE RABBLE CLANS

This was a derogatory collective name that covered all the other myriad clans that rose and fell without ever really making a name for themselves. They numbered in the hundreds or possibly even thousands, and were simply impossible to count or track, as they fractured and reformed long before any note of their existence could be made. These were the nameless clans who aspired to rise up and take their rightful place amongst the better-known skaven clans.

Thanquol appeared from nowhere, wisps of green-tinged smoke drifting from his robes and curling around his horns. Behind him, the creaking form of Boneripper suddenly loomed, wreathed in his own trails of fume. Staved-in crates and dirty rags marked this dark and distant tributary of the Underway, but Thanquol could see no sign of the one he had come here to meet. As the silence stretched around him, the grey seer stalked back and forth, wishing he was back among the relative safety of the marching column. His bodyguard remained where he had appeared, oblivious to the situation, but Thanquol cast around in the gloom, his eyes glowing slightly as if lit from within, and he fumbled anxiously at his belt for his warpstone pouch.

'It is done.'

The voice spoke from behind Thanquol and he started, spinning around to raise his staff. A black-clad ratman stood there, strips of dark material covering his claws and muzzle but leaving his eyes exposed. They stared openly at the grey seer.

'Then they are dead?' Thanquol demanded, drawing himself up to display his horns. 'And no-creature suspects me?' Near them, Boneripper stirred, his head swinging lazily to stare at the newcomer.

'Your secret is safe, for now,' answered the impertinent agent, 'All look to blame Skryre.' The agent grinned toothily. 'My clan-pack found the payment as you promised. But how did even the mighty Thanquol come by such wealth, I worry-wonder?'

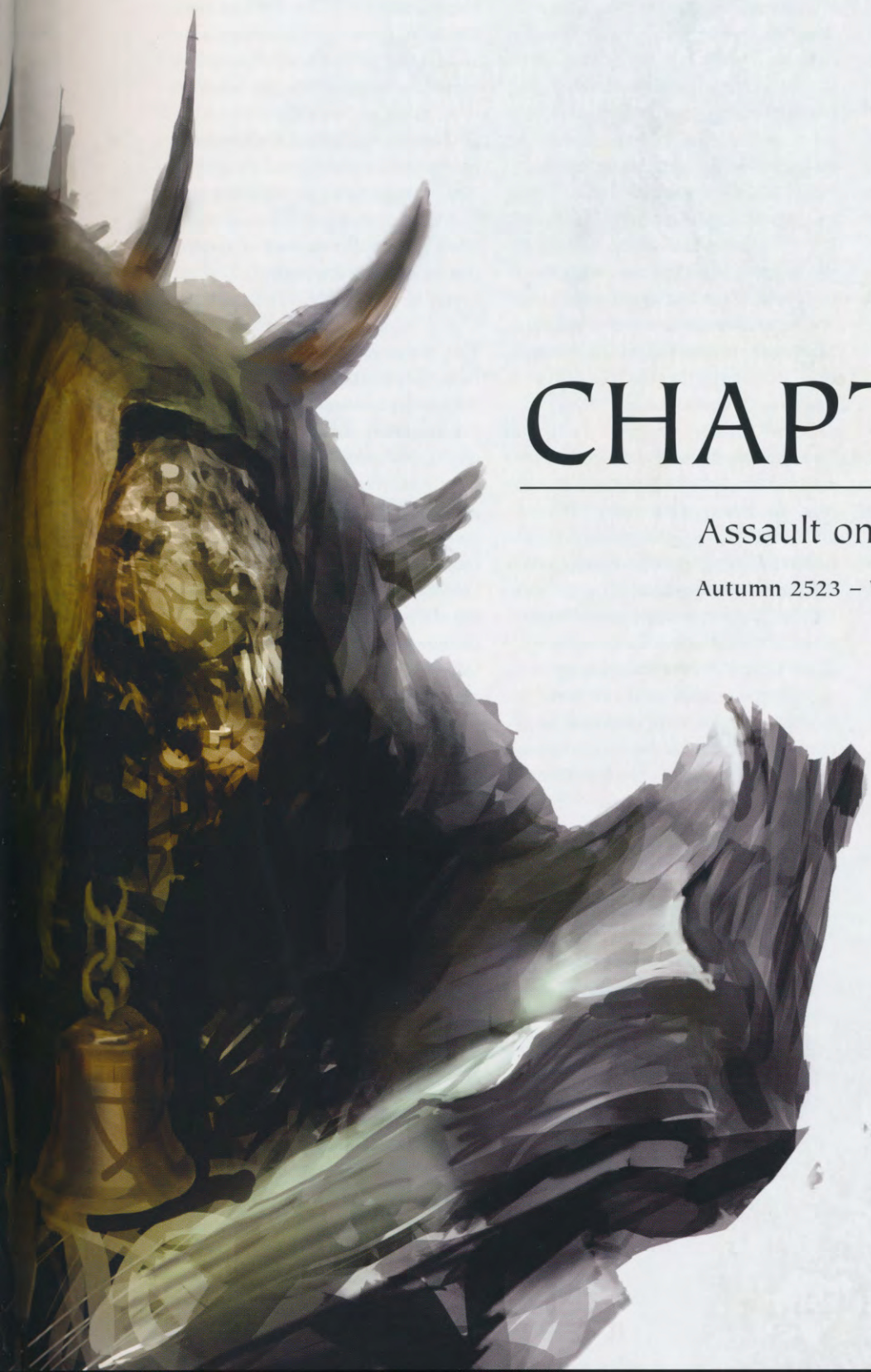
Thanquol bristled, narrowing his eyes. The grey seers had long hoarded resources and power at the root of Skavenblight, and his fellow sorcerers would have little need of their precious stockpile now.

'Our business is done, hireling. You may scurry back to your master.'

The Eshin agent retreated, and was soon lost in the shadows. Left with only the silent form of Boneripper for company, Thanquol gnawed at a warpstone chunk as he prepared to skitterleap back to the column marching for Nuln. As he chewed, his mind raced with visions of the glorious future ahead. The stock of the grey seers had never been lower, but with his rivals eliminated the way stood open before him. Once the skaven arrived at the man-things' city, he would mastermind the attack on the fools that had foiled his ambitions long before. In the wake of his inevitable victory, all of Skavenblight would recognise his rightful mastery. What other could have such a claim over the vacant seat on the Council of Thirteen as he?







CHAPTER 1

Assault on Lustria

Autumn 2523 – Winter 2524



An ominous dread had fallen across much of the vast continent of Lustria. The humid air, which was always heavy, now closed about more thickly, its cloying presence adding to the oppression. It was as if the jungles themselves were holding their breath, as they did during the approach of some apex predator. From under the murky eaves, many watchful and unblinking eyes peered out. The sounds of war drums reverberated over the mist-shrouded lands. The forces of the lizardmen stood guard, waiting for the attack they knew must come. Yet, for all their arcane ability to foretell the future, for all their ancient plaques of celestial prophecy, the greatest collection of sorcerous minds on the planet could not fathom what the attack would be, nor from where it would commence.

From the pinnacle of the Temple of the Eclipse in Tlaxtlan, a pair of cold and fathomless eyes gazed into the heavens. Tetto'eko, Astromancer of the Constellations, Beholder of the Beyond, and Great Oracle of the Stars, was seeking to see what was hidden from him. Hours passed, with the only movement the nictitating membranes – translucent third eyelids – sliding silently over Tetto'eko's staring eyes. Strive as he might, the most ancient of skink priests could see nothing of the time to come.

Blessed by the Old Ones with unfathomable foresight, Tetto'eko was used to reading the tangled web of divergent futures from the constellations that spun above in the night sky. No mortal creature could hope to rival Tetto'eko's precognitive abilities. Now, however, the stars were awry. Somehow, someway, entire astrological alignments were out of harmony.

The blackness of Tetto'eko's visions was not atmospheric – his gleaming eyes could pierce the humid mists that rose from the jungles and penetrate thick cloud. He had looked through raging typhoons, and was unfazed by arcing chains of lightning. For over a century Tetto'eko had unravelled the mysteries of the future, as revealed to him by the celestial bodies circling above. Only the unnatural green-tinged glow of Morrslieb – the Chaos moon – had proven capable of halting his visions. Its light was a malign miasma that blocked the mighty skink mage's divinations.

Unlike the constant and reliable stars, the orbit cycles of Morrslieb defied prediction; it waxed and waned to no logical order. These days the foul moon was always ascendant, growing impossibly huge each night so that it filled the horizon. Over the last month, the second moon had never set, the orb hanging in the same position overhead all night as if purposefully blocking Tetto'eko's sight. He could see it during the day too, the orb mocking all laws of order.

This evening, however, the cursed moon did not show its pocked face. According to the star charts and Tetto'eko's premonitions, which had never proven wrong, the thrice-blessed stars of the Ix Choltyl, the winged serpent, should shine brightest above the Temple of the Eclipse. Yet to his growing consternation, they were not there. Try as he might, Tetto'eko could read no visions of the future; his mind's eye could see nothing but black oblivion. If it was not the cursed moon's doing, then what was preventing him from seeing the future?

Relentlessly, Tetto'eko scried the heavens. Morrslieb could return at any time, and the skink priest instinctively knew that time was a luxury he was fast running out of. To the east, barely visible even from the monumental height of the highest temple in Tlaxtlan, flares of sorcery and battle marked the horizon. The skies above the distant city there broiled as the very air cracked apart. Xahutec burned with the flames of daemonic war.

Ancient Xahutec, the City of Echoes, was truly cursed. Although now little more than blackened rubble, the site was host to a rip torn in reality, a hole which spewed forth horrors from beyond. Over three years of unbroken battle, saurus legions had confronted this daemonic tide, pitting their single-minded savagery against unnatural fury. There, teeth of iron shattered upon bone-hardened scales, and the battle's ground-shaking repercussions could be felt hundreds of miles away. Thus far, Kroq-Gar, greatest of warleaders and destroyer of armies, had contained the daemons – but the cost was high. Cohort after cohort had been lost. Although the spawning pools thrashed non-stop as new warriors were birthed, they were barely keeping pace with the losses.

This attack was no mere incursion, no simple testing of strength along the border between realms – it was the beginning of the war to end the world. Only the masterful stratagems of Kroq-Gar, and the resolute legions at his command, kept the daemons contained. While a steady flow of reinforcements marched across Lustria to join Kroq-Gar's campaign, the slann mage-priests sought to divine where the next blow would fall. Their arcane efforts to locate the next threat had been stymied, and the battle at Xahutec continued to bleed the lizardmen, draining their formidable strength.

Over thousands of years, many of the nodes of the geomantic grid – the cunningly wrought power siphons that stored the great energies of the world – had been lost. Some were destroyed by war, others were forgotten over the ages and fell to ruin. Recently, Chaos invaders from the north, led by Vashnaar the Tormentor, had led an assault on the key nodes of the Great Warding. Beastmen rose from the jungle to pull down the Monument of the Moon, and a daemon army led by Kairos Fateweaver had manifested upon the very surface of the floating pyramid

of Ixxx. Those battles desecrated artefacts raised through the artifice of the Old Ones, and their loss further weakened the grid's power. Comets trailing green-hued flames descended from the vile second moon to wreck the Sentinels of Xetl, and cyclones formed from the winds of magic blazed paths that demolished ancient structures like the Monument of Izzatal and the Pylons of Divine Resonance. Even as the Slann re-awakened from their arcane slumber, they found their ability to foresee events thwarted, and their world-straddling power reservoir exhausted. Not even the most obstinate of their number denied that the seemingly random acts were integral strands of some long-planned offensive.

The slann mage-priests did not need clairvoyance to see that the Great Vortex upon Ulthuan was failing, or that the winds of magic were rising. With minds linked across space and time, the slann, mightiest of mortal mages, had for a time woven a tapestry of purest power, using this eldritch energy to boost the fading supernatural siphon created by the elves. Yet even in the early days of its creation, the slann knew that what the elves achieved was only temporary, a fleeting reprieve against the wayward energy that would, one day, come flooding back into the world.

In Hexoatl, the greatest and eldest of all living slann mage-priests surfaced from his sleep-trance with a sudden lurch. Lord Mazdamundi was awake – his eyes wide and his voluminous body still rippling from his jolt into consciousness. It had been the same vision that haunted his dreams of late – a prognostic revelation of momentous import, a world-changing glimpse of the onrushing future, of terrible and impending doom.

This was the same dream that had sparked Mazdamundi's revelation that the Great Plan had failed. That vision had driven him to ensure the Exodus was begun. Ancient monuments that had not been entered since a time before the first skink was created were once more re-opened. Deep inside long forbidden chambers, skink priests stared agog at the flashing and buzzing strangeness of the artefacts within, making wild speculations. As to their true purpose, the slann mage-priests would speak no more.

As Mazdamundi's half-completed vision faded from memory, dissolving into nothingness, it left only an indescribable sense of urgency. Snatched so suddenly from his wanderings in the cosmic realm, pulled from his sanctuary of purest thought, Mazdamundi's mind now struggled to process the world around him. It was the ultimate infuriation. Most maddeningly of all, the great slann mage-priest was sure – with a conviction he could not equate with any logic – that the message he was so close to receiving had been transmitted by the Old Ones themselves. With a concentrated effort borne from millennia of masterful self-contemplation, Mazdamundi willed his mighty three-chambered heart to ease its rapid rate. Without serenity, clear thought could not be obtained. With a grim shudder of realisation, the great mage-priest sensed how close his heart was to bursting. Not since the days of his spawning, over eight thousand years ago, had Mazdamundi felt such fear.

It was only after Mazdamundi eased his pounding heart that he became aware of his surroundings. The venerable mage-priest was besieged by sensory overload. Skink priest attendants, taking his open eyes as a sign of awareness, encircled his palanquin, chittering dire news and reports. His tongue tasted the air and he spluttered on the marked increase in the winds of magic. Mazdamundi's arcane perception noted the disruption in the ruins of Xahutec, many hundreds of leagues away, where the mind-wrenching power of raw Chaos was erupting in great torrents. And finally, telepathic messages barraged the eldest and most powerful of slann – psychic distress calls, requests for orders and frantic queries. As Mazdamundi raised an arm to command silence in his eternity chamber, he knew that he had little time left to unlock the secrets of the message hidden in his dreams. The Great Doom that the Old Ones had tried to warn him about had already begun. The Great Plan could never be achieved, but perhaps he could still save the world, if not for himself, than for others....



After much preparation, Clan Pestilens was at last ready to launch its plaguewar upon Lustria.

The trans-continental undertunnels had been reopened, each route widened to accommodate the great armies and equipment that passed through. For a year, steady streams of skaven marched non-stop to join the masses already gathered in place beneath the surface of the jungle continent. The largest portion of these seemingly endless numbers was composed of the robed zealots of Clan Pestilens, followed by their thrall-clans. The plague monks had all but emptied their considerable strongholds in the Southlands. Even the vast cauldrons and furnaces with which the clan brewed their weapons-grade diseases were dismantled so they could be reassembled near the war front. Legions of slaves – a living, bipedal baggage train – rolled vats of contaminations and noxious matter through the long tunnels.

The Lustria assault was part of the overarching campaign planned by the Council of Thirteen, and as such, it had the full backing of their considerable powers. A tithe of strength from each of the major clans was present, along with a great many warrior clans. There was no question, however, about who was in command. Lord Skrolk travelled between the newly established strongholds, issuing orders and checking each location for its strict adherence to the attack plans. He was neither subtle in his demands, nor lenient towards any who disappointed him. Lord Skrolk wielded absolute power, for he received his orders directly from Arch-plaguelord Nurglitch, the undisputable ruler of Clan Pestilens – a Lord of Decay who sat upon the Council of Thirteen in the influential tenth seat.

The first stage of the attack plan was to gather in secret beneath the locations the Council of Thirteen had deemed key. These were excavated deep below the surface just outside of the cities of Itza, Tlaxtlan and Xlanhuapec. The skaven presence had been masked by powerful spells of concealment, elaborate deceptive barriers emplaced by the grey seers. Even as these labyrinthine tunnels filled to overflowing, the plague priests set up the trappings of their foul cult. To the chanting of cursed verses from the Book of Woes, braziers of specially prepared fuels heated iron vats that bubbled with the filth of the world. These were the Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes, receptacles where many of the worst pestilences known to mortal kind had first been brewed. Through debased rituals, the diseases grew more powerful, blossoming into virulent plagues so potent that the plague monks who stirred the cauldrons rotted alive and had to be constantly replaced. As the concoctions neared dreadful fruition, Lord Skrolk personally inspected them, testing each creation. The creators of the plagues that met Skrolk's strict standards received a satisfied nod, but those that disappointed the right claw of Nurglitch were themselves added into the vats, melted within their own boiling stews.



The underground tunnels were soon clogged with smog clouds – a fug that hung in the air. Most of the skaven were immune to contagion, having been long inoculated against its harmful effects by constant exposure. Some, however, were not so fortunate. Those warrior clans that had the least amount of contact with Clan Pestilens were the ones that suffered most. The battle-hardened stormvermin from Clan Spittl, and the entire Skrittlespike clan that had fought so well during the conquest of Tilea, sickened, with many dying in agonising fashion. The majority of the verminous hordes took strength from the foul airs, drawing vitality from the unnatural vapours. It heightened their senses, agitating them so they snarled and bared fangs in nearly uncontrollable anticipation of orders to attack. But no signal to begin the assault was yet given.

To minimise the risk of detection, the skaven kept only a few surface watchpoints, and checked them sparingly. Under the cover of darkness, night runners would ascend to view the warpmoon, the one that the man-things called Morrslieb. The first night that it shone larger than seemed possible was the sign they awaited – that would be the sign for the attack to begin.

That day was filled with ill omens. The twin-tailed comet – visible even during daylight hours – blinked thirteen times, a number auspicious to the skaven, yet which caused consternation amongst the skink priests. From atop the heights of their pyramid-temples, the priests' elation at the sign of the twin-tailed Sotek turned to dread – for the number thirteen was considered highly unfavourable. The more practical-minded slann dismissed the superstitions of their credulous skinks; they long ago had given up attempting to dissuade their savage cousins from uncouth practices. Indeed, many skink priests regularly consulted the art of haruspicy – divination by the inspection of

entrails from sacrificial victims. After the portentous thirteen blinks from the comet, all the innard readings conducted by skinks were twisted and mutated, foretelling of dire events. Strange rumblings shook the ground. It was no wonder to all that as night fell, the cursed moon rose large and angry, spilling its sickly green light over the tepid jungles of Lustria.

The Council of Thirteen's ritual and the combined might of the grey seers gathered together the rampant magics of the world. Slowly, their sorcerous tendrils stretched out and began to draw Morrslieb closer to the world. The luminescent moon loomed larger than ever, green flashes strobing down. Throughout Lustria, many turned skywards to mark the orb that grew before their eyes. The vast moon pulsated with an eerie green glow that bathed all below in unnatural light.

Alarmed, slann mage-priests stretched out their prodigious mental powers in an attempt to halt the moon's approach. Minds that could move mountains strove to push back the looming disaster, to quell the changing tides, to block the unnatural light. The stars faded from the night sky as the air was filled with arcane energies. All the reserve power of the geomantic grid was emptied, as the slann strove against the forces that sought to bring that hated orb closer. Morrslieb shook from the tension, the rising pressures causing hunks of its surface to break apart. Later, these ragged particles would rain down upon the world as warpstone meteors.

The effort to break the mystic tether that was dragging the cursed moon closer strained the slann to the utmost. Many mage-priests slipped into an unconscious state from the extreme exertion, their minds temporarily unwoven. Rippling moonquakes – waves of chaotic energies emanating from the nearing moon – washed over Lustria. All but one of the slann were battered into dazed submission as they attempted to block the entropic forces crashing upon them.

Lord Mazdamundi alone was still in command of his wits. Using magics beyond the ken of mortals, the eldest of the remaining slann countered the fell power of Morrslieb and the Chaos it radiated. Through mind-shields and mystic barriers, Mazdamundi stopped the ensuing magical energies from sweeping the world. Yet even the mightiest of mages could not halt it all. Some of the meteorites pierced his defence. Guided by malevolent minds, they blazed downwards towards Lustria.

Although he was too weak to stop them, Mazdamundi was able to direct the meteors away from the inhabited cities of Lustria. The streaks of blazing light lit the world, striking the jungles with explosive force. Glowing green mushroom clouds rose miles into the air and firestorms roared, each scorching miles of jungle in an instant. In his last act before finally passing into a comatose state, Mazdamundi limited the concussive blasts caused by the impacts, dampening their destructive forces.

Even as the great cities of the lizardmen echoed to the colossal impacts, the skaven rose from the underworld and began their assaults.

Ground shaking explosions and now fresh interruptions. Laying aside his ladle, Grilok turned from the bubbling cauldron, ready to castigate those who dared interrupt the final pox-blessings. Instead, he froze in place. At the cavern's entrance the shuffling crowd of plague monks parted, revealing Lord Skrolk, the disease-that-walks.

Throwing back his hood, Lord Skrolk revealed his tumour-riddled snout. He sniffed about, inhaling the vapours of the chamber. 'Good-good, your Seeping Pox sniffs perfectly. You have done well, Grilok,' rasped Lord Skrolk, his voice thick with pollution. 'You have justified the faith Plaguelord Variolus has put in you and your Contagion Conclave.'

As one, the plague priests around the cauldron dropped to the dirt floor, prostrating and bowing before his great Eminence. Grilok noticed that no few of his rivals cast sidewise glances towards him. 'Lord Skrolk is too kind,' answered Grilok, his voice cracking in his fear and awe. He bowed repeatedly before adding, 'You honour our conclave, greatest of plaguelords. The Lord Variolus will be most pleased.'

'No,' burbled Lord Skrolk, 'Variolus failed me and I have slain-killed him. I will not begin the battles short of the required numbers of plaguelords. As Plague Pontifex, you, Grilok, are next in line to rule the Contagion Conclave. See-see that you do not fail me.'

For a long moment Skrolk looked directly at Grilok – or rather, the empty black sockets where the plaguelord's eyes should have been fixed upon him. Fighting a desire to scourge himself in order to prove his dedication, Grilok instead exerted all his willpower to remain calm, bowing low once more before that unseeing gaze.

'See that your poxes are delivered as plan-marked,' said Skrolk. He reached out his gnarled staff, its rusted bells clunking. Twice he rapped Grilok's shoulders, speaking words of power that caused his censer to emit thick wisps of cloud. Without another word, Skrolk turned and shuffled off, his entourage following.

As the echoes of clawed feet disappeared down the tunnel, Grilok rose – fiercely proud and single-mindedly dedicated to the creation of plagues. He began shouting instructions to his priests. There was much still to do.

Awaiting another attack, the slann mage-priests had been positive their assailants would be daemons, their arch-foes since the collapse of the star gates. Expecting rifts torn into reality, they were not prepared for the barrage of magical energies from the moon or the meteorites that followed. Even as concussive blast waves flattened miles-wide swathes of jungle, great rents in the ground appeared as the skaven cleared paths to the surface. A living tidal wave of vermin rose from the depths and surged towards the lizardmen cities that loomed above the jungles.

It was an apocalyptic scene, lit by the green glow of the impossibly large moon. So great in number were the skaven that the ground itself seemed to be moving. In areas of new ash waste, they flowed in undulating waves, and when forced to travel through the jungles left standing, the canopy swayed at their passing. Spellbursts flared across the skies; the slann had long prepared counterspells to ward off invasion. Even though the mage-priests were unconscious, their ensorcelled lights of banishment flashed above the skaven, bright as newborn suns. These enemies, however, had not travelled from another plane of existence. They were creatures of flesh and blood, so the dazzling light, no matter its lawful purity, could not extinguish them. Despite the momentary blindness, the skaven advance continued – the slann's best prepared efforts little more than a mystical light show.

Of all the skaven clans, none had ever been more zealous than Clan Pestilens. Driven and maniacal, the robed brotherhood was utterly dedicated to their worship of the Great Horned Rat. Their fanatical passion to spread disease in his name was unrivalled in its fervour. This was never more evident than when they burst forth upon Lustria. They were utterly committed to this assault – from Arch-plaguelord Nurglitch down to the lowliest plague monk disciple.

This was Clan Pestilens' attack, their moment in the great plan of the Council of Thirteen. Of all the skaven offensives planned, the attack on Lustria was the largest and the most ambitious. By crushing the lizardmen quickly, Clan Pestilens could turn their attention to other matters. Seizing control of the Council and grasping ultimate supremacy was, at last, within reach of their tainted claws.

The first skaven spearhead to reach its destination was the assault upon Tlaxtlan, the City of the Moon. The skaven leader – the Plaguelord Kreegix the Ravener – took a direct approach and drove his troops forward mercilessly. Multitudes of slaves rose out of the tunnels to attack Tlaxtlan's outmost walls. The first wave of attackers crashed headlong into the base of the towering edifice. They sought to clamber up the stone surface, but the enormous blocks were smooth-faced and so large that it was impossible for even the tallest of their kind to stretch up to reach from one join to the next. Skinks on the ramparts hurled down clouds of javelins and darts, but the real danger to the skaven at the wall's base came from the onset of the second wave of ratmen that crashed over them. With no room to turn, many were simply crushed by the onrush of yet more skaven piling against the walls. By dint of their own tremendous numbers, the skaven slowly began to ascend – scrambling atop the growing heaps of their own dead. Not until the sixth wave did the masses spill over the walls in number, and, by then, the gates were also being assailed.

Amid rhythmic chanting and the groan of rusted wheels, plague monks pushed forth great wooden chassis. Upon these scaffold-towers swung heavy brass censers. With each ponderous swing of the enormous orbs, boiling green fumes poured forth to choke the humid air. The robed ratmen strained, pushed, and heaved their engines of destruction down the flagstone roads leading towards Tlaxtlan's gates. So wide was that main causeway that three of the loathsome plague furnaces, along with their rabid entourages, were lined up abreast to smash upon the entranceway. The ancient Gate of the Starpaths was made of solid gold, and the soft metal buckled with each blow delivered by the heavy censers. It was not long before the doors were broken, the battered metal tarnished and rent by the poisonous wrecking balls. Elsewhere along the perimeter, neither the silver Moongates nor the Black Onyx Gates of the Dreaming Lotus proved any sturdier.

Tlaxtlan was breached in a dozen places. The flow of skaven poured over the walls, while columns marched over the fallen gates. The wide avenues of Tlaxtlan were soon clogged with fighting. The skaven, agitated into maddened fury by the cloying fumes of the plague furnaces, were reckless in their advance. They threw themselves into the defenders in a flurry of screeching, flailing and stabbing. Against this chittering horde, the city's saurus legions stood stoically, steady and methodical compared to the frenetic ratmen.

In the maelstrom of the front lines, the skaven waves washed over the disciplined ranks of reptilian warriors. Rusty blade clashed against weapons hewn from obsinite stone, heavy metal censers bashed down upon hide-covered crescent shields. Speed and agility were pitted against thick scales and powerful jaws, and warp-stimulated fury was countered by cold-blooded savagery. Time and again, skaven waves broke against the wall of defenders, but even as mangy remnants of broken units scrabbled away, new skaven formations surged forth. Slowly, inevitably, the lizardmen were forced back. The paved stones of Tlaxtlan's wide avenues were slick with blood, and the gutters, designed to shed even the typhoon rains of Lustria, now overflowed crimson as the first light of dawn brightened the dust-filled horizon.

At the massive temple-city of Itza, the skaven hordes did not attempt to storm the outer walls. This was the First City of the lizardmen, and a different tactic was employed by the ratmen against the sacred heart of their cold-blooded foes. Both Itza's walls and its armies were far mightier than those of Tlaxtlan. On the orders of their commander, Plaguelord Gritch, Great Potentate of Pustulates, the skaven contented themselves with encircling that great city. Only when their troops surrounded the sprawling metropolis did they turn their attentions to the watchposts and monuments that stood outside the city's gates. In their rabid fury, the skaven swarmed these sites, burying them beneath writhing hordes of ratmen. While age-old monoliths were toppled, another great labour was begun. Slaves dug pits in a ring around Itza, closing off any avenue of escape. As the first rays of dawn penetrated the murk-filled air, the verminous host could be seen lining their pits with sharpened stakes and erecting great siege engines on the hillocks of cast up dirt beyond.

The focus of the third prong of the skaven assault was directed as best as possible towards the temple-city of Xlanhuapec. It was known that this attack would be extremely difficult, as there was an additional defence to overcome at that mystic locale. Called the City of Mists, Xlanhuapec was permanently encased in a shroud of eldritch fog, an enchanted barrier of misdirection and menace. This mission was assigned to not one, but two plaguelords – the most stringent of their vile brotherhood, Lord Skrimanx, the Archdeacon of Disease, and the virulent Lord Blistrox, the Spreader of the Word and titular head of the Pestilent Brotherhood.

For the skaven, Xlanhuapec was an ill name, for that cursed city swallowed armies the way quicksand consumed unwary jungle travellers. In all their irruptions, raids, and spy missions in Lustria, few of the skaven had ever entered that cloud of fog and lived to tell about it. Entire invading clans had marched into those swirling mists, never to be seen again. The lowliest slave had heard rumours of disorienting spells and tales of living quagmires or shadowy monsters that prowled in the thick cover.

Lord Skrimanx led his assault up from the south, approaching via the underground tunnel network beneath the ruins of Quetza. At the fore of his army were slave formations, wretches chained together into ragtag units and driven forward upon pain of death. Although such chattel did not typically carry banners or totems of any kind, Lord Skrimanx had commanded that pole-mounted braziers be held aloft in the front rank of each group. He offered the reward of freedom and a bounty of food to any such unit that entered the reptilian city with its light intact. Plague monks and clanrats marched behind the massed slaves, hoping to follow the light of the braziers through the hallucinogenic fog.

To the north, Lord Blistrox led the legions known as the Pestilent Brotherhood – those clans treaty-pledged or enthralled to Clan Pestilens. There, Clans Feesik, Gangrous, Fester, Morbidus, Septik and Griblobe emerged from tunnels and into the swamplands that surrounded Xlanhuapec. To guide his hordes through the mist barrier, Lord Blistrox placed his faith in Reekit, a warlock engineer and master-artificer of the tech-occult. Much had been paid to Clan Skryre for the engineer's services, and, Reekit, with his whirring, cog-filled devices and mech-optic eye, assured Lord Blistrox that he could navigate the mists.

Even as dawn broke across embattled Lustria, both plaguelords led their respective armies into the thick banks of solid mist.



Tetto'eko's visions of destruction and ruin were coming true.

The stars had offered no warnings, save for the same vague messages of doom that had dominated Tetto'eko's nightly scan of the cosmos. The invaders had arrived too quickly, striking unexpectedly after the moonquakes had shaken the city. The skaven had already pushed past the outer walls, and dozens of battles raged within the city of Tlaxtlan. The wide avenues and plazas between the temple-pyramids were crammed with combatants or filled with reinforcement cohorts rushing forward to plug the growing gaps in the defence.

During all the long ages Tlaxtlan had stood, only one enemy had ever penetrated so deeply into its confines – the daemon legions at the coming of Chaos. Then, the city's slann mage-priests had met in the Ziggurat of Quetli. In that place, designed for the Old Ones themselves, the slann had combined their powers to create a dome of mystic energies that none could penetrate. The daemonic assault had washed harmlessly over the shimmering protections. Now, however, the slann were trapped in a mind-weary stupor, unable to utter a coherent phrase, much less work magics. Even Lord Adohi-Tehga, the eldest and most powerful of the city's slann, had spent the battle in a catatonic state. A great deal of the slann's energies had been sapped during their attempts to ward off the meteorites plummeting from Morrslieb, leaving the greatest sorcerers in the world stunned.

In desperation, Tetto'eko ordered his minions to bring forth the Relic Priests. In great haste, the skink honour attendants known as the *Ahmo Chotectzi* – They of the Sun Departed – had skittered to the mortuary chambers and retrieved the desiccated remains of mage-priests from their enshrinement. The revered mummies, still imbued with vast powers, were placed within the Ziggurat of Quetli. This ignited some of the ancient glyphs, but the ritual remained incomplete. No magical dome descended over the beleaguered city, and Tetto'eko knew they would have to protect themselves.

With no slann to guide them, command of the city fell upon Tetto'eko, for he was eldest and most steeped in the counsels of the wise. It was his sacred duty to oversee the countless relics, to protect the irreplaceable spawning pools and, above all, to ensure the slann mage-priests were safeguarded. Unable to see into the future, and unsure of what to do next, Tetto'eko had little choice left but to direct the defence as best he could.

From atop the Temple of the Eclipse, the ancient skink priest could see much of besieged Tlaxtlan as he assessed the situation. In the past years, many warrior cohorts had been sent to the embattled city of Xahutec at the request of Warleader Kroq-Gar. Those regiments that remained in Tlaxtlan were already committed to the chaotic fighting. To the north, the skink barrios burned, while to the west, swarms of ratmen could be seen defiling the Temples of Tepok. To the east, the drifting glades of the Floating Gardens thrashed – evidence of merciless battles taking place beneath those eaves. The skaven advances could be seen pushing down each of the main causeways, inexorably moving towards Tlaxtlan's centre. At the fore of those frenzied attacks were enormous carriage-born censers, and before their poisonous gasses the saurus cohorts were forced into a slow retreat.

For a day and a night Tetto'eko watched the battle rage non-stop throughout the City of the Moon. The fire, blood and frantic energies of the battles contrasted with the calm, soothing atmosphere found within each of the temple-pyramids' Eternity Chambers. Within these mystically sealed inner sanctums the air was tranquil – alternating between balmy circulations and cloying steam baths. Therein, skink attendants wielded giant feathers as if they were ship's oars, using them to waft clouds of exotic lotus scent mixed with hallucinogenic herbs. Enchantments lay upon each of these cosmic chapels to block outside noises, so that the loudest death-roars of gargantuan beasts, or the furious crescendo of the ratmen's hateful chanting, were rendered to little more than a murmur. Although it was calm, a battle was being waged here too, for the befuddled slann would not awaken.

Since their magical duel to halt the cursed moon's approach, the slann could do little more than loll their tongues. With an ever-growing sense of urgency, the agitated skink attendants watched over the potent mages. They did all in their power to awaken their leaders, but to no avail.

A constant stream of skink messengers flowed as Tetto'eko stayed in touch with Tlaxtlan's saurus warleader, Ax-cha, as well as each of the pyramid-temples where the slann lay paralysed, trapped in their warp-tainted dreams. None of them bore good news.

The mountainous Temple of Tlaxcotl and its four surrounding Blood Shrines of Sotek dominated the centre of Tlaxtlan. This vast area was, as of yet, untouched by the foe. Deep-ranked saurian temple guard blocked every passage into the central district, protecting the slann and the ancient powers that lay entombed within the sacred heart of the city. From all across the ravaged metropolis, the scattered defenders were slowly withdrawing towards those miles-wide plazas. Were the slann – any of them – to rouse themselves, the lizardmen might still repel the invaders. Even without his accustomed foresight, Tetto'eko knew this was now their only hope.

While the slann remained incapacitated, there was also no way to get news quickly from the other temple-cities. Terradon messengers had been sent, but it was impossible to tell if they had reached their destination. The other cities too might be under attack, or have been destroyed by some devastating effect of the moonquakes, and there was no way to know. With each passing hour the situation worsened. The Green-crested Guardian Cohort held the arch-portals of the Distant Heavens until every saurus fell. They fought to the end, with their wounded crawling forward to clamp their crocodilian teeth upon any plague monk within reach. Even after the saurian warriors' heads were cut off, the vice-like grip of their final bites remained clenched. Despite their heroic sacrifices, the saurus were accomplishing little but slowing the tide.

Gradually, Tetto'eko had come to the growing realisation that saving the city and saving the slann were now mutually exclusive – there was simply no way he could achieve both objectives. With mechanical precision, Tetto'eko's mind whirred through priorities and protocols. Without emotion or prejudice, the skink priest weighed his options. Bereft of precognition, logic and probability must serve. He came to the only conclusion that offered a chance of any success: he must gather the prone slann and the lizardmen must retreat.



Even as Tetto'eko made his fateful pronouncement, sending teams of skink messengers skittering out of the Tlaxtlan's centre, several more battered saurus cohorts were overwhelmed. The skaven tide surged forward fitfully. They had, at last, reached the easternmost temple-pyramid, the Temple of Chotec. Many hundreds of skaven swarmed over the enormous ziggurat, but all the portals within were sealed, so only the ground level entrance remained open. There, in deep ranks, stood the temple guard, fierce defenders that would give their lives to protect the vulnerable mage-priests in repose within.

Seeing that time was running out, Tetto'eko reached into the copious winds of magic, searching the heavens for any matter in the void that his agile mind could lock onto. Chanting verses of ritual in a language he did not understand, the skink priest walked the cosmos until he found what he sought. By the powers of his magics alone did Tetto'eko ensnare the comet. Exerting all his willpower, the frail skink redirected the iron-cored rock; from many thousands of miles distant, he pulled its mass towards him. With his spell complete, Tetto'eko's mind returned to the discordant present. Bereft of his foresight, he could not know if the meteorite would arrive in time to aid his plan, or merely avenge his failure.

The scrawny slave staggered, already foaming at the mouth. Nine... ten... eleven steps the wretch managed forward before collapsing into a shuddering heap.

'Which of you can explain-tell me why the Red Pox has not reached full potency?' demanded Grilok, the newest of the plaguelords. He glowered at the assembled plague priests that stood before a bubbling vat of purplish liquid.

None of the plague priests answered, or even dared to meet Grilok's accusatory glare. From beneath their dark cowls they could make out the sinuous loops of their leader's tail, as it waved in ominous agitation.

'Eleven steps? Eleven!?' hissed Grilok. 'This is the Red Pox – the disease that brought the man-things to their knees. Do not dare summon me again for approval until the batch is at its true peak. All of you should be demoted back to disciple-stirrers. Yes-yes.'

With a sweep of his tattered cloak, Grilok left, his entourage scurrying after him. Behind him he left a stunned silence, broken only by the death gurgles and last twitches of the poisoned slave.

Grilok was off to inspect the next cavern, to try out the next batch. He had not slept for three days – since Lord Skrolk had promoted him to plaguelord. Grilok was the sixth member of that ruling council – the position known as the Pontifex of Plagues, the ruler of the Contagion Conclave. It was his duty to oversee the production of the chief weapon in Clan Pestilens' arsenal – disease.

A throat cleared behind him, as Grilok had known it would. 'Oh Great Exalted Pontifex,' began the heavily bandaged Archpriest Driblech, malice dripping with every word. 'Surely you know-realise that eleven steps is a potent Red Pox?'

This passive challenge to his authority was exactly what Grilok had been waiting for, and he slowed his rapid pace and spun to face his accuser. Grilok bared his fangs, an open provocation. 'With the warpmoon so full, we can-must do better. I expect no more than a six-pace Red Pox. Or perhaps you, Driblech, would like to inform Lord Skrolk that, in your opinion, an inferior batch will work just as well?'

Even as the archpriest bowed to acknowledge his mistake, going so low he scraped his muzzle on the floor, Grilok watched the rest of his attendants. There would be further attempts to undercut his authority, to sabotage the plans. They had all heard the war topside was going well, but soon it would be their time... time for the Contagion Conclave to unleash the contents of the Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes.

A single failure, Grilok knew, would be his last.

So many messengers arrived and departed from the top of the Great Temple of Tlaxcotl that large queues formed. Retreat in the face of an attacking enemy was a difficult manoeuvre, but the matchless discipline of the saurus warriors, directed by Oldblood Ax-cha, gave Tetto'eko hope. What was proving more difficult, however, was gathering the comatose slann from each temple-pyramid. Taking the revered ones from the safety of their protected chambers was against protocol, and required orders from a slann mage-priest. With no mage-priest capable of coherent thought, Tetto'eko knew his best hope lay in convincing those tasked with keeping the slann safe. They had to understand the necessity of abandoning Tlaxtlan. Only by fleeing into the jungles could they escape. Ax-cha could set up an effective rearguard and, even if the foe overran them, they would buy more time for the slann to awaken.

The loyal temple guard were easy enough to convince. They were utterly dedicated to their task, but readily followed orders issued via the proper chain of command. With no slann mage-priests cognisant, the leadership of Tlaxtlan rested with Tetto'eko. It was those skink attendants who fawned over their prostrate slann leaders that proved difficult. Burdened by bureaucracy and their own self-importance, many attendants caused needless delays. Some asked for further information, wishing to approve their route themselves, while others refused to leave until they had gathered up every last luxury their indisposed masters might possibly request upon awakening. Given these difficulties, what happened next was inevitable.

At the Temple of Chotec the retreat had been too slow. There, the skaven hordes had finally pulled down and overwhelmed the last of the saurus guardians and stormed into the sacred edifice. Many ratmen died in those catacombs, fighting against the last desperate stands of skink attendants, or falling victim to deathtraps, but the skaven could afford such losses. Undeterred, the rag-robed monks of Clan Pestilens scoured the temple-pyramid until they found their true quarry. A pair of mage-priests were discovered in the uppermost chambers. They were lifted from cloud-beds of wafting fumes, seized by hundreds of clutching claws that heaved and dragged the slann out into the light of day. The chanting masses of skaven emerged from the of pyramid bearing the bulbous slann. Slack and unconscious, the mage-priests' frail limbs waved limply as they were hoisted up and down in triumph. This sight – the glorious captured trophies – was met by a clanging of discordant gongs and a cacophony of chittering that spread across Tlaxtlan. The noise reached a shrill crescendo as the slann were ripped apart by the swarming mobs.

Tetto'eko looked at the distant sight and bowed his head in total dejection. Two of the world's most ancient and mystical beings had just been torn into bloody chunks, their flesh defiled to the delight of lowly and degenerate creatures of Chaos. The loss was immeasurable. Tetto'eko knew that even more such atrocities would follow if he did not act swiftly. He gave the signal. Those that could began their exodus – to delay was certain death. Marching behind a spearhead of stegadons and bastiladons, Tetto'eko led those cohorts not designated to form Ax-cha's delaying force.

It had been Tetto'eko's hope that the foe would not press the attack. Tlaxtlan was a rich city, and the central district held the greatest of its invaluable treasures. Gold bands decorated many lofty temples and mosaics of precious stones or trails of inlaid rubies were plentiful. He imagined that those artefacts of obvious mystical properties – like the floating flora of the drifting glades, the perpetually moving stone cogs of the Sundial of Chotec or the fiery emeralds within the Eternal Fountain – would attract the attentions of rapacious invaders. He hoped that they might fight their way out of the city whilst the distracted foes were consumed with sacking the riches of Tlaxtlan. In this, Tetto'eko could not have been more wrong.

Some of the lesser Warlord Clans, or slave regiments assigned to this mission by the Council of Thirteen, did halt to pillage. Others forsook the assault in order to sate their black hungers, devouring the fallen and gorging upon the hulks of gargantuan beasts. The great majority of the skaven, however, were either dedicated plague monks or else too fearful of them to be easily sidetracked. The skaven overrunning Tlaxtlan were largely composed of clawpacks from Clan Pestilens, and they were not gold-greedy pillagers, or raiders seeking arcane devices. In fact, this austere brotherhood of monks cared nothing for loot, for they were rabidly dedicated to their cause – the spreading of plagues and the dominance of their clan. As the lizardmen forces sought to pull away from the Great Temple of Tlaxcotl, a horde of skaven continued to surge after them.

Not all the lizardmen escaped to join the retreat. Although it took the ratmen some time to hack down their temple guard, three more slann were dragged forth from temple-pyramids to suffer cruel ends. Their attendants had delayed departure, sacrificing their safety with their petty concerns over items of transitory nature. The slann mage-priest Ixi-Tehenci was eaten alive because his honoured caretakers had delayed so that extra supplies of the mealy-grubs most favoured by the illustrious slann could be packed.

The lizardman rearguard that was attempting to blockade further pursuit fought off charge after charge. Ax-cha had put his elite cohorts to the fore

– the largest and most ferocious of the spawnings that were not tasked with safeguarding the mage-priests. These units were fresh and the plague monk hordes could not break through them to get amongst the retreating columns. Step by step, though, the cohorts were forced to give ground, backing away from the mounded dead of previous onslaughts.

Sensing that victory was at hand, Plaguelord Kreegix threw forth all of his hoarded reserves. New tides of skaven washed into the battered city. Known as 'the Ravener', Kreegix was the youngest and most aggressive of Arch-plaguelord Nurglitch's lieutenants. Now, he himself joined the battle – storming forth at the crest of the living tidal wave that was to be the final assault, the killing blow. Kreegix bore a triple-headed plague censer whose fumes sent him, and all those nearby, into a berserk frenzy. Gnashing their incisors, their mouths trailing ribbons of foam, the plague-crazed contingents ploughed headlong into the saurus lines.

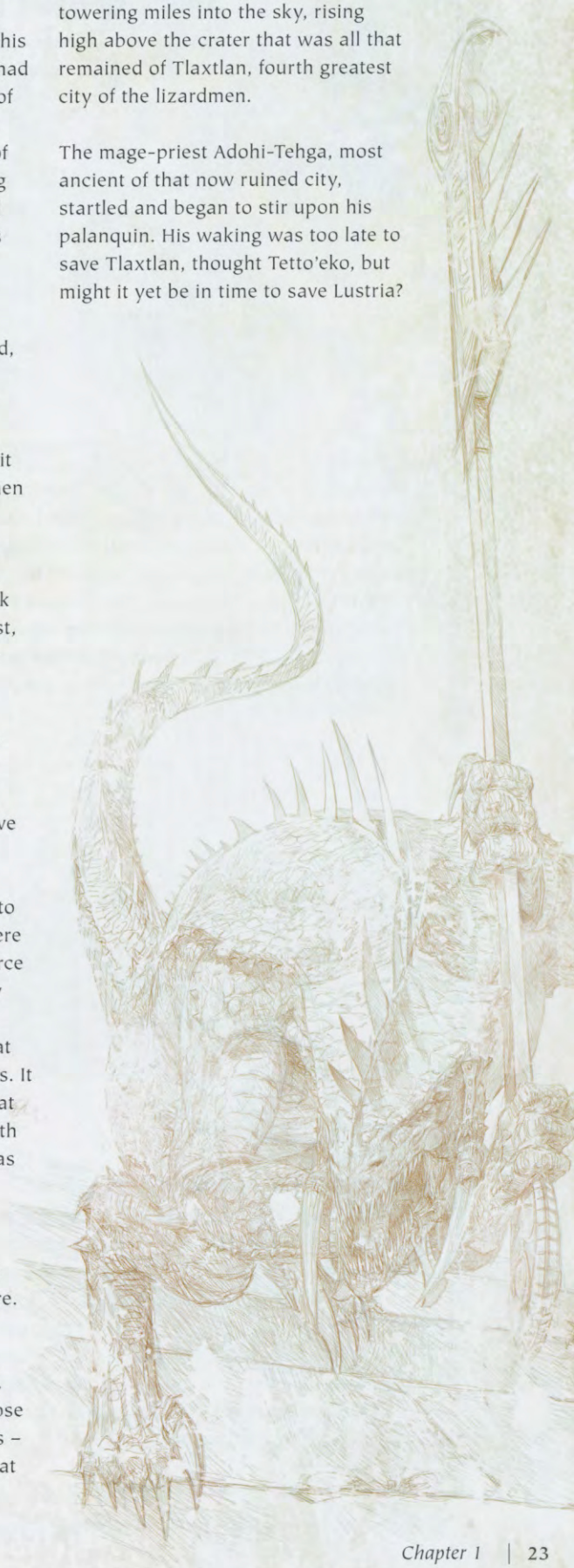
Inspired by their leader and incited by the thick censer-fog that surrounded Kreegix, the plague monk hordes fought with redoubled intensity. With their skin thickened into a leather-like hide by constant corruption, the devout of Clan Pestilens were already tough opposition. As the manic energies flowed over them, the plague monks shrugged off mortal blows, so that even when stabbed, maimed or disembowelled, they did not slow their furious assault.

While the lizardmen rearguard was mauled by Kreegix's renewed attack, the escaping spearhead made progress. The massed stegadons stampeded through the disjointed resistance before them and soon Tetto'eko's column had broken free from the battered city, entering the jungle beyond. Smoke-filled Tlaxtlan lay behind them, while the skies above darkened with impending thunderstorms. Although the thick clouds hid its approach from the city's combatants, Tetto'eko did not need to see the comet to feel its hurtling presence. There had been so much abundant energy to draw upon for his spell, that the ancient skink priest had not realised how massive a clump of metal and rock he had summoned. Now, feeling a mental impression of the magnitude of what was hurtling closer, Tetto'eko realised he should have left the city earlier. There was no time to dwell upon his lack of foresight, however.

Down, down the meteorite streaked, tearing through the world's atmosphere like a bolt sent by the Old Ones themselves. There was nothing Tetto'eko could do to stop it now. On his command, the lizardmen columns dropped to the ground as the sky became a blinding flash of light. The ancient skink priest's senses were attuned enough to pick out the shockwave that blasted past, flattening the jungle microseconds before the thunderclap eclipsed all other matters from his mind. The ground buckled and for a time everything was lost to the roaring explosion. Tetto'eko's palanquin rocked violently within its protective aura, the heatwave threatening to burn him alive. Some of the lizardmen – from sprightly skinks to ponderously heavy stegadons – were thrown into the air by the sheer force of the heaving earthquakes as they rippled outwards. Squalls of flame whooshed overhead, firestorms that sucked the very air from their lungs. It was long moments before those that were not instantly fried could breath again. Already, the scorched air was filled with debris.

At the forefront of the escaping column, Tetto'eko was many miles away from the meteorite's epicentre. Even so, less than a third of the escaping cohorts rose amidst the blackened and smoking wasteland. Most of the survivors had been those nearest the Shields of the Old Ones – the almighty protective barriers that surrounded the slann mage-priests themselves. Looking backwards, the survivors could see a dustcloud towering miles into the sky, rising high above the crater that was all that remained of Tlaxtlan, fourth greatest city of the lizardmen.

The mage-priest Adohi-Tehga, most ancient of that now ruined city, startled and began to stir upon his palanquin. His waking was too late to save Tlaxtlan, thought Tetto'eko, but might it yet be in time to save Lustria?



THE RED HOST

The Red Host of Tehenhauin was known throughout all of Lustria. They moved mysteriously through the deep jungles, arriving unbidden at the gates of each of the great cities. In times of need, the Red Host swept out of nowhere and fell upon the foes of the lizardmen with all the vengeful fury of Sotek.



TEHENHAUIN

The Prophet of Sotek and Harbinger of the Serpent God caught the scent of rat carrying upon the winds of magic. The divine hissing of those airs told Tehenhauin to lead the Red Host out from its jungle base and make all haste to Itza. The wrath of Sotek must once more rise. The swarms of Sotek – snakes and serpents of every shape and size – spilled from the undergrowth to join the Red Host as Tehnhauin led them to battle. Tehenhauin foretold many sacrifices dedicated to the gratification of Sotek.

THE RED SHIELDS

Although they emerged out of the spawning pools of Axlotl, the large red crests of these skinks indicated that they would not swell the ranks of that army. Upon shaking off the waters of their making, these skinks travelled far into the jungle depths, drawn by a hissing call. They were a sacred spawning of Sotek, fated to join the infamous Red Host beneath Tehenhauin. During their journey, they found and slew the most enormous Fangadon, fashioning red shields from its mighty hide. Led by the Chieftain Hui-ixxen, the Red Shields were notoriously fierce, savagely beheading all ratspawn they encountered.





THE FIRE LIZARDS

Skink priests claimed they could see the serpent shape of the almighty Sotek within the fiery blasts emitted by these salamanders. Whether or not this was true, it was undeniable that the reptilian beasts became enraged in the presence of the hated ratspawn. Upon finding a line of skaven stragglers making their way through the jungle to Itza, the Fire Lizards set upon them with flame, tooth and claw. Even the charred and ripped remains drew the beasts' ire, for when all living targets were destroyed, the salamanders continued to maul the shrivelled and blackened corpses.

EYES OF THE CANOPY

The chameleon skinks known as the Eye of the Canopy were not followers of Sotek. They joined the Red Host as Tehenhauin led his cohorts towards Itza, appearing out of the undergrowth mysteriously. None knew the secret paths through the jungle better, and they guided the Prophet of Sotek passed numerous treacherous pitfalls and wayward beasts. Although they did not speak, nor tell of their origins, it was deemed the Eyes of the Canopy had travelled from far away. The glowing orange poison-frogs they carried secreted the deadliest venom, and were not native to any of the nearby swamps.





LIVING BASTIONS

The twin bastiladons known as the Living Bastions served their crew with an obedience rarely seen in the jungle reptiles. What's more, they showed outright reverence for the great Tehenhauin, lowering their heads in his presence. Upon the armoured back of each was an ark of Sotek, its ancient weathered stone banded by stripes of precious gold. The outpouring of snakes from these mysterious devices had always been especially prodigious, like a never-ending river of serpents.



THE WIND THAT HUNGERS

A squadron of ripperdactyls, the Wind That Hungers earned their name when the Red Host witnessed the unridden beasts drop from the skies and rip apart a skaven patrol. Perhaps it was their blood-glutted state, but the typically hard-to-break beasts remained upon the ground and allowed the red-crested skinks to scramble upon their backs. Taking this as a gift of divine vengeance from Sotek, the Red Host named the beasts the Wind That Hungers, helping to direct their unbridled fury through the cunning placement of blot toads.

Tehenhauin
The Prophet of Sotek

Chillipeno
Skink Priest atop Ancient Stegadon

Iztec Heart-taker
Skink Priest

Skyleader Tlexi
Skink Chief atop Terradon

Niltok
Skink Chief

Tehnini
Skink Oracle atop Troglodon

Redhorns
Trio of Stegadons

Amaxon River Patrol
Two spawnings of
Skink Skirmishers

Jungle Patrol
Two spawnings of
Skink Skirmishers

The Red Shields
Five Skink Cohorts with Kroxigor

Mauls of Sotek
Two clubs of Kroxigor

Makers of the Paths
One club of Kroxigor

The Fire Lizards
Three hunting packs
of Salamanders

Protectors of Xihilic
Two hunting packs of Salamanders

Vengeful Shards
Two hunting packs of Razordons

Living Bastions
Two Bastiladons with Arks of Sotek

Wing of Sotek
One wing of Terradons

Eyes of the Canopy
One ambush of Chameleon Skinks

The Wind That Hungers
One wing of Ripperdactyls

THE HERALDS OF CORRUPTION

Disease and pestilence have always been a pivotal part of the Clan Pestilens arsenal, and such weapons were never more on display than when their army besieged Itza. It was Plaguelord Gritch's intention to transform the lizardmen city into a contaminated wasteland.

LORD GRITCH

Lord Gritch was the Great Potentate of Pustulates, the third of the plaguelords of Clan Pestilens. There never was a greedier or more grasping skaven. Grossly corpulent, Lord Gritch consumed any kind of flesh he could get his claws upon. He had grown powerful indeed, but was slowed by his extreme girth. To overcome his voluminous waddle, the plaguelord rode upon a great pox rat. In battle, Gritch wielded a warpstone-headed mace and a short stabbing sword blessed with runes of corruption.





LORD GRILOK

With a knowledge of disease and a penchant for creating the most virulent of maladies, the plague priest Grilok was promoted by Lord Skrolk to become the sixth plaguelord. In that coveted position, Grilok ruled the sect that created the most potent of Clan Pestilens' weapons. At his command, the Contagion Conclave was set in motion, brewing up the most hateful batches of contamination imaginable in their Caudrons of a Thousand Poxes. Unlike most of his clanmates, Grilok preferred to stay away from the front lines of battle, instead using his arcane abilities to wither foes from afar.

THE BILEKIN BROTHERHOOD

Clan Pestilens had grown so huge that it had branched off into many different sects. The plague monks of the Bilekin Brotherhood were one such order. They wore tattered green robes like the majority of their contaminated kind, however, their cowls were cream coloured and bore jags and runes. The Bilekin were labeled as extremists, even within their zealous clan. As part of their ritual of infection, they bathed daily in the worst filth imaginable, coating themselves and the blades of their weapons in liquid disease.





THE CHAINED ONES

Being a slave was the most miserable existence in skaven society. Of all clans, however, none treated their slave legions as harshly as Clan Pestilens. Without resistence to their masters' maladies, the slaves quickly succumbed to the horrors of the most wretched diseases. The Chained Ones were the hardy survivors of Warlord Clans that once challenged Clan Pestilens. It was the Chained Ones who carried the disassembled war engines of the Virulent Batteries through the tunnels, and then assembled and wheeled them into position at Itza. Any who could survive such conditions were the fiercest of their kind.



THE CONTAGION CONCLAVE

The Contagion Conclave was perhaps the most diseased of all plague monk sects. Their main responsibility lay in tending the Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes, yet they were more than mere potion-making alchemists – they were the most virulent of their kind. With robes stained from all the worst contaminations the world has ever known, they charged into combat, the plague priest Ndemix at their head atop a choking plague furnace.



THE VIRULENT BATTERIES

The Virulent Batteries – thirteen groupings of three plagueclaw catapults each – were one of Clan Pestilens' most devastating assets. The war engines had laid low many an enemy before – destroying dwarf mountain fortresses, fouling lair-dens of rival clans, or battering apart the puny wooden constructs of the greenskins. With their disease-ridden payload supplied by the Contagion Conclave, the Virulent Batteries stood ready to spread the worst strains of disease, all in the name of the Great Horned Rat.

Lord Gritch, Great Potentate of Pustulates
Plague Priest on Great Pox Rat

Lord Grilok, Pontifex of Plagues
Plague Priest

Ndemix of the Bubonic Choir
Plague Priest

Drok Dribslime
Plague Priest on Plague Furnace

The Virulent Batteries
Thirteen batteries of three Plagueclaw Catapults

Acolytes of the Greenfester
Three claws of Plague Monks, one claw of Censer Bearers and one claw of Clanrats

The Cankerous Choir
Two claws of Plague Monks and one legion of Skavenslaves

Rotclaws
Six claws of Plague Monks, one claw of Censer Bearers and two legions of Skavenslaves

The Contagion Conclave
Three Plague Priests, six claws of Plague Monks and six legions of Skavenslaves

The Bilekin Brotherhood
Five claws of Plague Monks and one claw of Censer Bearers

Clan Eshin
Three claws of Night Runners

Clan Moulder
Two claws of Rat Ogres, three claws of Giant Rats and three claws of Rat Swarms

Clan Morbidus
Six claws of Clanrats, two claws of Stormvermin, three Warpfire Thrower Teams and one claw of Poisoned Wind Globadiers

The Chained Ones
Pawleader Vitkrit Whiphand and twenty-one legions of Skavenslaves

ASSAULT ON ITZA

All of the major cities of the lizardmen were founded in the days of the Old Ones. Each site was meticulously chosen to align with myriad interstellar entities in the cosmos above. Every building was carefully built in order to best concentrate power, the chain of cities and monuments forming a geomantic grid that could siphon and hold eldritch energies. Of all the structures raised as part of the Great Plan of the Old Ones, the city of Itza was the first and the greatest.



Itza, the First City, had never fallen to a foe. In more than eight thousand years, since the time of the Great Catastrophe, Itza had never been seriously threatened. Now, before its walls and arches, the skaven armies were massed. To the crack of whips, the ratmen toiled – excavating a wide moat around the sprawling city and erecting great engines to besiege it. To the other races of the world, the sight of the skaven scaffold-tower catapults encircling their cities would cause dread. Before the monolithic walls and arches of Itza, however, such devices seemed puny. Compared to the mountainous size of the largest of the First City's temple-pyramids, the skaven weapons were as children's toys. Indomitable Itza had survived immersion in a sea of daemons, withstanding what had been the greatest invasion the world had ever known. Those inside did not quail to behold the siege devices now being arrayed before Itza's gates.

Not all was well within Itza, however.

As befit its supreme status, Itza boasted more slann mage-priests in residence than any of the other great cities. All of the most powerful of the remaining slann – those originating from the Second Spawning – resided within the First City, save only two: Adohi-Tehga from Tlaxtlan, and the eldest of them all, the great Lord Mazdamundi of Hexoatl. Also in Itza were more mage-priests from the third, fourth, and fifth spawnings than anywhere else in the world.

Despite how many slann dwelt within Itza, the majority of the city's monumental pyramid-temples were unoccupied. No new spawnings had been created after the departure of the Old Ones. Although seemingly impervious to age, a great many of the slann, including all of the first generation, had been slain over the passing millenna. What troubled Itza now, however, was not the paucity of slann, but that those ensconced within the pyramid-temples had been rendered insensible. Just like the mage-priests of Tlaxtlan, they had overstrained their powers attempting to stave off the cursed moon, which had been drawn closer than ever to the world. Contact with that orb of pure Chaos had, at least momentarily, unhinged the mighty mages from the laws of reason.

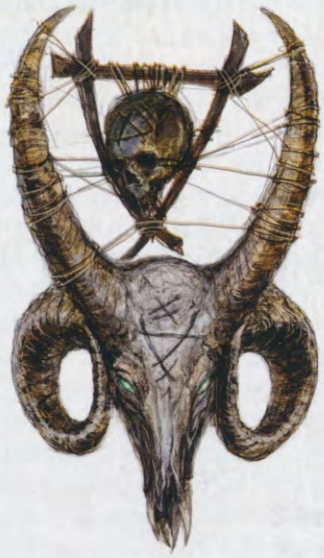
Civil activities and daily regimen, such as the coordination of patrols and maintenance of the city's monuments, was the province of the skinks. Their priests made all such minor decisions, prioritising which repairs to make or directing which sections of the encroaching jungle to clear. Deciding upon anything out of the ordinary was the province of the mage-priests. The easily agitated skinks did not possess the steady calm of their slann masters and orders had been put in place to ensure none of the overly emotional creatures was given too much authority. Although spared major destruction from the moonquakes, Itza had been badly shaken and several of its eldest monuments toppled. To many of the skink leaders, the importance of these varied hubs of the geomantic grid was paramount. Many skinks ignored the swarming foe at their gates, and instead rushed work crews to repair and rebuild damage. Only a direct attack upon them or their construction sites would have provoked any other response.

Although war was the province of the saurus, the decision about when and where to go was a decision for the mage-priests. Saurus warleaders, including Tekza, the venerable warleader of Itza, had scented the foe and carefully watched to judge their dispositions. If the skaven attacked, the response was Tekza's to make – but as of yet, the milling throngs of ratmen had been intent only upon the encirclement of Itza and the construction of their siege engines. The largest oldblood of the First City waited and watched. Although he remained as still as stone, not a movement went by that his reptilian eyes did not mark.

Even after half of their number had been sent to fight under Kroq-Gar in the ongoing daemon battle at Xahutec, the armies of Itza remained second to none. The cohorts stood immobile throughout the city, awaiting only Tekza's order to send them loping into battle. So the hazy dawn greeted Itza, the dust-filtered sunbeams breaking through to suffuse the towering temples in a glow of orange light.

Lord Gritch, Great Potentate of Pustulates and the third of the plaguelords of Clan Pestilens, watched that same sunrise. Lord Gritch was grossly corpulent, and to ease his strain he had taken to riding a great pox rat. He sat astride this wolf-sized rodent and observed the impressive work his minions had done overnight. The lizard-things' city stretched past the horizon, but wrapped around it like a noose was a newly excavated ditch. Lord Gritch sat on his loathsome mount as it climbed the mounded earth raised on the far side of the moat. Atop this slight rise, stretching in a line unbroken as far as Lord Gritch could see, were newly erected plagueclaw catapults. He was pleased, very pleased.

It had not been easy to accomplish this task, Lord Gritch reflected. Plague monks were notorious for losing control in the presence of the enemy, forsaking plans for the chance to hurl themselves at a hated foe – and for Clan Pestilens, any opposition, often even another skaven clan, was considered a hated foe. Lord Gritch had not only instilled great fear into his followers, but his idea to channel the plague monks' anger toward the slave legions had worked particularly well. The zealot priests had whipped the labourers relentlessly, driving them at a frenetic pace. The additional cruelty forced the slaves to work faster than ever, and the ability to focus their endless ire onto something had kept the plague monks from straying off to attack the foe prematurely. If the saurus legions had been directly provoked, Lord Gritch knew that Clan Pestilens' plans would be in jeopardy.



Of course there had been setbacks. It was known that many slaves would be worked to death during the frantic digging and construction, but they were deployed in such numbers that Lord Gritch had counted on half of the penal creatures to survive. The brutal exertions and callous treatment exacted upon the lowliest of the ratmen, however, had ensured that less than a quarter of their total remained. At least those that died or had become too feeble to work had completed one last function: they served as food for the remaining skaven. The jungles had taken their toll too. Enormous saurian beasts had burst forth to rampage amongst the ratmen, preying upon them by the dozens before striding back into the depths of the surrounding foliage. Skink patrols were everywhere, emerging out of swamps, appearing from deep within the nigh-impenetrable undergrowth or even swooping down from the skies mounted atop winged beasts. These skinks typically unleashed a hail of poisoned darts and then were gone, too fast and elusive in their native lands to be pinned down by the ensuing skaven counter-attacks.

Despite these inconveniences, Lord Gritch was now in readiness, his hordes awaiting only one last thing. The delivery from the Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes was late. The corpulent plaguelord twitched, sending ripples through the bulk covered by his tatty, filth-encrusted robes. Lord Skrolk would hear of this. No, Lord Gritch thought, the Arch-plaguelord Nurglitch himself would hear of this. It had been Lord Skrolk, after all, who had worked to dispose of the old Plague Pontifex. Doubtlessly the old plaguelord had replaced the ruler of the Contagion Conclave with one of his own minions, some pawn that Skrolk could more easily control himself. Yet the whole plan for Itza relied on those plagues being deployed before the cursed frog-things awakened. If Lord Skrolk had fouled everything up with his own political manoeuvring then perhaps the path to the coveted first plaguelord position would, at long last, be free?

It was with disappointment that Lord Gritch identified a distant sound. It was the creaking of rusted wheels and the groan of over-whipped slaves. Undoubtedly this was the arrival of the Contagion Conclave. Still, he could at least report their lateness, and now his siege engines could finally be put to use.

Lord Grilok, the Pontifex of Plagues, hated the jungle.

As the newly appointed ruler of the Contagion Conclave, it was Grilok's duty to oversee the sect that invented and produced the plagues used by Clan Pestilens. Making the most virulent diseases was exacting work, made more difficult by the operation being moved from its old locale in the Southlands to the newly created undertunnels beneath Lustria. Unfortunately, that had not been the end of Lord Grilok's troubles, for his underlings were also required to deliver their deadly alchemic arsenal to all the war fronts opening up across the jungle continent.

The journey towards Itza, led by Lord Grilok himself, proved especially difficult. Grilok and his ragged column emerged from the tunnels some ten miles from the city walls, and had to travel through the jungle to reach their destination. Although they followed a path trodden by the preceding skaven armies, it proved rough and dangerous going. The caravans containing the vats moved slowly, and the skaven were repeatedly ambushed.

The first attacks upon the disease-laden caravan of plagues came from a bulge-eyed strain of skinks that could shift the colour of their skin. The well-camouflaged skirmishers would spit a hail of poisoned darts from their blowpipes before fading back into the thick foliage. Time and again, they re-appeared from some unexpected angle, slaying their targets before drifting backwards to avoid pursuit. Lord Grilok struggled to maintain control. The slaves pushing the carriages needed constant beating and prodding, and at the same time, the accompanying plague monk army needed to be reined in. Furious at the constant needling attacks, swarms of the robed monks would tear off into the deep jungle in pursuit. Mostly, they returned empty-handed from these reprisals, but sometimes they did not return at all. Beyond seeing potential ambushes behind every bit of undergrowth, the skaven were also delayed by the inherent dangers of moving volatile toxins, as well as other jungle threats, like quicksand pits, chokevines, and the carnivorous blood-dew trees.

It soon became apparent to Lord Grilok that he would reach his destination later than agreed. This bad news was not offset by his only consolation: the noxious fumes of their cargo kept away the living clouds of insects that haunted the swamps. While not potent enough to affect the plague monks of the Contagion Conclave, the escaping gasses caused many of the slaves that pushed the wheeled platforms to sicken and fall. With every step – especially those made over the top of still-twitching slaves – Grilok reaffirmed his hatred for the cursed jungle.

Not long after dawn, the rolling columns of ragtag skaven pushed their way out of the dark green thickets and arrived before the walls of Itza. Lord Grilok's surge of relief at escaping the jungle was tempered somewhat by the fact that he was only exchanging one predicament for the next. Distributing the vats of specially brewed diseases and loading them into the catapults was a precarious duty. One miscue could send a cloud of death-inducing fumes rolling over the skaven battle lines. Grilok knew a few such accidents were probably just what his counterpart Lord Gritch was hoping to report.

The meeting between the plaguelords was full of the strange observances and well-calculated insults of Clan Pestilens. Passages of the Liber Bubonicus were chanted, censers were swung, and the plague pacts were spoken. At long last, Lord Grilok formally handed over his creations. The chief acolytes of the Contagion Conclave spread out amongst the war engines, chittering directions and ensuring that the correct procedures and blessings were in place. It was not long after this that the plagueclaw catapults were declared ready to begin their loathsome barrage.

Rising high upon his pox rat, Lord Gritch raised his sword and brought it swiftly down – the signal to commence the bombardment. Up and down the line went the sound of creaking machinery, the straining reverberations of rotting wood and the resounding thwack-twang of plagueclaw arms flinging their gloopy contents. Up went the gelatinous missiles, leaving trails of green-tinged corruption in their wake. A distinct and putrid odour filled the air, and the tainted counterweights were already being winched back into position for another shot when faint slapping sounds from the city signalled the splattering impacts of those first high-arcing shots.

Had the slann mage-priests been awake, they would have known straight away what horrors were being unleashed upon the perimeter of their city. Whatever was splashed or spattered by the far-flung catapults' shot began to smoulder. Ancient rock-carved monuments smoked and fumed from contact with that vile substance. Even obsinite, the hardest of substances, writhed as the semi-liquid compound bubbled and evaporated into a sickly green mist. Something primal told the skinks, saurus and the mammoth saurian work-beasts that to be soaked by that pulpy mass, or exposed to its fumes, would mean death. Not all were quick enough to back away, however. Scale, flesh and bone melted in seconds, an unnatural corrosion as painful as it was horrific.

From their dirt hillocks outside Itza, the skaven war engines did not have the range to penetrate deeply into the colossal city. Instead, their shots rained down upon the outskirts throughout the day and into the evening. It was a hail of toxic sludge that plastered lesser temples and

drenched stone-paved avenues until a noisome liquid ran down into the sewers, slowly filling the runoff ponds. A mist rose into the humid air, but still the barrage continued.

Clan Pestilens catapulted their entire arsenal of diseases into Itza. These plagues were not the mundane killers that occasionally swept through the Old World, but concoctions far more unnatural. Each disease had been painstakingly nurtured, its stock allowed to stew and ferment for years, aided by the arcane power within the Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes. Now, with their operations moved far below Lustria, Clan Pestilens had added the final ingredients – ground warpstone and measures of all the world's miseries. They had created new diseases and brewed strong batches of proven maladies, and now they unleashed them all.

The first to be launched was the Red Pox – a virulent new strain of the same pandemic that the skaven had once used to lay low Bretonnia and Tilea. Next, vats of Seeping Pox, Scalamundrax, the Oozing Eye Plague and others were emptied into the waiting plagueclaw catapults. There was a strict sequence for the ammunition, overseen by the heavily bandaged acolytes of the Contagion Conclave. Alone, any one of these diseases was a scourge to anything that breathed. Together, they formed an evil brew, a deathly concoction that created a miasmic cloud that hung in the still air. Soon, this foul fume formed a ring that hemmed in all of Itza's occupants.

The Chaos moon had, at last, subsided, and a glow at the margin of the world hinted that a new day would soon be dawning. With ancient eyes, Oldblood Tekza, the warleader of Itza, peered down from the Temple of the Stars into the waning darkness. Tekza had commanded his cohorts march out to attack the foe when their war engines began to hurl missiles into Itza. After the first cohort fell staggering in the rising mists, he sent a second to the same doom. Before the third cohort could march into the foul mists, Tekza roared the command to fall back. He pulled his legions further into the city, out of range of that steady barrage, and away from the noxious cloud that hung heavy inside the city's perimeter.

The great saurus warrior was not afraid. If his own death, or those of the vast armies at his command, would best serve Itza, then it was a price he would pay without a second thought. Had Tekza known of the alchemic weapons of the foe, he would have led an attack out as soon as the skaven erected their war engines. This was not regret or self-recrimination – for he knew neither – this was sheer practicality. He would not make that mistake again. Like all his kind, Tekza was spawned for battle, destined to protect his slann and their territory, to slay those whom he was ordered to destroy. Battle plans continued to run through his reptilian brain, but for now, the oldblood watched and waited.

Alone at last, Skrolk leaned heavily upon his gnarled staff. His boil-covered paws scrabbled within his robes, seeking a vial amongst the filthy folds. Overseeing the invasions, and ensuring the newest plaguelord completed the diseases in time, had worn him as never before. Needing to regain his strength, Skrolk drew forth a vial of glowing liquid. Even as he fumbled with the stopper he sensed another presence.

'Who-what is there? Announce yourself before Lord Skrolk,' demanded Skrolk, his hollow eye sockets sweeping the chamber.

And then it hit Skrolk, a scent so full of overpowering corruption that at first he thought it must be Arch-plaguelord Nurglitch, come from Skavenblight. Yet it was not the same aura as his leader, the one whose glorious vision of pestilence had inspired Skrolk to pluck out his eyes. This was something different...

Though blind, the plaguelord saw in effulgent shades of decay. Now, his eyeless sight beheld a vision of such dark majesty he felt compelled to fall before it worshipfully. A Verminlord had come, and its power and aura of pure treachery filled the room.

'Ah, Skrolk,' it said, in a voice redolent with ancient evil. 'All your work, all Nurglitch's plans – they have been hard to watch. It will be harder still to watch them all fail. A ware-warning to you: the serpent god moves against you. Defeat is coming.'

Bathed in the radiance of unholiest disease, Skrolk felt the words scratch into his mind. They burrowed, branching off into different meanings – was this a threat? Why warn him? Was this truth, or a spurious path? Lost in the echoes of the otherworldly presence, Skrolk was unaware that he stood slack-muzzled, with a line of drool pooling from his open jaws.

'Remember my name,' the caressing voice whispered. 'I am Vermalanx. When all else has failed you, call upon me. Together we will know victory. Remember...'

Skrolk was alone. Perhaps he always had been. If he had just had a vision, it was hardly a suprise: he had not rested, let alone slept, for over three weeks, sustained by his indomitable will and the boosting energies of warp-stim. The surface invasion would go as planned. He – Lord Skrolk – would see to it.

With shaking claws, Skrolk opened the vial and tossed his head back to down its shimmering contents. There was no time to rest yet, he thought. Something gnawed at the back of his mind as the overly agitated plaguelord stalked down the corridor to learn the latest news.

Lord Gritch was as fat and greedy as his pox rat, but he was not lethargic. He rode Itza's perimeter, urging the plagueclaw crews to continue their relentless barrage. Where the plaguelord came upon war engines that had broken down, he berated the sweating crews as they attempted to effect repairs, demanding greater industry and faster results. Gritch's overbearing presence seemed to be everywhere, a pace he could maintain indefinitely thanks to his consumption of warpstone elixirs. The glowing fluids imbued his corpulent form with unnatural energy, but also further stirred his voracious appetite.

It was time for the next stage of the battle plan. Those slaves that still lived were once more whipped into action. Building dirt causeways across their own ditch, the skaven systematically began to move the creaking war engines forward, one battery at a time. Those catapults that were not being moved continued with their plague bombardment until they were interrupted.

Oldblood Tekza sent forth flying cohorts: air patrols of terradons were massed and sent forth to wreak havoc amongst the war machines. Screeching from the skies, packs of the leathery-winged predators descended. Led by skink chieftains, some terradon riders made sweeping runs, diving to drop rocks from great heights onto the plagueclaw catapults. Others swept low so their riders could fling poison-tipped javelins or sling fire-laden leeches. A few terradon flocks came too close, allowing the maddening hordes of plague monks a chance to pull them down. Flapping and screeching, the beasts rolled on the ground, attempting to shake off their assailants before they were swarmed over. Although some machines were destroyed, the raids proved to be more of a nuisance than a real threat. Soon enough, Gritch was back, directing repairs to catapults broken into timber and ordering the slaves to start building ramps.

During the aerial assaults, Tekza ordered further attempts to penetrate the wall of murk that surrounded Itza. With the distant line of catapults as their target, a trio of bastiladons plunged down the wide Avenue of Sacred Stars towards the southerly gates. Armoured with heavy plates and protected by a hide so thick that it could turn an axe stroke, it was hoped that the lumbering beasts could shrug off the ill effects of the deadly cloud. From his vantage point atop the Zenith of Tranquillity Temple, Tekza did not need the report from his terradon scouts. The bastiladons emerged out of the thick band of fog with their skink crew spasming uncontrollably. The creatures themselves stumbled, their pace and path growing erratic before they too slumped. Blinded and in agony, one of the bastiladons gave a final roar which still echoed amongst the stone monoliths as the beast moved its last.

Tekza, who thought in straight lines and tactics, was out of ideas. The oldblood resolved to pull his cohorts back even further into the city. Until the slann mage-priests were revived or the foe advanced yet further, it seemed his only choice. Yet Tekza's eyes, and those of his airborne scouts, had missed something moving out of the jungle.

Heavy shadows raced across Itza as the blazing hot afternoon sun was shrouded by black-headed thunderclouds. The air felt heavy and in the dim light the green-tinged smog glowed with an unnatural luminescence. Still the slaves laboured on, the sounds of their digging mixing with the groaning tensions and resounding snaps of the plagueclaw catapults. It was enough noise that none took notice of the slight swaying of the trees at the jungle's edge. Even if they had, it is likely they would have simply assumed this to be the work of the newly rising winds. Soon, however, there would be no mistaking what was coming...

Each of the formations Lord Gritch had placed to guard the rear of his besieging army had been expertly hunted and quietly eliminated before they could raise the alarms. All was quiet along the jungle edge until a single almighty roar echoed to the heavens, and then the tangled forests thrashed with movement and fury. A writhing carpet of snakes was first to emerge, slithering forward in a crisscrossing mass. Behind them came cohorts of red-crested skinks clustered around hulking kroxigor, followed in turn by swift-moving skinks that goaded forward horse-sized lizard creatures. Leaving a wake of broken and bent trees behind them came a moving wall of bastiladons, more snakes writhing out from the strange stone arcs they bore upon their protective shells. As this new army lifted their bellowing challenges to the skies, the dark clouds above them answered with brilliant flashes of lightning.

Tehenhauin, the Prophet of Sotek and Harbinger of the Serpent God, had come.

Even as the rearmost plague monks turned to face this new threat, the armies of Sotek were upon them, crashing into their ranks. The fighting was bitter, for Tehenhauin's heart burned with hatred for this verminous foe. To him they were the fleshly embodiment of corruption, decay and disease, and he and his vanguard fell upon the skaven with all the fury of divine vengeance.

At the fore of the killing was Tehenhauin. Bolstered by his own powerful spells and his unrelenting hatred, the first and greatest of Sotek's priests tore through the skaven. Tenenhauin cut a swathe deep into the plague monks, his blade a flashing blur as it struck out again and again, felling ratmen with each stab. Truly he had summoned the Serpent God's impenetrable scales as well, for the disease-encrusted swords of his enemies could not

penetrate Tehenhauin. Those skaven brave enough to stand before the oncoming skink found their own weapons were turned aside or broken in shards against the vengeful priest. Beneath them, the battlefield itself felt alive. Everywhere a skaven stepped, the ground moved as poisonous adders, fang-spitting rockbacks, hooded deathcrawlers and strangling constrictors attacked.

The pride of Clan Pestilens – the Acolytes of the Greenfester, the Cankerous Choir, and the speckled robed Rotclaws – disappeared as the red-crested skinks fought with the same ferocity as their leader. Along with the battle-clacks from deep in their throats, the skinks called out to Sotek and shouted Tehenhauin's name. They pushed the skaven back towards their pits, vying to overrun the plagueclaw catapult batteries.

When Tehenhauin's assault began, Lord Gritch had been gulping down the body of a slave that had not been digging quickly enough. Spurring his pox rat out of the ditch, he halted alongside the war engines, gaping in horror. Everywhere his plague monks were being assailed. He could see the skaven lines wavering in many places. As he took in the sight, Gritch involuntarily voided his stomach, retching out black gobbets of flesh and blood. Where were his rearguard? Where were his scouts? Gritch assumed that his defensive measures had either betrayed him or neglected their duty. There would be time to ponder what horrible fate he could put them to later. Now the plaguelord needed to stem the tide of skinks and regain control of his plague monks.

Before Lord Gritch could steer his scampering pox rat into the fray, the skies opened up. Curtains of rain hissed downwards, transforming the muddy ground into a quagmire. Behind the plaguelord, the slaves attempted to crawl out of entrenchments whose slopes had quickly turned to slippery mud.

The jungle was the skinks' natural environment. They lived through such harsh rains daily in the monsoon seasons and it troubled them no more than the heat or the humidity. Indeed, it could truly be said that the climate and the skinks were made for each other. The skaven, on the other hand, preferred to lurk underground. Many of the skaven could count upon their claws the number of times that they had ever been to the surface, and only those plague clans that dwelt in the Southlands could claim to have experienced anything like the tropical deluge that now pelted them.

Beneath that hammering rain, the skinks and kroxigor drove the skaven back. Confused by the merciless onslaught and the deteriorating ground, the verminous hordes panicked. The battle quickly turned to a rout as plague monks, sodden in their damp robes, began to flee. Many scampered backwards, plummeting into their own moat and drowning in droves, their bodies filling the ditch. Others scurried in all other directions, eventually scattering into the jungle.

The chameleon skinks that had so expertly slain Lord Gritch's rearguard before they could raise the alarm had not joined the battle. Instead, they stayed unmarked upon the jungle's edge, their scales blending in perfectly with the dark foliage. They had waited for this moment. No skaven who ran back into the jungles ever lived to see the moons rise again.

The storm he had summoned let up, but Tehenhauin and his army did not. They prowled amongst the mud-strewn fields, stabbing and killing. The lizardmen toppled the scaffold-towers of the siege engines, the kroxigor easily smashing them into kindling. Only when they had finished the complete slaughter of any living foe did the Prophet of Sotek turn his attention to Itza.

The sudden storm had blown away the low-hanging clouds of pestilence that surrounded Itza before dispersing them with gales and sheets of rain. Now Tehenhauin peered down the empty avenues and up at the towering temple-pyramids, wondering if he had saved anything besides the city itself.







DEFENDERS OF THE CITY OF MISTS

The mists of Xlanhuapec held illusions to confound foes. Within that shrouded fog stalked mystic beasts that would prey upon any who dared enter the fogs. Yet these were not Xlanhuapec's only defenders, for the city boasted many strong cohorts awaiting any invaders who survived the trek through the protective mists.

LORD HUINITENUCHLI

There were few slann mage-priests left upon the world, but fewer still were those that came from the Second Spawning. Lord Huinitenuchli was one such revered being. It was he who had first taught the other slann of his city the secrets of making the protective mists. Although Huinitenuchli was turning a mottled yellowish colour, the eldest slann of Xlanhuapec had lost none of his mental acuity. When awake, Lord Huinitenuchli could still move mountains with his mind. Alas, the strain of halting the Chaos moon's meteorites had left the great slann groggy and struggling to awaken.





CHAKAX

The Prime Guardian of Xlanhuapec, Chakax was the eldest of the Second City's temple guard. It was his solemn duty to protect the lizardmen's most precious assets – the slann mage-priests. He was the last line of defence, and he had never failed in his duty – no slann under his protection had ever been slain. Armed with the hefty Star-Stone Mace, Chakax pulverized anything that dared threaten those in his guardianship.

MIST RUNNERS

The skink skirmishers of the Mist Runners had strange markings – pale grey patches upon their blue scales – that allowed them to blend in with the fog and brackish water that surrounded Xlanhuapec. The warriors of the Mist Runners had rubbed their eyes so long with the pale blue lotus that their eyes themselves had taken on that opalescent hue. Yet they could see through the mists, allowing them to approach foes unawares. They took down foes by either javelin or dart, each coated with a fast-acting poison. None passed their well-guarded sectors unseen.





THE SHROUDED COHORT

The skinks and kroxigor of the Shrouded Cohort bore similar markings to each other. The formation was equally adept at launching ambush attacks into a foes' flanks or rear as they were at forming up in deep ranks and taking their place in the lizardmen battle line. The Shrouded Cohort was garrisoned in underground caves beneath the mist fields of Xlanhuapec, from where they could return quickly to help defend the city by swimming through underground waterways that joined up with the city's canals.



TEMPLE GUARD OF XLANHUAPEC

The spawning of temple guard that protected the temples of Xlanhuapec was an ancient one. The thick scale plating that covered the warriors' bodies was faded and crisscrossed with deep scars. The horned skull helms and ornamental halberds they bore were notched and showed evidence of great wear. The lizardmen did not see these as signs of decay or neglect, but rather of revered success. The guardians of the temples had a long and gloried history of victory.



COHORT OF THE BLACK CLUB

Since the days when the saurus were first created, the Cohort of the Black Club had existed. They bore the same black obsinite weapons of their predecessors – spiked stone clubs, often inlaid with bands of gold. At the head of the cohort could be found the same two-headed snake totem – a standard that had seen lizardmen victories upon every continent of the world.

Slann Mage-Priests
Seven unconscious Slann Mage-Priests led by Lord Huinitenuchli

Chakax
The Eternity Warden

Kroq-Gar
Last Defender of Xhotl

Tzlar, bearer of the Banner of Sacred Stone
Saurus Scar-Veteran, Battle Standard Bearer of Xlanhuapec

Tichi Yellowfeather
Skink Priest

Mist Runners
Seven spawnings of Skink Skirmishers

Greencrests
Two Skink Cohorts with Kroxigor

The Shrouded Cohort
Five Skink Cohorts each with four Kroxigor

Defenders of Xlanhuapec
Seven Skink Cohorts, two spawnings of Saurus Warriors and one spawning of Cold One Riders

Temple Guard of Xlanhuapec
Nine spawnings of Temple Guard

Riders of the Mists
Three wings of Terradon Riders

Xlanhuapec Heavy Builders
Eight clubs of Kroxigor, two Stegadons and one Bastiladon

Mist Hunters
Four hunting packs of Salamanders, two hunting packs of Razordons and one hunting pack of Troglodons

Cohort of the Black Club
Four spawnings of Saurus Warriors

THE PESTILENT BROTHERHOOD

Ceaseless faith and an arsenal of diseases had propelled Clan Pestilens to become one of the most powerful of all clans. Key to this strength and growth was their ability to recruit a motley horde of thrall clans to their monomaniacal cause. To those of the Pestilent Brotherhood, zeal and contagion had become their own reward.



LORD BLISTROX

A powerful plague priest, Lord Blistrox held the fifth of the seven plaguelord positions beneath Clan Pestilens' arch-leader, Nurglitch. That seat was the titular head of the Pestilent Brotherhood, the Spreader of the Word, the bringer of corruption. He was in charge of recruiting and directing those clans that fell beneath the bubonic-pull of Clan Pestilens. Blistrox's unorthodox methods were questioned by many of his peers, but the plaguelord had achieved much success by taking advantage of other clans' specialities.

REEKIT

A warlock engineer of Clan Skryre, Reekit carried about him a number of gadgets of his own design. His optics were able to see through any material or illusion, and also made Reekit a deadeye shot with his customized warplock pistol. The resourceful inventor also carried a power-packed polearm – a weapon augmented by both alchemic and arcane-electric technology.





THE INFECTORHOOD

Converting clans to fall under the thrall of Clan Pestilens was a dangerous task. Rival clans connived many traps and betrayals in an attempt to stop the spreading of the righteous word, and so a convoy of true believers was assigned to guard Lord Blistrox. Those in the Infectorhood were full-fledged plague monks, one of the many sub-sects dedicated to spreading the message of their filthy order. Whether in battle, in devotion to the Horned Rat, or in the subjugation of the weak, the Infectorhood set the standard of utmost zeal to the multitude that followed Clan Pestilens.

THE BLACKCLAWS

The Blackclaws were a top-trained unit of gutter runners, the shock troops of stealthy Clan Eshin. Led by Vroll the Claw, the Blackclaws coated their weapons and throwing stars with the vilest of warp-poisons. While they would not normally work for Clan Pestilens – who were notoriously unlikely to spend warptokens or make alliances – the cooperation now ordered by the Council of Thirteen could not be openly disobeyed. During their uneasy alliance, the Blackclaws secretly planted Clan Pestilens' diseased contrivances to help destroy such places as Tilea, far off Ind and now, Lustria.





THE RUSTBLADES

Most of Clan Septik had yet to arrive in Lustria, but the thrall clan known as the Rustblades was eager to ensure their clan-banner was prominently seen amongst the spearhead attack of the Pestilent Brotherhood. As such, Chieftain Grrzk Roteye and his elite plaguevermin force-marched to join the initial assault. Like all their clan, they were marked by their rusted gear of war, as their diseases sped the corrosion of the metals near them. Unlike the truly devout, however, Grrzk and many of his clan still coveted loot and plunder. This yearning meant the grizzled leader kept his one good eye open for gold, gems, or any scavenge-material that might fetch a price amongst those skaven clans not quite so pious.



PLAGUE RATS

These giant rats had been exposed too long to the loathsome and corrupting diseases worshipped by the Pestilent Brotherhood. These contagions, mixed with the warp-amplified growth-juices of Clan Moulder, created hump-backed, tumour-riddled mutant vermin. Each one of the vicious giant rats was a walking four-legged disease bomb, so riddled with contaminants that they were as dangerous dead as they were alive.

Lord Blistrox
Plague Priest

Reekit
Warlock Engineer

The Infectorhood
Five claws of Plague Monks

Kiletto Blurblade
Assassin

The Blackclaws
One team of Gutter Runners

The Rustblades
Five claws of Clanrats

Plague Rats
Three claws of Giant Rats

Szik Vilepot
Warlord and Exalted Imperator of Clan Gangrous

Clan Gangrous
Seven claws of Clanrats, three legions of Skavenslaves and one Warpfire Thrower team

Beast-Chieftain Grotchrot
Packmaster of Clan Morbidus

Clan Morbidus
Six claws of Clanrats, one claw of Stormvermin and one claw of Rat Ogres

Rikzik Seepage
Warlord and Grand Potentate of Clan Feesik

Clan Feesik
Six claws of clanrats and two legions of Skavenslaves

Drib Bentblade
Chieftain of Clan Griblobe

Clan Griblobe
Three claws of Clanrats and one legion of Skavenslaves

Deathwind
Three claws of Poisoned Wind Globadiers

The Hooded Ones
Two claws of disguised Night Runners

THE MISTS OF XLANHUAPEC

The target for the third prong of the skaven assault was Xlanhuapec – the City of Mists. To pass the eldritch fog that enshrouded that metropolis, Clan Pestilens had assigned two vast hordes to the task. Each was led by one of the seven plaguelords, and both commanders came at the city from a different direction, and with their own methods to defeat the mystical fog.

Lord Skrimanx was considered a harsh and demanding commander even by the skaven, who admired callous and overgrasping behaviour more than any other race. Skrimanx had an ability to wring the most out of his wretched slave legions, and to drive his warriors to spectacular results. All skaven leaders climbed to their position over the bodies of rivals and minions, but Lord Skrimanx had scaled entire mountains of dead to reach the coveted second position within Clan Pestilens, Archdeacon of Disease. Of all the plaguelords serving the Lord of Decay, Nurglitch, only Lord Skrolk was more powerful.

Countless legions of slaves formed the broad front of Lord Skrimanx's attack. Although the lowly pariahs greatly feared the swirling mists, for it was rumoured horrors lived within, they dreaded their overseers more. Whips thrashed them frequently, and for a slave to slow his pace for even an instant, perhaps spending too long scratching at fleabites or picking a scab, was to invite horrific punishment. With Skrimanx and his priests behind them, the slaves would go anywhere. Now – chained together and forced to carry illuminating braziers – the slave legions were pushed ahead into the dense fog banks that surrounded Xlanhuapec.

From the north came another type of army. Pestilens was amongst the most active and virulent of all skaven clans, and they were forever recruiting others to join them in their disease-worshipping ways. These clans were known as the Pestilent Brotherhood, and it was they that made up the majority of the second force that would be attacking Xlanhuapec. Their leader was the fanatical plaguelord in charge of bringing new initiates of infection into the fold. He was Lord Blistrox, the Spreader of the Word.



Unlike many of the more orthodox members of Clan Pestilens, Lord Blistrox was open to innovation. He believed strongly that all manner of weapons and types of warfare should be employed to defeat an enemy, not just those listed out in the dark scriptures of the Book of Woe. So long as the end was corruption, what matter the means? On this principle Blistrox had staked his reputation, and therefore his life. It was his plan to navigate the mist barrier of Xlanhuapec chiefly using the arcane sciences. Reekit – a warlock engineer from rival powerhouse Clan Skryre – had designed several optic devices that he was sure would allow a wearer to penetrate the mystic murk that hid Xlanhuapec. The warlock engineer himself wore the largest of these contraptions, but several others had been fashioned and spread throughout the verminous army. Lord Blistrox had not risen to become a plaguelord by trusting anything, and even if this stratagem failed, he had prepared a slew of secondary measures and backup plans.

The army of Lord Skrimanx was haste-marched in order to be the first to enter the fog, for he did not wish to share any of the glory with Lord Blistrox. The horde only paused long enough to light the banner-beacons carried by each of the slave legions and to attach chains that connected one legion's banner to the one behind it. The plague monks followed the long procession of slaves that disappeared into the fog.

Entering that wall of mists was like stepping into another world. The sun could not penetrate the thick swirls; sounds were muffled and the heat and humidity were trapped in the very air. It was not long before every skaven was damp, their fur dripping. The jungle growth was gone as the ground gave way to a bog-like consistency that slowed movement with every sloshing step. With their feet bound with chain, slaves that slipped were tramped and drowned by the hordes that followed. Those that lifted their feet or tails out of the sludge-like waters, instead of just sloshing through, revealed something else – a rich crop of bloated black leeches hung off anything that was submerged for even an instant. Perhaps sensing disease, the leeches did not attach themselves to the plague monks.

In the beginning, the fog seemed like nothing more than low cloud. It obscured the vision, so that even the keen-eyed skaven could see no more than a few steps ahead. The braziers carried a mix of tar, charcoal and chunks of warpstone, a fuel that gave off a glowing green tint that coloured the surrounding wisps. Even when the slave who carried it and the banner pole were long lost to the mists, the shimmering light bobbed mysteriously ahead, showing the way.

In those mists sounds were difficult to gauge. A splash could be some far off noise, or that of a nearby slave being pulled under the knee-deep sludge. There was no wind, but strange eddies swept up mist-shapes that loomed suddenly into sight before spinning off into murky obscurity. It was impossible to tell how long the horde had travelled in the fog, for

there was no telling if it was day or night. Skaven were disappearing into that wispy gloom, but whether they were deserters or had been swallowed up by mud, or worse, was impossible to say.

Struck by strange feelings of disorientation, Lord Skrimanx ordered a halt, passing the command up the line. To rein in the slaves ahead of them, the plague monks pulled upon the chains only to discover them suddenly slack. Upon reeling in the clanking links, they discovered the severed ends attached to nothing but hunks of bloody meat. Runners were sent out to find adjacent units, but none returned. Only silence answered the shouted calls. The bobbing lights were still there, appearing tantalizingly close, yet whether ahead, to the flanks or to the rear, no contact was made. It was as if the fog had swallowed the army whole.

The swirling mists had seeped into the brains of Lord Skrimanx's army. Although the slann mage-priests within Xlanhuapec suffered the same stunned malady as those of other cities, their shield of hallucinogenic mists remained as effective as ever. Will-o-the-wisps danced, luring the ratmen further and further apart. False shapes formed out of the mist, but real dangers lurked there too. Slitherdons rose up from the bog to pull hapless slaves down by their dozens. Allisaurs lurked in the mists with their cavernous mouths open, waiting for the unwitting to walk inside. Pale troglodons lay supine in the mud before springing forth to seize a handful of invaders with their powerful jaws. Most deadly of all, however, were the skinks.

With the blessings of their priests, and by rubbing their eyes with the juice of the pale blue lotus, skinks could see through the magic mists as if the cloud was not there. Although the murky waters below ranged from ankle deep to mid-thigh upon the skaven, there were small fissures that led down to a network of water-filled underground tunnels. Guided by their braves, entire skink cohorts swam into position before emerging in sneak attacks. Some rose up and threw poison-tipped javelins or shot swift volleys of toxin-dipped darts from blowguns before disappearing again. Others surfaced behind passing formations, crashing into their rear. Where skaven units were chained together, the industrious skinks took up the lead themselves, pulling their foes away from their allies. Worst still was when the skinks attached the chains to one of their trained saurian beasts, for the largest of them could drag scores of chained slaves through pools and marsh until all the chains bore were broken corpses.



The band of mists surrounded Xlanhuapec with a circumference many miles deep. Even slowed by the cloying swamp, the skaven would have reached the viaduct avenues that led into the city in a matter of hours. It was not a walled city, and there were no barriers save the fog. The skaven, however, did not travel in anything near a straight line. Instead, they were led by illusions in endless spiralling circles, long marches that left the ratmen scattered, bewildered and exhausted. One by one the sodden skaven formations were hunted, the mistfields becoming a place of great slaughter.

Lord Skrimanx's career had been long for two reasons – first, most of his ventures were successful. Whether leading armies, smashing rival clans, or seizing coveted assets, Lord Skrimanx had climbed up the hierarchy of Clan Pestilens by guile, iron determination, and by delivering what his masters asked of him. The second reason Lord Skrimanx had risen so high was that he knew a failing venture and when to cut his losses. He saw a lost cause now. His army was scattered well beyond his ability to locate them, and so his thoughts turned quickly to saving his own hide. The mists played havoc with the keen skaven sense of smell, so that their attempts to backtrack proved difficult. Skrimanx ordered his censer bearers to light up their weapons and they formed a whirling shield around his plague monk bodyguard. The warp-fumes released by the swinging censers counteracted some of the disorienting properties of the mists. They had to fight their way past a few patrols, and Lord Skrimanx had to fell a pale lizard-monster after it raged through the plague monks, but at long last they escaped the fog.

Battered, filthy and utterly beaten, Lord Skrimanx and his surviving monks staggered out of the mists and into the jungle. Lord Skrimanx offered a fervent prayer to the Great Horned Rat. He did not thank his god for deliverance, or request further aid in guiding him back to the tunnels below Quetza; that was not the skaven way. Instead, Skrimanx cursed his fellow Plaguelord Blistrox, zealously praying to the Horned One to aid in his failure. After all, it would not do for an underling lord to surpass Skrimanx's own deeds.



Lord Blistrox assembled his army beneath the towering fog bank and paced the frontlines. The plaguelord's tail swished impatiently as he waited for some sign of success from the cluster of engineers that stared into the mists. Fidgeting with various controls, Reekit cranked gears and cogs, raising and lowering different lenses over the apparatus he wore on one eye. The warlock engineer tried many combinations until a prolonged squealing announced his success.

Three layers of warpstone-filters atop a magnifier shield allowed Reekit to make the mists as transparent as a clear-flowing stream. The marshy bog, however, remained impermeable at that setting, appearing only as a stagnant brown sludge. Other warlock engineers fine-tuned their own optics, seeking the combination to penetrate its murk. Only when the optimal settings had been found and shared amongst those likewise outfitted was the signal to advance given.

The advance into the mists was done in stops and starts, as only the warlock engineers had vision within the dense fog. They raised their paws for frequent halts while they adjusted headsets or called out the bearings that allowed nearby units to make course corrections. Reekit and his fellow Clan Skryre engineers were also able to reveal that the fog-beasts were harmless phantasms, mere shadowplay designed to mislead them. They shouted commands to the others to pay them no heed. Most importantly, the engineers were able to see the real ambushers lurking ahead and call out warnings.

Skinks hoping to emerge behind enemy lines found their foes had about faced and were awaiting them. Enormous saurian beasts still crashed into the skaven, but by maintaining their formations, the vast numbers of ratmen eventually wore down the attacking monsters. Lord Blistrox soon revealed other countermeasures. When skinks closed in upon ratmen they were sure could not sense their presence, Reekit directed a nearby warpfire thrower team. Gouts of green and black-tongued flame ripped through the mists, melting skinks and kroxigor alike in agonising fashion. When clouds of blowgun darts came out of the mists, warlock engineers responded with sorcerous chains of black lightning that scorched the ambushers before they could retreat. At other times, the skaven halted while poisoned wind mortars sent high volleys arcing down onto half-submerged creatures lying ahead. By the time the clanrats advanced, the noxious fumes had dispersed, leaving behind reptilian behemoths still twitching in their death throes.

It was difficult work lining up the speculative fire and coordinating units that could not see more than a few paces past their snouts. The skaven had entered the fog shortly after dawn, but it was gloaming as they stepped out of the banks of coiling mist. It was exhilarating to be back in a world where sight, sound, and smell worked as they ought. Ahead, clear pathways led to the raised viaducts that in turn became the wide avenues of Xlanhuapec. The raised temple-pyramids stood tall and black against the last rays of the setting sun.

Although the skink ambushers of the northern marshfields had been overcome, they had sent off several patrols to give warning of imminent invasion. To the north, the skinks seeking aid had not yet reached their destination, but the city's defences had been alerted. A battle line of defenders stood ready to meet the invaders as the skaven emerged from the fog. What remained of the great army of Xlanhuapec was neatly arrayed in rectangular cohorts, blocking the main entrance routes. Never in all the Second City's long history had so few been mustered to protect it. Xlanhuapec too had sent cohort after cohort to help Kroq-Gar stem the daemonic tide at Xahutec. Few, therefore, remained to answer

the war gongs, yet all who could marched to their city's defence at the northern approaches into the city. Of all the cohorts, only the temple guard were not present: it was their duty to protect each temple-pyramid and stand guard over the comatose slann. The masters of Xlanhuapec had not foreseen that any foe could penetrate the protective mists. Now the Second City, and all the wonders it held, would pay the price of that mistake.

Being enclosed within the swirling fog and repeatedly ambushed had brought the skaven to a state of pent-up fury. Now, at last, they could see their foe clearly. Even better, they saw the paucity of the lizard-things, realising that they greatly outnumbered their enemy. With bells clanging, they scrambled towards their foes. They passed beneath boundary stones and archways that few outsiders had ever witnessed. At a hand signal from Lord Blistrox, more of his secret weapons were sent forth. What had seemed to be a formation of plague monks threw off their robes. Beneath their tattered guise were black-clad night runners and a small band of elite gutter runners – the Blackclaws. These warriors did not join the hordes pushing up the wide avenues, but instead slinked down narrow canalways or used ropes with grappling hooks to scale stone ziggurats. Soon all had disappeared within the growing shadows.

The main skaven line crashed home in a feverish charge. Despite their advantage in numbers, where the verminous hordes ploughed into the unyielding blocks of saurus warriors they were halted. What followed was a gruelling slog, as the battle line became a killing grind where bodies started to pile up. The back ranks of both sides scrambled to push forwards, or stepped up towards the front to replace fallen comrades. Compared to the ratmen, the saurus were larger, stronger and more heavily armoured, protected by both shields and their hardened scales. They were also fresh; they had not spent the day crossing a terrifying morass through which they could not see. Most of the skaven were clanrats – not fanatical plague monks – and were more prone to wavering at the sight of setbacks. The battle could have been over before it truly began, but Lord Blistrox had never intended to win Xlanhuapec through superior martial prowess.

While the clanrats pinned the saurus, other formations had moved into position. Now that they were in place, the tide of battle began to shift. The poisoned wind globadiers scurried forward and lobbed glass spheres full of poison gas into the saurus' ranks. A steady repeated *fumph* announced the presence of multiple poison wind mortars further back, lending their firepower to the effort. They lofted their shells further down the avenue, and blossoms of toxic gas exploded, engulfing many lizardmen in lung-bleeding clouds of corrosive fug. Then came the fearful whooshing noise of the warpfire thrower teams unleashing their liquid terror. The fighting masses were so tightly packed that skaven and saurus fell in equal numbers amid those infernos, a casualty rate Lord Blistrox would willingly pay to clear the route into the city.

As so many had been sent to Xahutec over the previous months, only a handful of saurus cohorts remained. The rest of the defence was comprised of skinks. Smaller and more agile, the skink cohorts were ideal for patrols, or swift hit and run missions. They proved less suited to holding their ground before the skaven onslaught.

As the skinks were driven back and routed, skaven were able to pour through growing holes in the lizardmen lines. With their flanking support gone, the end was inevitable. The outmatched saurus fought to the end, but as full darkness fell, the last bastions of the defence were ground down and destroyed.

The messenger scrambled up the stone steps that wound around the pillar-like monument. As he rounded the last stair and came to the flat pinnacle that looked over the long avenue, he halted and began bowing. Before him stood Lord Blistrox – it seemed the plaguelord had been pacing and speaking to himself. The messenger delivered his message; it was not his place to see his leader's madness.

'The last lizard-things have fallen, your Excellency,' reported the gaunt runner. 'My Lord Chieftain, Vroll the Claw, says the city is yours...'

With an impatient wave of his paw, Lord Blistrox dismissed the runner, watching his bowing retreat before returning his gaze to the shadows.

'Foolish-wrong,' said a whispering voice from the deepest recess of black. 'As I have told my lord, each of the triangle-mountains is heavily guarded by the best lizard-thing troops of all. Much fighting remains, yes-yes. Lord Skrimanx has turned tail – will not arrive.'

For a moment Lord Blistrox paused in his pacing as he absorbed this news. 'Good-good, so Skrimanx has failed,' he mused. 'Time is short before the slann-things awake,' said Blistrox. 'I will set the vats of blessed disease into the breeding wells, but I need the Blackclaws to seek out and slay each of the croak-things.'

Red eyes flared within the shadows. 'The treaty-pact was clawmarked for one kill, not all,' said the unseen shape.

'Yes-yes. Matters have changed now that Skrimanx has failed. I will pay triple. I will send troops for your support. But do it quick-quick – the city must be ours by dawn-light.'

After a squeak of agreement, the darkest shadow scampered down the wall and was gone.

The skaven overran the Second City of the lizardmen. The huge hordes broke apart, scattering in all directions, scurrying throughout every nook and cranny of Xlanhuapec. This was their true element – pulling apart civilisations to nest in their ruin. The skaven were, after all, the children of Chaos, the true inheritors of the world's detritus.

Where their way was blocked by locked vault or labyrinthine design, the ratmen showed uncommon skill at finding a way inside. They burrowed underneath, slipped through ancient cracks, or unleashed unnatural fires to melt through. They rifled through everything in their searches, prising precious gems out of stone tablets before hurling the slabs away. That each plaque was ancient beyond their race, or bore the secrets of the world inscribed onto its surface, was of no concern to them. The city's work-beasts – titanic herbivores trained by the skinks for menial tasks – were slaughtered and consumed. Xlanhuapec was filled with the deathly roars of cornered creatures. The incubatorum was smashed open and its contents dragged out beneath the moonlight. The eggs, some of which were larger than a grown skaven, were smashed upon the paving stones. Newly hatched creatures were ripped apart and consumed in a feeding frenzy.

In their search for glittering loot and fresh meat, the skaven scrambled over many of the true treasures. Xlanhuapec was full of relics from the days of the Old Ones, although the lizardmen had mostly forgotten their use, and now kept them as revered mementoes from a heritage they were proud of, but no longer understood. The Placid Pool – a reflective pond, which allowed world-spanning visions – became a repository for skaven droppings. The warlock engineers soon discovered the Device of the Great Beyond, a communication apparatus that spoke to beings from beyond the stars. As they swirled its many dials, a querulous voice spoke through the stone speakers. That voice, fair and clear, caused the skaven to bolt away. The device was something like the far-squeaker, but the melodious tones that issued forth were, if anything, akin to the despised speech of the elf-things. As they did not understand the alien language, nor how the arcane contraption worked, the warlock engineers pulled the device apart and shot it with warplock pistols until it stopped making any sounds.

There were still some locations where the skaven dared not intrude, however. Although the city had fallen, its largest and most impressive structures were still well defended. The entrance to each of the temple-pyramids had been sealed from the inside. These were breached by greed-driven skaven, who quickly regretted their actions – for the temple guard were vigorous in their duties. Bearing specially blessed skull helms, the hulking saurus had only one mission: to safeguard their chosen slann. Unmoving, implacable, the elite temple guard would not allow any to harm the mage-priests under their care.

Several raiding clawpacks of clanrats were savaged when they attempted to burrow their way into the Temple of the Blue Zephyr. A black-clad unit of night runners scaled the Temple of the Star Ascendant, thinking to enter through its stargazing balcony, but were savagely repulsed with severe losses. The most sustained attempt to enter any of the temple-pyramids occurred at the largest of them all – the gargantuan Temple of Eternal Serenity that dominated the central plaza of Xlanhuapec.

The lower entrances of the Temple of Eternal Serenity were besieged by clanrats. The stone gates were easily broken, but pushing through the narrow corridors against the sturdy opposition of the temple guard proved costly. The skaven were masters of tunnel warfare, however, and they called for warpfire throwers to clear the hallways. Again and again the warpfire throwers blazed, sending gouts of liquid fire to immolate their foes. However, skaven technology is temperamental, and given the high rate of fire, what happened next was inevitable. Misfires, leaking fuel, or the failure of some inner mechanism resulted in spectacular explosions as crew after crew burst into searing balls of green flame. While the echoes were still reverberating through the stone, the temple guard simply advanced over the mangled and burnt dead, claiming back the territory that the ratmen had paid so high a price to take. This attack, however, was a mere ruse to distract the temple guard from the real threat attempting to reach the topmost Star Chamber.

By scaling the walls and using an infernal explosive device, the Blackclaws had breached a hole in one of the enormous stone blocks high up in the wall of the Temple of Eternal Serenity. These were an elite group of gutter runners from the most mysterious skaven clan of them all – Clan Eshin. Contorting their bodies to slip through the cracked masonry, they were soon within the temple's upper levels. Not all the temple guard, however, were stationed in the lower levels, for several of their kind were already moving to investigate the explosion. These troops were felled by a hail of star-shaped discs the instant they turned the corner.

The Blackclaws moved with scurrying rapidity, passing quickly through the upper levels. Those that the gutter runners met along the way were slain by swift volleys of poisoned throwing stars. At last they stood before the stone-carved door that led to the Star Chamber – the apex of the Temple of Eternal Serenity. Obeying unspoken signals, they raced into position. Several of their kind opened the heavy door, allowing others to dart through. Executing a series of somersaults too swift for the eye to follow, they came

up in a crouching position. Such was their skill, that somewhere in that rolling tumble they ascertained their target and threw handfuls of razor-edged stars towards it. Suspended by ancient technologies, the great mage-priest Huinitenuchli hovered unconscious above a tranquil pool. The throwing stars would have ripped into the slann's soft belly, spilling his prodigious guts, but despite their perfectly aimed flight path, the gutter runners' deadly projectiles never found their mark.

Rising between the acrobatic skaven death squad and the third generation slann was Chakax, Prime Guardian of Xlanhuapec. With a single deft move, the hulking temple guard swung the weighted end of his Star-stone Mace. Sparks flew as the full spread of incoming missiles was sent pinging off that ancient weapon, which was made of a stone not quarried upon this planet. Before the ricocheting shots had landed, a half dozen gutter runners had already sprung upward, drawing paired blades as they rose.

Back and forth swept the Star-stone Mace, its wide arcs momentarily holding the gutter runners at bay. At first the crafty skaven warriors deemed the weapon so ponderous that they could slip under its path and stab their foe before any backswing could be attempted. After several of their kind were sent sprawling into crumpled heaps, the Clan Eshin elite realised that its wielder possessed uncommon strength and skill at arms. Despite its massive size, Chakax spun his mace in a figure of eight pattern with impressive speed. Another gutter runner avoided the bone-crushing mace, and made to leap over his opponent, but reckoned without the saurus' clamping jaws. That one's body fell twitching and headless to the ground.

Seeing an opening to slip beyond Chakax, another of the Blackclaws made his move. He sought to spin under the swinging mace and launch himself beyond the temple guard, to leap upon the blubbery body of the suspended mage-priest with both blades. With a single sweep of his stout tail, the Prime Guardian upended the would-be killer, leaving him in a painful sprawl. A backwards stomp with scale-hardened heel pulped the fallen gutter runner's head. As Chakax gored another with his horned helm, the final two skaven were mauled by a single emphatic downward mace-blow.

Yet during the one-sided battle, another shadowy figure had crept into the chamber, clambering along the roof like a black spider as he made his way towards Lord Huinitenuchli. This was no gutter runner, but a full-fledged assassin. A single drip of deadly venom oozed out of the tip of his sword, which was bound to his back. It made a slight sizzle on the stone floor below – enough noise to alert the wary Chakax.

It took a spiralling twist to avoid the upthrust Star-stone Mace, but the assassin did so while drawing forth two blades and landing gracefully in fighting position. Now it was the Clan Eshin killer's turn to attack. Yellow fangs bared, the assassin launched into a rapid blur of black and flashing silver. This was the delicate mantis-rake pattern, a lost art stolen from the mysterious Far East. Although Chakax had never seen such swordplay during his millennia of service, he blocked the flurry of one hundred and thirty-six separate sword slashes and stabs. However, as only the assassin knew, the mantis-rake pattern is all an elaborate decoy for the final strike. The assassin plunged his venom-dripping blade into Chakax, dropping his other sword so that he could use both hands to drive his strike home. Past scarred scales, through muscle and flesh, the assassin stabbed his blade all the way to the hilt.

Few have seen a skaven Weeping Blade and lived to tell the tale. Fewer still have been stabbed by one and survived for more than a few shallow breaths. Yet this was Chakax, the Eternity Warden of Xlanhuapec, who over thousands of years had never failed in his sacred duty. He would not do so now...

The assassin stood expectantly, waiting for Chakax to fall backwards, stone dead. He was therefore more than surprised when the thickly muscled temple guardian seized him with one gnarled hand, heaving him into the air. When the ratman was at the apex of his upwards movement, Chakax swung a mighty one handed blow with the Star-stone Mace that propelled the black-clad killer across the chamber. There was a satisfying splat as the broken corpse smashed into the wall and slid wetly into a shapeless mass on the floor.

Closing the stone door to the Star Chamber, Chakax once more took up his silent vigil.



Xlanhuapec had fallen, but Lord Blistrox was not feeling triumphant just yet. His mission was to slay the slann-things before they could awaken. Lord Skrolk had been quite insistent – even if Blistrox could not take the city, so long as the slann-things were slain, his part of the invasion would be a success. Blistrox's army had accomplished much – crossing the mystical fog, overwhelming Xlanhuapec's defenders, contaminating the foe's breeding pools and looting the city – yet the slann mage-priests lived still. At least their bodyguards did – for no skaven had yet survived entering one of the seven temple-pyramids that were still defended. Blistrox cringed to think of Skrolk's reaction. All attempts to storm the pyramid-temples had resulted in casualties and costly failure. And another problem was arising... Lord Blistrox was losing control of his army.



The majority of Lord Blistrox's host was composed of clanrats from the Pestilent Brotherhood. Lacking the zealous fanaticism of the plague monks, many of the other clans were lost to looting. Feuds over plunder had begun. Despite the city being overrun with ratmen, each day it was growing progressively more difficult to collect together sufficient clawpacks to attack the temple-pyramids. After several days of repeated failure, Lord Blistrox took matters into his own claws. He personally led the next attack. Backed by the powerful spells of their plaguelord, and eager to show their superiority, the plague monks hacked through the temple guard until they reached the uppermost pinnacle of the pyramid-temple.

By chance, Lord Blistrox had chosen to attack the Temple of Infinite Coils. Truthfully, he had selected it because it was one of the smaller temple-pyramids – he did not know that this was where the slann mage-priests conjured the mystic barrier that surrounded Xlanhuapec. As Lord Blistrox and his plague monks stepped over the last of the temple guard and opened the stone door to the star chamber, they gasped at what they saw. A dozen feet above the stone floor, lolling upon a glowing nimbus cloud, was the unconscious form of a slann mage-priest. This was Lord Hua-Hua, mighty visionary of the Third Spawning. From his gaping mouth issued forth great tendrils of a thick smoke-like substance. It circled the recumbent slann, winding its way around glowing columns of crystal before disappearing down specially made chutes that channelled it. Clearly, it was from this temple that the mysterious fog issued to encircle the city.

As Lord Blistrox entered the room, the slann started, his rolled-back eyes blinking a few times. Lord Hua-Hua was slowly awakening, and he sensed the disturbing presence of Chaos in his star chamber. Cruelly, the slann mage-priest was just regaining his senses when he was ripped from his telekinetic perch to be torn open and stabbed hundreds of times with filth-encrusted swords. With his death, the mystic protections that surrounded ancient Xlanhuapec began to lift for the final time.

While the monks scoured the Star Chamber, Lord Blistrox found the stone pathways that led outside to the ziggurat's peak. Throughout the ages of the world, a slann mage-priest had levitated here upon his palanquin. The city's streets lay far below, and here the invisible lines of the geomantic grid waxed strongest. It was possible for the mage-priests to reach out and touch the minds of others of their enigmatic kind, telepathically communicating across the city, continent, or world. All the plaguelord could do, however, was scan the fog lifting along the horizon. What he saw coming from the north made him simultaneously squirt out the musk of fear and involuntarily make his droppings.

The unmistakable shapes of marching cohorts along with massive beasts gave no doubt that a lizardmen army was making for the city. Lord Blistrox estimated they were less than an hour's march away.

Skink messengers from the northern marshfields had fled north to Xahutec. There, amidst the ongoing war with the daemons, they sought out Kroq-Gar and told him of the skaven invasion. Other messengers from other lizardmen cities began to arrive

shortly after. It took but a few short hours to split the cohorts, before the greatest military commander of Lustria could set out.

Such were the secret wonders of Xlanhuapec that it was considered a death sentence for any outsider to glimpse the City of Mists. Over the millennia, only a few raiding parties had ever managed to navigate the fogs: a dark elf invasion had travelled up a tributary of the subterranean Black Way; a warband of men from far-off Norsca had simply gotten lucky in their stumbling through the fogs. Those intruders had been tracked down and slain, and any stolen treasures returned. What Lord Blistrox's invading skaven army had done to the city had never been achieved before. Unnatural diseases had been poured into the spawning pools. Ancient wonders had been destroyed. Now Xlanhuapec was damaged beyond the lizardmen's ability to repair it, the spawning pools contaminated past their ability to re-sanctify them.

But the city's loss could still be avenged.

Kroq-Gar's army was not a huge one. He had left many to contain the daemonic assault that still poured forth at Xahutec, and he had sent other cohorts to the aid of Tlaxtlan. If the skaven scattered across Xlanhuapec could be organised, the ratmen would have far superior numbers and at least a fighting chance of defending what they had taken. As Kroq-Gar's cohorts were closing fast, Lord Blistrox had to make a decision.

Without hesitation, the Spreader of the Word and head of the Pestilent Brotherhood assembled his personal plague monk guard and fled the city. With the different clans intent upon their own scavenging, none marked Lord Blistrox's departure. Certainly he gave no warning to the others. It was the skaven way.

Kroq-Gar and his cohorts swept into Xlanhuapec like a merciless typhoon. The hastily assembled skaven lines were swiftly broken. The saurus cohorts, battle-scarred veterans from the long daemon war at Xahutec, knifed through the verminous hordes, slaying at will. Down the wide avenues and central plazas stormed saurus atop cold ones, running down their opposition. Cornered and desperate, some of the boldest skaven chieftains attempted to mass their superior numbers and make a stand. Kroq-Gar waded into these knots of bitter fighting, the roars of his carnosaur mount rising above the tumult. Stomping a gore-splashed path through the skaven masses, the cold-blooded colossus lunged out its muscular neck to bite through ranks at a time. Violently shaking its head, the carnosaur hurled dismembered skaven body parts and viscera high into the air. The reptilian beast ploughed forward, bellowing in its blood-frenzy.

No skaven stood for long before that relentless fury. By battle's end, the heads of ten skaven chieftains hung from Kroq-Gar's stone saddle.

All the joy at being underground once again emptied out of Lord Blistrox as he dropped to the chamber floor before Lord Skrolk. He had always known that he must report to the right claw of Nurglitch, but he had hoped to put that day off for as long as possible. Without time to plan, the head of the Pestilent Brotherhood had not yet made ready any excuses.

'Greetings, Lord Skrolk, bearer of the sacred book. I had not looked-sought to find you here,' said Lord Blistrox between supplications.

'No,' said the rasping voice of the gnarled old plague monk. 'Nor I you, Lord Blistrox. You are far from the mist-city.'

Lord Blistrox trembled beneath that sightless gaze. He felt as if the haggard but diabolically vital plaguelord could smell the fear upon him, or hear his overly rapid heartbeats. Even as the panicking Blistrox struggled for words, Skrolk spoke again.

'Tell me, Oh Spreader of the Word, leader of our thrall-clans, tell me how well it worked trusting others than Clan Pestilens? Where is the Pestilent Brotherhood now?' asked the gargled voice.

Whether Skrolk had guessed at the defeat or already knew what had happened, Blistrox could not tell. He bowed his cowled head, sensing Lord Skrolk's scabbed hands gripping his gnarled staff-flail more tightly. Blistrox had seen it in action too many times to count, and knew that one touch of that loathsome spiderwood staff, or the heavily spiked censer ball it bore, meant a torturous end.

'I... I have failed-failed, Oh Most Corrupted One.' Blistrox spoke the truth. He did not blame any others, or offer any excuses. He knew a deathblow would come soon, he was already involuntarily cringing. When, after hundreds of heartbeats, that blow did not come, Blistrox dared to look upwards.

Skrolk, his head tilted and his snout thrust out from his deep hood, sniffed the air contemplatively. 'So have we all, Lord Blistrox. But the war is not over yet.'

As Skrolk turned to walk away, he pulled something out from within his tattered robes and tossed it. Blistrox caught what was unmistakably the severed head of his rival, Lord Skrimanx. The Archdeacon of Disease and second of the plaguelords had obviously died an agonising death.

'Come-come,' said Lord Skrolk, as he shuffled down the crudely gnawed corridor. 'We have much think-planning to do.'









The assault upon Lustria was meant to be a major campaign in the Council of Thirteen's master assault plan, which spanned the globe. The Council had intended for all the clans to work together, but Clan Pestilens had, naturally, seen the golden opportunity. This was their chance to ascend, to prove their superiority, to rise to their rightful place over the other clans of the underworld. Instead, Clan Pestilens had been defeated, its armies broken.



The tunnels deep below Lustria still heaved with skaven. Some of these were the lucky ones that had escaped the hunting terrors of the jungle, returning after many narrow escapes to the damp and reassuringly dark subterranean world. Most of the ratmen, though, were reinforcements, arriving from mustering points around the globe. It had been planned that these armies would arrive from the Underway in time to launch the subsequent stages of the invasion. After many long marches, they barged their way into the vast network of tunnels only to meet the scattered remnants of the failed first ventures.

Being skaven, recriminations flew. Panic had spread until all order broke down. The situation began to turn into another civil war. The strong blamed the weak and the weak sought escape. Inter-clan rivalries set the myriad factions at each other's throats. This was, in microcosm, the history of the verminous race: a series of defeats or setbacks began an even longer course of finger-pointing, backstabbing, and self-destruction. So it had always been. Near-triumphs, like the Red Pox in Bretonnia, or the Black Plague that beset the Empire, eventually ended in bitterest defeat.

This time, however, everything would be different.

With an energy that belied his age, Lord Skrolk was everywhere. The cloaked figure need only enter a cavern and hostilities ceased. A spoken word from his cracked lips quelled debate and set countless hands to work. The plaguelord and right claw of Nurglitch refused to retreat further. He was not content to gnaw the bitter ends of failed plots. He cared not for recriminations or excuses. It was the Clan Pestilens way to emerge stronger after a trial – the disease that did not kill them only made their necrotic skin tougher.

Into the darkness of despair he had spoken a name, summoning an otherworldly power to his aid. Vermalanx the Corrupt – a Verminlord, a living avatar of the Great Horned Rat. Together, they had stopped the collapse. Together they seized control.

Wherever Skrolk walked, behind him loomed a shadow. Every faction he spoke to, every clan he commanded, saw the gleaming eye that peered from the towering darkness. The battle for Lustria was not over. Huge armies amassed for another drive. This time the skaven would not stop until all was pestilent ruin.

To be successful, to cover the world in contagion, to reach the gloried heights of pandemic, every disease must mutate. To overcome resistance, a disease must transform itself, not once, but over and over again, adapting to become stronger. Deep in his rot-laden heart, Lord Skrolk knew that, this time, Clan Pestilens was going to be triumphant.

Lord Skrolk commanded his brethren to extinguish the warp-braziers and to leave the chamber.

Alone in the dank cavern, Skrolk felt the blackness wash over him.

'The armies are set,' said Skrolk. 'Shall we plot-scheme the next stages of our plan? How shall we report back to the Council?'

Something stirred in the shadows. A voice that sounded at once like a whisper and like a million scratching rats spoke.

'My plan... yes-yes. Leave the Council for me...'

One by one, the remaining slann returned to consciousness. All across Lustria they awoke. Before they listened to the chattering and throat-clicking of their skink priests or heard the reports of their city's highest ranking attendants, each mage-priest stretched out his mind. Despite the distance, the contaminants in the air, and the strangeness of the winds of magic, the slann reached out and made mental contact with one another. They were tiny specks of light and order amidst the growing chaos of the world, yet they found each other.

During their cerebral journeys, each slann noticed the new gaping holes in the geomantic grid, feeling keenly that reservoir's emptiness. The city of Tlaxtlan – with all its sacred markers and star-pylons – was gone. It had been crushed to ruin by Tehenhauin's comet. Each felt also the broken links in the chain – the empty spaces in the network where they should have found the reassuring presence of other slann minds. Those connections were now silent, for many of their kind had been slain or infected by the skaven, never to rise again. It was a grim dawn that rose over Lustria.

The probing slann minds were subtle and learned, able to pick out meanings from the winds of magic that no other race of beings could deduce. The mage-priests quickly ascertained the presence of a cold new power – a feeling they had experienced before – for they recognised from afar the return of Nagash. They sensed the splitting of the eight winds, the burying of death magic under Sylvania. They felt the tremors that emanated from the Great Vortex. Everything was tainted by the cloying presence of Chaos energies. The world was overshadowed also by the unseen, the undeniable pull coming from the Chaos moon. It was closer than ever.

In their mind-walking, the slann hovered over Xahutec. The rift in reality in the City of Echoes was strangely becalmed. For the first time in years, no daemons issued forth from that tear in the world's fabric. It was dangerous for the spirit-consciousnesses of the slann to contemplate that forsaken place too long. What lived on the other side of the veil could discern them; the cold logic of the slann's presence shone like a beacon to those in that realm of insatiable desires and swirling emotion. In the past, the dark powers had sought to entangle the slann, to lock their agile minds into labyrinthine traps that befuddled their thoughts. Now however, there was no sign of this old threat, but a niggling echo troubled the Slann still.

From the limit of perception came a far-off rumbling, like thunder over the horizon. It was an unnatural sound, like the mocking laughter of dark gods.





CHAPTER 2

Blood Beneath the Mountains

Autumn 2523 – Winter 2523





Snow was pelting from a leaden sky. From the ramparts of the stone citadel, King Belegar Ironhammer gazed out into the whiteness. He was in the ring of Karak Eight Peaks. Though none were visible at the moment due to the swirling storm, he knew that out there rose mighty mountains that enclosed him in a great circle. It was as if the entire world had been swallowed by the endless snowstorm. Perhaps, thought Belegar grimly, that would be a preferable ending.

A direct descendant of the last ruler of Karak Eight Peaks, Belegar stood near the centre of what was ostensibly his realm. In truth, the dwarfs held less of the territory than their hated foes. The ancient Karak – a word that described a dwarf city, mineworks and stronghold – had fallen to the skaven thousands of years ago. Since that time, the underhalls had changed hands hundreds upon hundreds of times. Primarily, it had been skaven and night goblins that feuded over the spoils, but at various stages the once-glorious dwarf hold had been ruled by an orc warboss, become the domain of an ogre tyrant, and been overrun by trolls. Over the millennia, dwarf expeditions – whether by secrecy or open war – had attempted to reclaim the halls of their ancestors. There had been a few brief victories, but most of these efforts ended in further misery and humiliation. Before Belegar, none of the dwarf occupation attempts had survived for more than a few years.

It had been over fifty years since King Belegar had carved his way into Karak Eight Peaks. He had led a formidable throng to war, comprised of the descendants of the former clans from that lost hold, generously backed with further troops and equipment by the High King, Thorgrim Grudgebearer. They had fought many battles, driving into the old kingdom like a steel spike into a rockface. Even so, after much loss, the dwarfs had only the barest of toeholds in that ancient realm.

Unlike previous failed ventures, the dwarfs did not overreach themselves by attempting to seize the King's Hall, the burial vaults, the armouries, or the sealed treasure chambers. Instead, they captured the old citadel, the central keep that once dominated the surface city sprawled within the ring of mountains. The city was in ruin, for it had been ransacked and fought over for thousands of years. There, the dwarfs made their stronghold – quickly fortifying the foundations, which lay buried in squalor. They strengthened its defences in the superior fashion of their race, so that the counter-attacks that followed broke upon their walls the way wind is sheared by a mountainside.

Since that time, Belegar and the dwarfs of Karak Eight Peaks had made the citadel their fortress-home. They lived under a constant state of siege. At times, the dwarfs sallied out to expand their holdings, clearing the ruined surface city, re-capturing ancient underhalls and exploring levels sealed by their secretive ancestors. King Belegar reported each of these successes back to the High King in Karaz-a-Karak where the news was met with fierce joy. It was the dwarfs' ambition to renew their golden age. This was a sign that they could take back what was rightfully theirs, that the time of waning was over. Yet these hard-won victories ultimately proved to be only temporary gains, a cruel reality in a harsh new realm.

With each added territory, the dwarfs of Karak Eight Peaks spread their defenders out. To a dwarf they were battle-hardened warriors, outfitted with the finest rune-covered arms and armour from the most skilled race to ever forge steel. Yet they were too few in number, and there were too many places to guard. In the end, it was like finding gold dust in a mountain stream, only to watch it run through their hands as they tried to collect it. Time and again the dwarfs held the gloried halls of their ancestors in their grasp, but found lasting victory slipped through their hands. Infiltrated or overwhelmed, it was all the dwarfs could do to fight their way back to the citadel, to hunker down again in their one secure location. Only by a steady influx of reinforcements marching down from Karak Kadrin and Karaz-a-Karak could they continue to endure the non-stop, battering assaults. It was said in the halls of the other dwarf ings that Belegar and his armies still mined at Karak Eight Peaks. It was not gromril, gold or gemstones with which they filled their vaults, though – it was grudges.

Before Belegar had forced his way in, Karak Eight Peaks had been in a state of war between the night goblins and the skaven. The greenskins controlled the mountains and the innumerable delvings within them. Although many tribes rose and fell, it was the Crooked Moons who had eventually risen to the top. They were led by the most devious of their wicked kind, a figure that was to become only too well known to the dwarfs of the Worlds Edge Mountains: Skarsnik. The self-proclaimed Warlord of the Eight Peaks, Skarsnik was a master of subtle ambushes and sneaky ploys. His cleverness ran as deep as his penchant for tormenting his victims. With spies everywhere, the treacherous night goblin's ambitions grew larger than just ruling the old dwarfhold. With war running rampant across the lands, and greenskins everywhere feeling the rich flow of Waaagh! magic in the air, Skarsnik was canny enough to know his time for greatness was now.

Just as the greenskins dominated the mountain and the upper halls, the lower depths were the territory of the skaven. This was the largest realm, for most of Karak Eight Peaks lay below the mountains' roots. In the years since the dwarfs were ousted, these deeps had only grown larger as the ratmen continued to open up new caverns or discover rich new veins to follow. Deeper and deeper

they gnawed below the surface. So extensive were the mineworks, undertunnels and connecting passageways, and so frequently did they change, that it was simply impossible to map it all. In this subterranean maze, the skaven were truly at home. Through treachery and the expenditure of warriors beyond count, the ratmen of Clan Mors came to rule the City of Pillars – their name for Karak Eight Peaks.

Clan Mors was arguably the most powerful of the numerous Warlord Clans, and their ultimate ruler was Grand Lord Gnawdwell. He served on the Council of Thirteen and his right claw was Queek Headtaker. Queek was feared by the goblins, respected by the orcs and loathed by the dwarfs. The skaven warlord had risen to greatness fighting in Karak Eight Peaks. Indeed, in the past Lord Gnawdwell purposefully viewed the old dwarfhold as a sort of proving ground. He drip-fed reinforcements in to maintain equilibrium – a grind of battle where only the strongest might live. It was no different than the constant gnawing that kept skaven teeth strong and razor-sharp. Any that could rise to the top in that den of death would be worthy of commanding the armies of Clan Mors in battle. A wolf amongst jackals, it was Queek who long ago sliced, slew and stabbed his way to supremacy. Since taking the reins as the highest-ranking battlefield commander of the clan, Queek had wreaked havoc up and down the Worlds Edge Mountains. At the bidding of his master, he had smashed rival clans, destroyed goblin tribes and ransacked dwarf holds. Now Queek Headtaker had returned to Karak Eight Peaks. It had served its purpose, and would be a training ground no more. Queek's orders were, at last, to clear it of enemies once and for all.

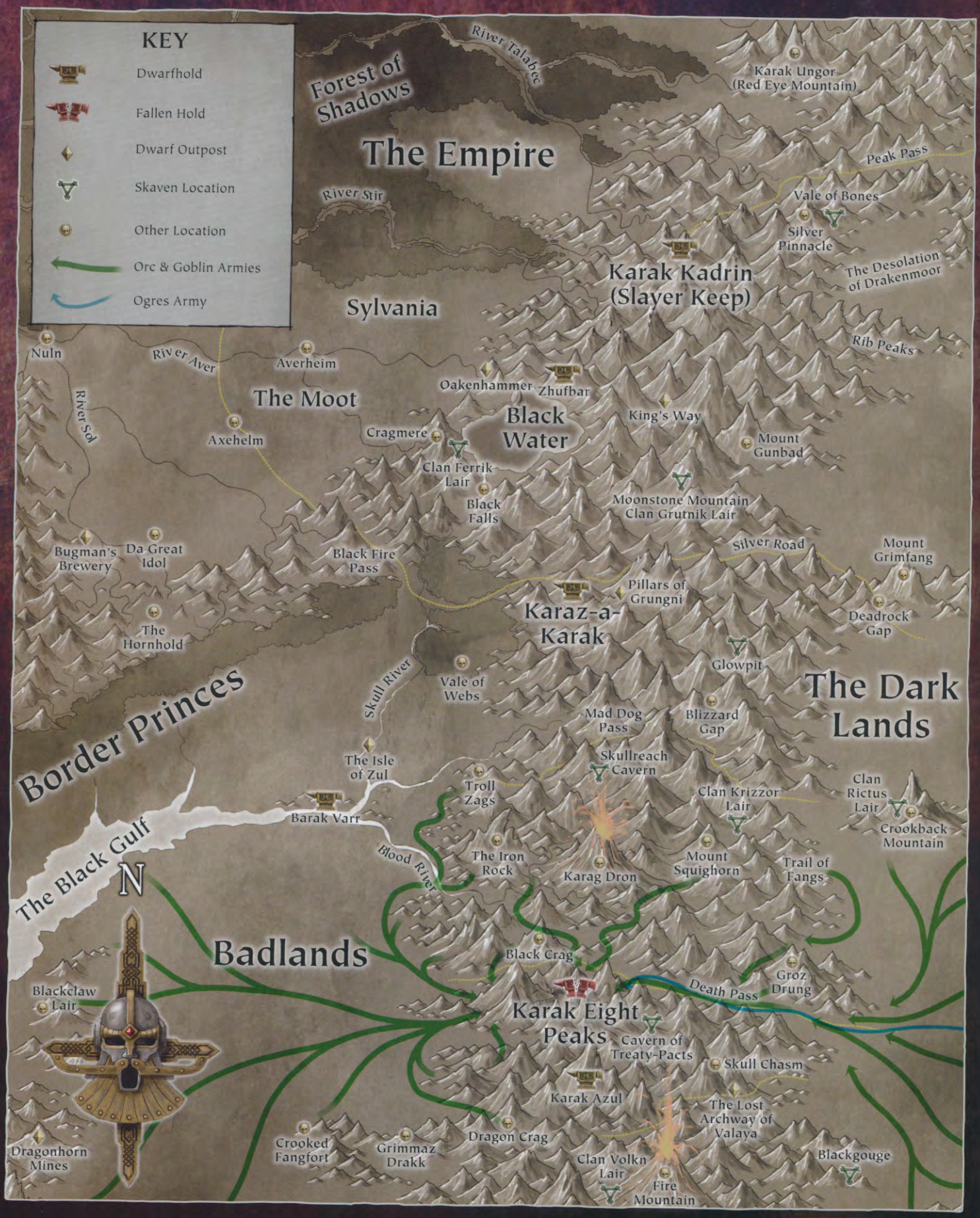
As King Belegar watched the storm rage, he knew great forces were moving against him. He knew this because he had lived and fought here every day, and a strange lull had fallen over Karak Eight Peaks. That was not to say it was peaceful, for it was not. Dwarf outposts were still assailed and gyrocopter messengers still had to run a gauntlet of firepower to reach the citadel. However, there had been few large-scale assaults of late; it had been months since his defences were properly tested. Belegar had learned not to trust these settled periods, for they always meant the same thing: one or both of his foes were planning something.

On Belegar's commands the ranger mountainside patrols swept further afield, daring to travel amongst the high peaks as well as the lower depths of the karak. As was to be expected, not all came back.

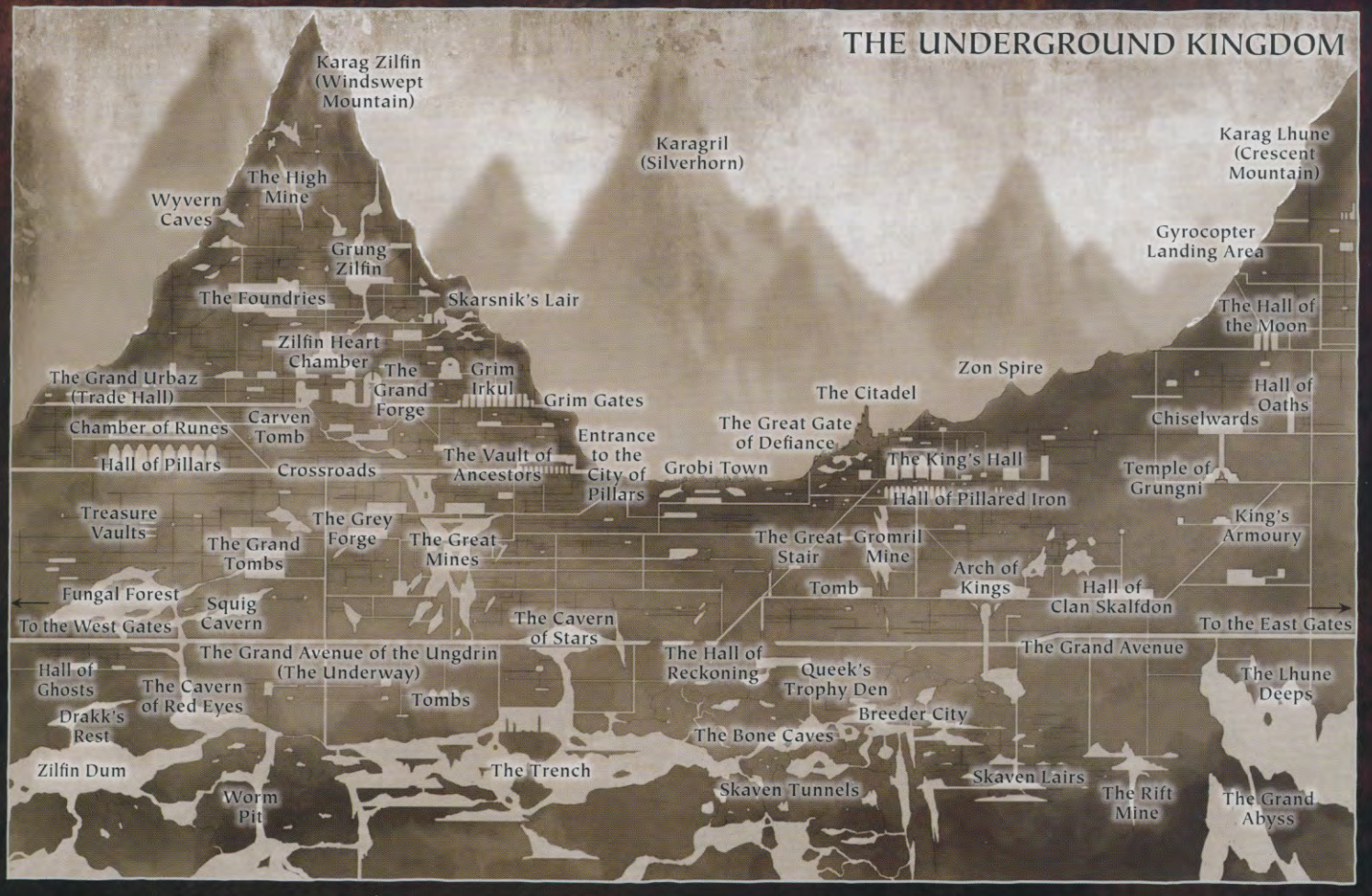
The reports of those that did return seemed to confirm the very worst of the dwarf king's suspicions. An influx of greenskin tribes had been marked advancing out of the Badlands, entering into Karag Ziflin. Many wolf riders from the Dark Lands were seen forming caravans along Death Pass, along with an unusually high number of roving ogre armies. The news from underground proved harder to collect and, if anything, was even worse. Quake-reading seismic machines and deep tunnel listening devices detected vibrations consistent with massive troop movement and major excavation projects. The ratmen were amassing armies, moving up heavy equipment and burrowing new tunnels.

Upon hearing the rangers' words, Belegar had been quick to act.




KEY
Dwarfhold
Fallen Hold
Dwarf Outpost
Skaven Location
Other Location
Orc & Goblin Armies
Ogres Army
Forest of Shadows
River Talabec
The Empire
Karak Ungor (Red Eye Mountain)
Peak Pass
River Stir
Vale of Bones
Silver Pinnacle
Karak Kadrin (Slayer Keep)
The Desolation of Drakenmoor
Sylvania
Rib Peaks
Nuln
River Aver
Averheim
The Moot
Oakenhammer
Zhufbar
Black Water
King's Way
River Sol
Axehelm
Cragmere
Mount Gunbad
Clan Ferrik Lair
Black Falls
Moonstone Mountain Clan Grutnik Lair
Bugman's Brewery
Da Great Idol
Black Fire Pass
Silver Road
Mount Grimfang
Pillars of Grungni
Karaz-a-Karak
Deadrock Gap
The Hornhold
Glowpit
Skull River
Vale of Webs
The Dark Lands
Border Princes
Mad Dog Pass
Blizzard Gap
Skullreach Cavern
The Isle of Zul
Troll Zags
Clan Krizzor Lair
Clan Rictus Lair
Barak Varr
Crookback Mountain
The Black Gulf
Blood River
The Iron Rock
Karag Dron
Mount Squighorn
Trail of Fangs
N
Badlands
Black Crag
Groz Drung
Death Pass
Blackclaw Lair
Karak Eight Peaks
Cavern of Treaty-Pacts
Skull Chasm
Karak Azul
The Lost Archway of Valaya
Dragonhorn Mines
Crooked Fangfort
Grimmaz Drakk
Dragon Crag
Clan Volkn Lair
Fire Mountain
Blackgouge


KARAK EIGHT PEAKS
Karag Drakkloc (Dragon Peak)
Karak Drazh (Orc Fort of Black Crag)
Ironfont Mines
Karagril (Silverhorn)
Flamestone Mine
Karag Grim (Stubborn Peak)
Karag Lhune (Crescent Mountain)
Red Axe Mines
Death's Crossing
The Silver Tower
Spidernotch Caves
Death Pass
The Barrows
Uzkul Mines
Karag Zilfin (Windswept Mountain)
Death Pass
Silver Tarn
The Burnt Cliffs
The King's Gates
Wyvern Caves
Broken Tooth Encampment
Und-Uzgar
Karag Nar (Sunrise Mountain)
Zon Spire
Skarsnik's Lair
Karag Yar (Sunset Mountain)
The Endless Pit
Kvinn-Wyr (White Lady)
Grim Gates
West Gate
The Citadel
Grobi Town
Entrance to the City of Pillars
Karag Mhonar (Shadow Mountain)
Karag Rhyn (Mount Redstone)
The Sentinels
East Horn
East Gate
KEY
Doom Diver Peak
Gyrocopter Landing Pad
Morzund's Wall
Diamondhelm Mines (abandoned)
Ghuzhur Mines


THE UNDERGROUND KINGDOM
Karag Zilfin (Windswept Mountain)
Karagril (Silverhorn)
Karag Lhune (Crescent Mountain)
The High Mine
Wyvern Caves
Gyrocopter Landing Area
Grung Zilfin
The Foundries
Skarsnik's Lair
The Hall of the Moon
Zilfin Heart Chamber
Zon Spire
The Grand Urbaz (Trade Hall)
The Grand Forge
Grim Irkul
Grim Gates
The Citadel
Hall of Oaths
Carven Tomb
Chamber of Runes
The Great Gate of Defiance
Chiselwards
Entrance to the City of Pillars
Hall of Pillars
Crossroads
The Vault of Ancestors
Grobi Town
The King's Hall
Temple of Grungni
Hall of Pillared Iron
Treasure Vaults
The Grey Forge
King's Armoury
The Grand Tombs
The Great Mines
The Great Stair
Gromril Mine
Arch of Kings
Tomb
Hall of Clan Skalfdon
Fungal Forest
To the West Gates
Squig Cavern
The Cavern of Stars
To the East Gates
The Grand Avenue of the Ungdrin (The Underway)
The Hall of Reckoning
The Grand Avenue
Hall of Ghosts
The Cavern of Red Eyes
Queek's Trophy Den
The Lhune Deeps
Tombs
Drakk's Rest
Breeder City
The Bone Caves
Zilfin Dum
The Trench
Skaven Lairs
Worm Pit
Skaven Tunnels
The Rift Mine
The Grand Abyss

The situation at Karak Eight Peaks changed every day, sometimes every hour. This was not surprising, for where else in the world did armies stand guard so close to those of their hated rivals? Oceans, mountains, or rivers did not separate them as they did other feuding nations. Instead, vast hordes of skaven were divided from the dwarf throngs by a few levels of stairs and a few blocked tunnels. Mobs of night goblins herded squigs and scavenged amongst the fungal forests in caverns adjacent to halls guarded by gromril-armoured ironbreakers. The boundaries between the combatants were never fixed for long, as rival forces probed borders and found or made new access passageways.

Every inch of Karak Eight Peaks – from the grand halls to long abandoned well shafts – had been fought over. Any part – from mountain top lookouts to the darkest underdepths – could become a battleground. Ambushes and traps were commonplace, and attacks ranged from lone killers stalking messengers or spies, to skirmishes between hunting patrols, or the clash of vast armies. Some battles took place in narrow passages, where there was not room to swing a weapon. Others were fought in miles-wide halls, where thousands of warriors could stand abreast and the arched ceiling stretched up out of sight.

Any conflict risked escalation. A clash of pickets could intensify as reinforcements flooded to the fighting. A simple attempt to capture a cavern could grow into a month-long slaughter that spread across an entire underground front. With three warring parties, it was entirely commonplace for a battle between two sides to suddenly have a third force attempt to claim the spoils. Indeed, all sides sought to bait their enemies into attacking each other, it being easier to crush a foe after they had been bled into a weakened state.

Other things also lurked in the ruins. Drawn by bloodshed, all manner of creatures stalked the abandoned underhalls. Newly wakened wyverns, blindwyrms or manticores slaughtered dwarfs, night goblins and skaven alike to sate their hunger.

It was into this environment that Queek Headtaker returned. He had been back to his old hunting grounds many times, but this would be the last visit. It would not be long before he could mount the heads of Belegar and the despised Skarsnik onto his infamous trophy rack.



Queek was at the tail end of the fifth and final day of inspecting the troops amassed for the coming attack. It had taken him that long to travel between the assembly caverns. The first of the great clawpacks was entirely composed of warriors from Clan Mors, supported by beast packs they had purchased from Clan Moulder. Thaxx Redclaw was the clawpack's warlord. It was he who had ruled the City of Pillars while the Headtaker was called to duty elsewhere, and his knowledge of the tunnels was matched only by his savagery. The next two clawpacks were each about half composed of Clan Mors warriors, with the rest made up from smaller clans that had been subjugated by them. Their numbers were so many that no hall or cavern was great enough to hold more than a small portion of their size – each force stretched across at least three deeps for their encampment. Two of Queek's former lieutenants from his Red Guard served as warlords.

It was a long journey through cave-in prone tunnels to reach the site of the fourth clawpack. They were deep under the peak the dwarfs knew as Karag Rhyn, where lava streams of old had shaped enormous caverns. These were the Bone Caves, vast chambers that for ages had served as the dens of monsters. A litter of bones formed a thick crunching carpet where the hordes of many clans awaited orders to begin the invasion. These were the dregs – slaves, carrion-eaters and scavenge-clans – and warrior clans rightfully looked down upon such ill-equipped wretches. Still, as he had learned from long experience, Queek knew that their numbers would fill a necessary role. Whether the foe bore flame-throwing cannons or mushroom-drugged fanatics, it did not matter, Queek thought. The numbers he would unleash would simply bury them.

Since his rise to supreme warchieftain of Clan Mors, Queek had led hundreds of armies into thousands of different battles. Even before witnessing the last army group, what he had seen so far was the largest assembly of skaven Queek had ever beheld. His was the power to command it, and that thought swelled Queek's chest as he made the journey downwards. His last stop was at a place called the Trench. It was a miles-wide cleft very near the bottommost limit to which even the skaven would venture. There were deeper tunnels bored into the bedrock of the world, but those who dared venture there rarely returned.

Stepping out of the cramped tunnels, Queek emerged onto a low rocky shelf that overlooked the canyon-like cavern. Below, all was aswarm with motion – a sea of verminkind larger than any he had yet seen. Before even acknowledging the clawpack's leaders, Queek stepped to the ledge and let his gaze sweep over the great cavern. His eyes picked out a dozen different clan banners alongside huge beast packs from Clan Moulder.

More were crowded into various side tunnels that exited off the Trench. It was quite a sight. Only after he had absorbed the immensity did Queek turn to accept the greetings of those near him. Yet even as he turned, the warlord gave an involuntary start.

The leader of the clawpack was not a chieftain or warlord, but a grey seer.

The horned skaven bowed and prostrated himself, as did his slew of underlings. He then rose and greeted Queek with a long string of superlatives, as was fitting. Once again composed, the warlord signed the traditional Clan Mors symbol and nodded as Kranskritt the grey seer introduced himself and his chief lieutenants. Then, upon a signal from the grey seer, the slave legions and clans below began to manoeuvre through the cavern and out into side chambers where their crude encampment-nests awaited. Kranskritt rattled off the various clan names as they shuffled or were whipped along. It was a display of sheer numbers and equipment that the grey seer knew was impressive. There were many clans Queek recognised, some of which were far from their lairs. Clan Krizzor came from the monster-ridden Dark Lands and Clan Volkn from the Fire Mountain. Queek bristled only once, when he recognised the markings of Clan Gritus – traitorous offspring that had split from Clan Mors. The exhibition would surely take hours to complete, as unending lines of troops were paraded by. Clearly chaffing to get away, Queek soon motioned that he had seen enough, and his right claw – the Warlord Skrikk – would finish matters. With that, the leader of Clan Mors stalked off.

It had been long since Queek had returned to his trophy-den, but he still knew the way. Ages before it was looted, this chamber had been an armoury for the bearded-things. Now it served as his scavenge-pile. Bones, battered armour and brutal keepsakes from his years of claiming the chieftain's share of the spoils lay scattered in heaps. He was just running his claws over a manticore skull when he heard the approaching steps of the two he had summoned.

Even with his back turned, Queek knew who it was: the light pad of the stabber-killer from Clan Eshin and the heavier tread of the hulking beast-handler.

'Greetings, Oh Most Malevolent of Potentates, Oh Sovereign of Mighty Mors. I have hurried quick-quick at your summons,' said Skewit, bending low. 'My watch-spies have already told me much-much.'

'Hail Great Headtaker,' said Grootose. The burly skaven bowed his head.

Unlike most skaven of high rank, Queek cared little for long-winded honourifics and embellished titles. Perhaps, he thought, this was why he favoured Grootose. The longest serving master moulder in Clan Mors' service, Grootose was gruff, to the point, and a deadly fighter – the very qualities Queek admired most. Skewit, on the other hand, was a useful spy, but as with any Clan Eshin member, he favoured intrigue and was likely to be playing more angles than he had claws.

Queek acknowledged his minions only by turning around. Without greetings or preamble, he went to the heart of the matter. 'A grey seer! What is the meaning of this? Did I not tell-squeak Lord Gnawdwell about the grey ones' interfering ways? Did either of you know that the fifth clawpack is led by a horned one?'

Grootose looked Queek in the eyes and bared his fangs – a clear sign of no. Skewit drummed his nervous, twitchy fingers against themselves, scratched at his whiskers and looked at his shuffling feet. A clear sign of yes.

With a swift flick of his wrist, Queek struck his pick Dwarf Gouger to split the manticore skull before him. 'You may return to your beasts, Grootose,' snapped the Headtaker. 'Skewit tell me everything you know about this. This was obviously the Council's doing, but was Gnawdwell in on it too? Tell me about Kranskritt. Squeak-tell me everything.'





All the clanrats were anxious to begin the invasion of Karak Eight Peaks, but none more so than Queek. Even amongst a nervous and twitchy race, he had always been especially impatient. He was not one of those warlords that enjoyed the convoluted games of conspiracy. The war chieftain of Clan Mors far preferred straight action to political manoeuvring or subtle scheming.

Unlike many of his kind that rose to power, Queek did not often resort to backstabbing or treachery. He rarely used surrogates to carry out violence on his behalf. Not for nothing was he known as 'the Headtaker'. His way was abrupt, sudden and violent, striking down those who opposed him and demanding duels with any who connived openly for his downfall. Many, including the Grand Lord Gnawdwell, had assumed that Queek's headstrong ways and rush to get to grips with his foes would make an early end of a promising career. Thus far, he had proved them all wrong.

It was a mistake, however, to assume that because Queek did not play the political and manipulative angles, that he was not canny. To be a clawleader required guile; to rise to the top of a powerful clan took a level of cunning beyond extraordinary. As much as Queek wanted to concentrate upon the sizeable battles looming in front of him, his agile mind kept returning to the aid the Council had sent to bolster his attack. Like all dealings with the Lords of Decay, it smelt of contrivance, collusion and intrigue. With the assembled clawpacks, Queek knew he could supply the victory the Council of Thirteen demanded, but what else were the devious plotters trying to achieve?

The forthcoming invasion across the Worlds Edge Mountains was part of the wider plan ordered by the Council of Thirteen. It had all their immense backing and was intended to join the major clans in a united cause. From what he had already seen and heard, the coming assaults would eclipse the scale and ferocity of the campaign that had already wrecked Tilea and Estalia. Naturally, Clan Mors wished not only to do their part, but also to gain substantially into the bargain. The Council's commands were to seize all of the City of Pillars, but Gnawdwell wanted more, much more.

Before leaving Skavenblight, Queek Headtaker had been summoned to a private audience. Grand Lord Gnawdwell himself had impressed upon Queek that all of Clan Mors' resources were at stake. Other clans – Clan Rictus foremost amongst them – wished to discredit Clan Mors. It was a race to seize a greater share of the spoils in terms of both riches and political clout within the Council. All along the Worlds Edge Mountains other attacks were planned. Clan Rictus joined with Clan Skryre to attack Karak Azul to the south, and Clan Moulder and Clan Kreepus would assault Karak Kadrin. Elsewhere, Clan Ferrik would lead many clawpacks against Zhufbar, while Barak Varr – the dwarf sea fortress – was targeted by Clan Krepid from the ground while Clan Skurvy and the clan-fleets assailed by water.

It was Gnawdwell's intention that Queek take Karak Eight Peaks as quickly as possible, so that Clan Mors might 'aid' the others. On Gnawdwell's wishes, Queek had already sent out thousands of his warriors dressed in other garb and carrying false clan symbols. They were to infiltrate the other battle sites. By their acts of sabotage, it was hoped that they might slow down and thwart the other clans' progress. This would allow Queek and his clawpacks to arrive in time to salvage victory in the name of Clan Mors.

Despite the additional rounds of pact-making, the disgrace of the grey seers and the loss of their seat upon the Council, skaven alliances were every bit as shifty as before. In a way, the directive to work together had actually made the situation worse. Covert action and cover-ups required an even higher degree of effort than ever. Plans within plans, pacts within pacts, Queek knew that traitors and turntails would be everywhere. It would be better to fixate solely on killing bearded-things and greenskins, but the war chieftain knew he did not have that luxury.

Queek did not trust that which he could not see. Magic, espionage, political alliances, each had their place, but were no match compared to simply putting steel in your foe's gut. The arcane order of triple-speaking grey seers had long ago earned his ire, and none had been more pleased than the Headtaker when, following the Tilea campaign, that self-important clan had fallen from favour. Now, on the cusp of the invasion, Queek had discovered that one of their manipulative kind was given a high ranking command within his force. The grey seer controlled the largest of the clawpacks, although as the Headtaker thumbed the razor-edge of Dwarf Gouger, he thought the first clawpack might prove more powerful. The more he thought about the matter, it was just the kind of challenge he would relish.

The news the night runner spies brought had been bad, but hardly unexpected. Greenskins from the Badlands were swelling Skarsnik's ranks and the Dark Lands seethed with activity – ogres, goblin caravans and wolf riders. This did not slow the Headtaker's swagger, for he did not care what or how many he fought, only that battle came soon.

The prearranged signal to attack could come at any time now. Even with the clawpacks widely spaced out across the sprawling underground complex, the most habitable levels were overflowing, heaving with verminkind. The lower deeps were the worst, as there the packmasters kept the most rabid creations of Clan Moulder. The howls of the heavily chained beasts unnerved all those in proximity. This fear was justified, as pressgangs routinely swept nearby passageways, scouring the area for stragglers and deserters. Just being nearby risked becoming fodder, as the packmasters' definition of who might be a defector revolved entirely on whether their gang outnumbered the potential victims.

With so many different clans pressed into close quarters, feuds inevitably broke out. Queek Headtaker, accompanied by his Red Guard, travelled from clawpack to clawpack. His mere presence instilled fear and discipline, and dampened down the worst excesses of fighting. From his life of campaigning, Queek knew it was no bad thing for some in-fighting to occur before the battle. Having the hordes agitated would work to the skaven advantage. Also, claws thought twice about turning tail when they knew the formations behind them would be only too glad to skewer them on spear points should they flee. By visiting each of the underground encampments again, the warchieftain of Clan Mors doublechecked plans and invasion routes while he tried to gauge which of the clans harboured traitors amongst their lot.

During his journey, Queek narrowly avoided a cave-in, caught and throttled a Clan Eshin assassin and had been forced to slaughter two of his own chieftains. The Headtaker had no proof or any leads on which rival clans had paid for these treasonous acts, or which leaders had ordered them to do it. He did, however, have some firm ideas.

'Greetings Grey Seer Kranskritt, Oh Most Wise and Malign. I gather-bring news of the Headtaker.'

Turning from the writhing runes he was scratching into the chamber floor, Kranskritt glowered at his messenger.

Bowing profusely, the skaven gave his report. 'A boulder trap missed Queek. Three of his Red Guard were smashed-slain, but the Headtaker leapt aside.'

Kranskritt's muzzle twitched. 'He will know it was a set-trap, yes-yes,' said the grey seer. 'Who will he suspect-blame? Tell me again, who has he questioned about my presence?'

'Grootose, Skewit, and Warlord Skrikk, my Lord,' responded the messenger without raising his eyes.

'Hmmmm... but not Gnarlfang?' said the grey seer, musing to himself. 'Yes-yes, strange-odd. Send Skewit to me immediately.'

Twitching his head to listen, Kranskritt waited until the sound of the messenger's feet had receded before returning to his runic pentagram.

'It will not work,' said a whisper from the shadows. 'You are inscribing it wrong.'

Kranskritt froze. 'Why don't we tell-explain to the Headtaker that it is not us? Clearly he will come after me soon,' said Kranskritt to the darkness.

A soft and altogether evil laughter filled the room, a sound as palatable as nails scratching polished slate. 'Of course he suspects you, but it would do no good to tell him that the one behind the attempts is his Lord Gnawdwell. He would not believe you. And yes, his agents are already on their way.'

After a long pause, the voice spoke again. 'I could protect you little Kranskritt, but there must be no more attempts to bind me...'

It began as a dull rumbling. The dwarfs, who were closest of all races to the mountains, recognised the ground tremors immediately. The skaven, whose underground senses were perhaps the keenest, followed closely behind. Their leaders whipped slaves to attention and passed out the pre-battle brew of warp-strained stimulants. This was, after all, the very signal they had been awaiting. The night goblins, although long adapted to their subterranean lives, did not notice anything until the intensity of the vibrations grew. By the time the upheavals were so fierce they could knock over a fully armoured ironbreaker, even the thickest rock trolls understood something unusual was happening.

The skies, which had been thick with dark clouds and snow, was breaking up to the north, a sign more change was coming. Many miles away, Karag Dron, the Thunder Mountain, was erupting, spewing ashen cloud miles above the surface. Reverberations shook all the Worlds Edge Mountains, as lesser volcanoes joined the chorus. The spells to reel Morrslieb closer and the Slann's efforts to stop it were far distant, but their ramifications were felt across the world. The air seemed to crackle with energy and the swelling pressures beneath the surface were pushed past their limits as the Chaos moon drew closer than ever before.

The Chaos moon's gravitational pull altered more than just the tides and seismic pressures, it stirred the hearts of all fell things. The undertunnels of the City of Pillars came alive as a living tide of vermin surged up from the lower depths in their chittering millions. The long awaited invasion had begun.

Far below four of the mountains that made the ring of Karak Eight Peaks, the earthquakes also gave the signal to clandestine groups. In absolute secrecy, teams of warp-grinders had used their Clan Skryre tunnelling devices to bore a network of tunnels winding high up into the mountain. Although the main works they tunnelled beneath had been made by dwarfs ages ago, they now served as the abode of the night goblins. It was dangerous work, burrowing so deeply into greenskin territory. Behind the rock-melting teams, gutter runners slipped through these newly made passageways gnawed into the living rock. They carried with them powder kegs and intricate devices of cogs and whirring gears. For over a month they had worked, stringing wires and setting many charges. During that time, many of the creatures associated with the greenskins had stumbled across these tunnels. Knifework and poisoned throwing stars alone kept their existence secret.



At the first signs of distant rumbling, it was time. In chambers carved into the roots of the mountains, warlock engineers connected clawfuls of wires, sending electrical shocks upwards. In some cases the wires had been cut – gnawed upon by squigs, or pulled out by curious snotlings. Other connections were lost due to cave-ins, as the volcanic surges sent shivers down the mountain chain. It must also be said that some of the explosive devices failed to ignite – design or manufacturing flaws making up a large percentage of any skaven-made device. As the plan was for the detonations to link together to cause a major collapse, the few duds saved the goblin territories from immense destruction. There were numerous cave-ins and minor collapses causing some greenskin casualties and temporarily cutting off key passageways.

In the one case where the packed explosives worked as the warlock engineers had guaranteed, it proved cataclysmic. Beneath Karag Nar, the Sunrise Mountain, the explosions chained together to form a series of devastating concussive shockwaves. Halls collapsed, flattening galleries, plazas and more. Carven tombs, long hidden by secretive dwarf design were crushed, rockslides gained momentum and the very mountain tumbled inwards upon itself. In one stroke, tens of thousands of greenskins were crushed.

Across the peaks avalanches tumbled, sending boulders the size of small villages crashing into the ruined city below. From secret tunnels on adjacent peaks, other warlock engineers adjusted their optics. With vision that could cut through the snowfall and pierce the rising cloud of dust, they observed the collapse. They could not help but emit squeaks of delight at the tumbled ruin of the mountainside. The east gate was sealed beneath a tomb of rubble. Karag Nar, the southernmost mountain in the ring of Karak Eight Peaks, was reduced to less than half its once-majestic height.

The skaven had unleashed a new level of ruination upon the City of Pillars, but they were only getting started. Even as the other denizens pulled themselves up from the ground, they heard the oncoming rush as tens of thousands of the verminous host rushed upon them.

In the Galleries of Kings, Queek Headtaker watched over the activity. Thaxx Redclaw, leader of the first clawpack, was there – a dwarf head proudly stuck upon his backbanner. The armoured warlord kept the vanguard of his force back now, allowing the endless legions of the fourth clawpack to ascend the Great Stair. Frothing from the tainted brew they had consumed, the slaves were eager for combat. Yet even in their agitation, they marked the deep

ranks of Clan Mors stormvermin that would follow up their assault. This was not by accident. Queek knew that when they hit that first wall of dwarf traps and resistance they would either break or come close to it. Knowing what stood behind them – the merciless fighters of the deadliest warrior clan – would encourage them to last a bit longer. After all, they thought they might stand a chance against the bearded-things – they *knew* death upon the blades of Clan Mors was a certainty.

The farsqueaker reports claimed that a mountain had been levelled. Better than he had expected from the Clan Skryre contraptions. The four mountains that had been targeted were those most populated by greenskins. They were also where reports placed Skarsnik as frequenting most often. Although he knew the night goblins would fall without their leader, Queek more than half-hoped the diminutive warlord was not crushed in the mountainfall. He wanted the pleasure of facing the miserable imp himself. Too often in the past the Crooked Moons warboss had slipped away from the killing blow. How Queek longed to hear those shrill screams. Further crashes and explosions from above brought him out of his reverie; the first obstacles had been encountered.

The skaven poured through the tunnels like an unstoppable flood. They filled the passageways as they scrambled over each other in a scurrying mass. In their furious advance, none noticed their clawed feet pulling out trip wires, or registered the loose stone slabs that tilted beneath their onrush. Belegar's engineers had not been idle and the slave legions paid the price.

Powder keg charges and shrapnel bombs blew gaps in the furred press of skaven. Pneumatic levers tumbled heavy walls to crush those underneath. Stone blocks dropped out of the floor to fall into pits hundreds of feet deep. Spring loaded auto-firing mechanisms filled the close air with whirring bolts, or sent log-sized spears hurtling through many dozens of oncoming foe.

The dwarfs had rigged the corridors, hallways and stairwells leading up to their realm with all manner of deathtraps. Gutter runners could have sniffed out the deadly ruses and bypassed them, as could any Clan Mors warrior who had been whelped in Karak Eight Peaks. They would have had the tunnel-sense to see where false walls had been added, or stone blocks recently pried upwards. The surging mass, however, had not been raised in the warzone that was the City of Pillars, nor did their blind rush give them a chance to do anything but scurry forwards. It was all they could do to avoid being crushed by their own kind, much less look for telltale signs of traps.

It is probable that more skaven were lost in this initial surge than there were dwarfs within Karak Eight Peaks. For the skaven, these losses were expected. This was, after all, not a subtle raid, but rather the first act of an overwhelming attack intent on nothing short of genocide. This was the fastest way to clear open lanes towards the bearded foe. Queek and all his clawpack leaders fully expected the next phase to be equally costly.

Of the seventy-eight planned entrance routes into the dwarf realm, fully half of these were blocked so severely by rockfall and cave-ins that they were, for now, considered sealed off. Naturally it took some time to establish this, and the skaven that were driven down these deadends suffered a cruel and painful end – packed and crushed by the impetus of their own furious assault. Only the strongest, and most desperate of their kind chewed their way out of those flesh-packed tunnels. With broken bodies, blood-matted fur and a crazed look in their eyes, these survivors were dangerous and bad for morale. They were stabbed or stomped to death by a wall of armoured stormvermin that quickly put an end to their misery.

Many tunnels were still open, and into these the seemingly endless slave legions continued to pour.

The thane Borrik Norgrim led the guardians who stood watch in the Hall of Reckoning. They were dwarfs, and so could mark the difference between the far off thunder of the volcano, the rumbling avalanches as Karag Nar collapsed, and the reverberations of the traps going off as the foe advanced. Even without the sounds drawing ever closer, the pressure change in the thick air let them know something was rising from the underdepths.

Once known as the Grand Avenue, what had formerly been a broad passageway was now called the Hall of Reckoning. It had been a main artery of Karak Eight Peaks. In those days, it connected with the East and West Gates as well as the under-deeps. The Grand Avenue was a continuation of the Ungdrin, the Underway – the dwarf subterranean highway system that connected their kingdom of old. The wide and brightly lit passage ran smooth and true, and would have extended thousands of miles in many directions. But that was then.

The section of the Hall of Reckoning that Borrik Norgrim was guarding now stretched only four hundred paces – a chamber capped on both ends with rockfall. The hall was but a chamber now – the far perimeter of King Belegar's dwarf realm. Behind Borrik was a small passageway that led back to a sealed gate – the Door of Bar-Undak. Behind that reinforced doorway was an entrance straight up into the Citadel. It was Borrik Norgrim's task to guard that steel-clad doorway. To do that, Borrik would lay down his life and the lives of those he led. With him were two



dozen ironbreakers – the Axes of Norr – and a fist of irondrakes – the Forgefuries. All of them hailed from the same clan – the Norgrimlings. Each dwarf knew and understood that they were all that stood before the oncoming horde and an unimpeded path into the last dwarf stronghold in Karak Eight Peaks. It would be enough, Borrik reckoned.

Borrik was concerned with all the routes into the hall, of which there were three known, but there was another location that troubled the oldbeard. Two of the passageways were stone carved, their arched doorways decorated with worn ancestor heads barely visible upon their keystones. These led to stairwells down to the enemy-held deeps. Those passageways had been heavily trapped since then. The third entrance into the Hall of Reckoning was a ragged cave gnawed into the centre of the floor – a deep shaft bored straight downwards. It would take grappling hooks or something awfully good at climbing to emerge from that hole. In addition to these more obvious assault routes, Borrik's incessant wall-tapping had given him good reason for further doubts. He was dubious about a nearby buttress. There was tunnelling work behind it or he was a beardling.

The first skaven to appear came from the northern stairwell. Even as that wall of vermin burst outwards, the Forgefuries opened fire with their drakeguns. The short-barrelled hand-cannons erupted, lighting up the darkened chamber as they spewed forth beams of dazzling energy. The irondrakes unloaded volley after volley into the oncoming mass, making the Hall of Reckoning strobe between pitch black and brighter than day. Each beam punched a fist-sized hole through a ratman, melting away the front rank even as the living stream of skaven pushed forward. No matter how many fell, more surged forth. Step-by-step the stream forced its way out of the narrow doorway, advancing into the great hallway. Many skaven were mowed down or crushed underfoot, but they advanced nonetheless. Opposite them, the southern stairwell likewise vomited forth a stream of scrawny wretches – the dregs of the verminous race.

The room began to fill with the flea-ridden and mangy host, some even being pushed into the gaping hole in the chamber's centre. The full firepower of the Forgefuries could slow one advancing stream, but against two it was a hopeless endeavour. Upon a growled command from Borrik, the irondrakes fired a parting shot before shouldering their weapons and turning about face. Skaven move with a scurrying speed far beyond that achievable by dwarfs, especially with the added impetus of thousands pushing them onwards. When they saw their hated foe purposefully turn their backs, the hordes redoubled their efforts, racing around the hole and sprinting for the defended corner. The rolling tide of fur and claws screeched in its fury to reach out and grasp the dwarfs before they could retreat to safety behind some doorway.



With well-drilled precision, the ironbreakers kept their position across the narrow passageway, but opened their ranks just enough to allow the irondrakes to slip through. Even as the last of their brothers-in-

arms passed by, they snapped their shields back together with a clang that echoed through the Hall of Reckoning. Even as the ironbreakers closed ranks, the claws of the oncoming horde reached outwards, snatching to grab the retreating irondrakes. They found, instead, an impenetrable shieldwall. Ten dwarfs wide, the sturdy barrier blocked the passageway that led to the Door of Bar-Undak.

With shields lifted high and locked with those of their brethren, the ironbreakers felt the oncoming wave crash against them. The surging momentum of hundreds of sprinting slaves pushed upon them, but with their short, powerful legs braced, the dwarfs held firm. Next sharpened claws scratched at their shields, spike-tipped clubs pounded upon them, and rusty iron blades attempted to stab through them. The shields turned the blows as easily as they would shed the soft patter of a spring rain. Indeed, the gromril-banded shields were neither scratched nor dented, but the same could not be said for the shoddily made skaven weapons. Spears shivered and pitted iron blades snapped against the pride of the dwarfen forges. Before the skaven hordes stood not just ironbreakers, but the Axes of Norr.

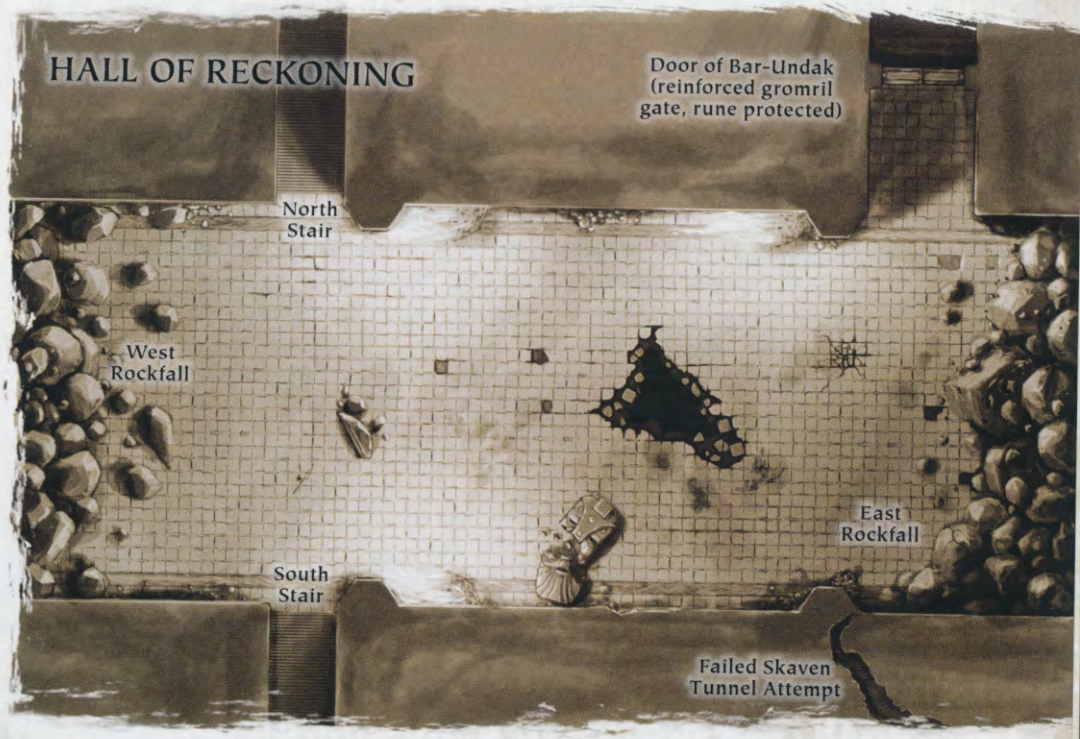
The Axes of Norr had withstood the full momentum of their foe's charge, and blocked their initial flurry of blows. Now it was their time to retaliate. Shouting their war cry, they swung their axes from behind their shields, cleaving skaven skulls and chopping off limbs. Dead ratmen fell into piles and the flagstone floor grew slippery with blood and tangled ropes of spilt innards.

Endlessly, the skaven continued to grind forward. Because of the door frame, they could not bring their numbers to bear, nor could they penetrate the shieldwall. On occasion, a speartip would get past the shields – a lucky thrust or an attack from below as a fallen ratman would make one last desperate lunge before his onrushing littermates crushed him. Nothing came of these pitiful attempts, the blows were unable to pierce the gromril armour that covered the ironbreakers from foot to helm. Although the arched doorway was low, several blood-mad skaven scurried over the backs of their own fighting ranks, propelling themselves over the barrier of dwarfen shields. These bold skaven were hacked down in mid-air by the ironbreakers back ranks. Once fallen, steel-clad feet ground the verminous bodies until all twitching ceased.

It went on like this for hours. Twice the Hall of Reckoning rang to the barked commands of Thane Borrik. Upon hearing the order, the Axes of Norr lowered their shoulders and bullrushed the skaven mass before them. Thus were the hordes pushed back and the heaped dead cleared. The surprised skaven were powerless to halt the momentum, as the sturdy warriors behind their bludgeoning shields shoved them backwards. Many skaven were hurled into the open pit, the rest broke and fled. After cutting their path clear, the ironbreakers then returned to their position at the mouth of the passageway to the Door of Bar-Undak.

As more skaven scrambled up the stairwells, they met those exhausted ratmen who had fled from the shieldwall. The furore had been beaten out of them, and they stood bedraggled, with shallow chests heaving and fur matted with sweat and blood. In this brief and hard-won respite, the dwarfs were not idle. Thane Borrik gave another gruff order. Like clockwork, the ironbreakers' shields parted, and again the Forgefuries stepped out, their drakeguns spitting molten beams into the skaven mobs milling near each stairwell.

The scent of fear and the heaps of piled dead was bad enough, but the deadly patter of white-hot beams slicing into them was too much for the skaven. They turn-tailed and scrambled over each other in their haste to regain the safety of the stairwells that would lead them back down into darkness.



After long hours of battle, silence fell over the Hall of Reckoning.

The Door of Bar-Undak was secure, and the dwarfs finally moved out from the narrow passageway. If anything, Borrik Norgrim was more unsettled during the respite than he had been during the skaven assault. He had fought for over fifty years in Karak Eight Peaks and he knew two things: one, their foes would be back and, two, he could expect the unexpected. He cursed and lifted his helm off, spitting at the foul stench. The air was thick with the cloying smell of blood, innards and the foul musk of terrified ratmen. Within a few heartbeats, the thane had all his lads in action.

The front rankers of the Axes of Norr inspected their shields and armour. One of the dwarfs – the ironbeard Gromley – strung together a tirade of powerful oaths and curses. Under closer examination, the old warrior had found an almost imperceptible scratch, a hairline gouge that ran for several inches along his shield. The younger back rankers – those who had yet to see any action – did their share of grumbling too. It was their assignment to haul the dead skaven out of the hall. At least, thought Borrik grimly, he had found a use for that large pit. It was so deep, none heard the carcasses land.

The Door of Bar-Undak was only one of many underground passageways that led into Citadel. After the engineer's traps had been set off and many tunnels blocked, there remained thirty-nine known entrances. All of them had come under attack similar to the one Borrik Norgrim had faced. All held, although unlike Borrik's guardians, all of the dwarf outposts had suffered casualties. Runners inside the reinforced doors tapped out secret codes to collect the news. After giving their reports to a series of relays, each one further and further into the upper levels of the Citadel, they at last reached the Hall of Pillared Iron.

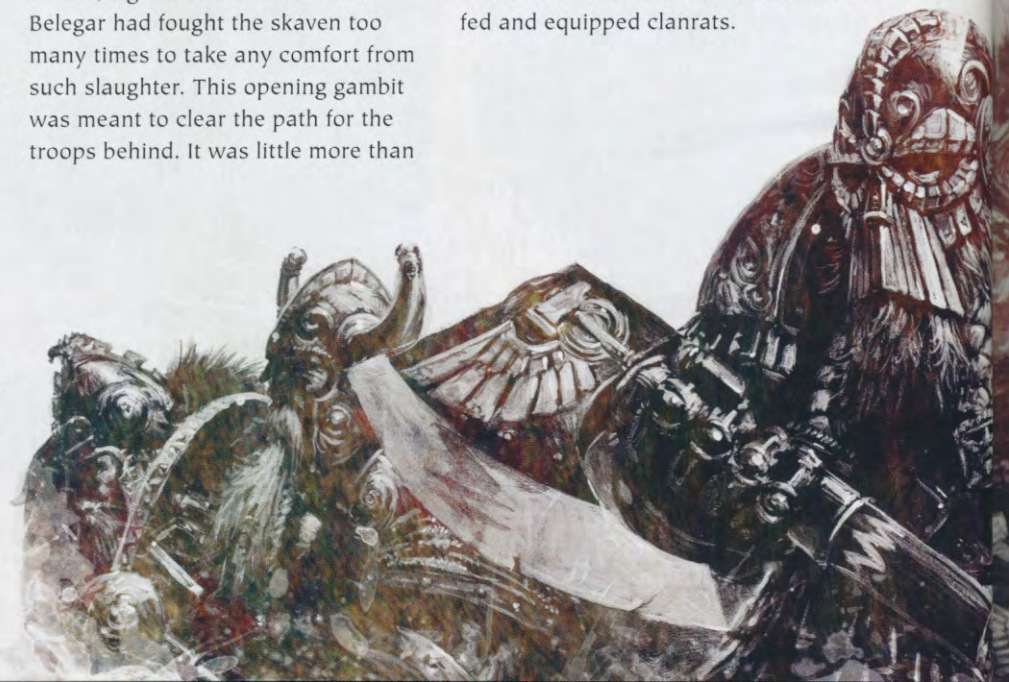
Once, long ago, the Hall of Pillared Iron was but a support for the upper halls. There, several storeys above this great chamber stood the magnificent King's Hall. That high-arched palatial chamber was where the King's Throne had sat – from the time of King Lunn Ironhammer back to the days when the Ancestor Gods walked amongst the dwarfs. In those days all the halls were bright as day – for many chambers were above the surface and had windows looking up upon the ring of eight surrounding mountains. Above or below ground, all the inner rooms blazed with light. Indeed, it was said the halls fairly glittered, for even at night fires reflected off polished walls, and sparkled from glowgems cunningly set into the carven stone. Now all was dark and gloomy, save for a few feeble braziers glowing small in the darkness. The ruin of those upper levels lay strewn upon the surface – a maze of rubble toppled by ages of war, fire, and avalanches. There was nothing fair or glorious left of the Citadel of old – but its foundation was strong, and it had become a place of determined defence. There, upon an unadorned throne of iron brooded King Belegar.

Casualties had been light thus far, but this did not brighten Belegar's stern face. The reports told of scrawny, malnourished and filthy ratmen – many still bearing manacles and chains, signs of their enslavement. Belegar had fought the skaven too many times to take any comfort from such slaughter. This opening gambit was meant to clear the path for the troops behind. It was little more than a probe for weaknesses, or perhaps, simply an opportunity to tire the dwarfs and use up their ammunition.

More troubling to the king had been the reports of distant Karag Dron erupting and the explosions that toppled Karag Nar – the Sunrise Mountain. The loss of that peak was like losing part of his ancestry. The dwarf elders – they of the longest beards – had all agreed with their leader. It was believed that the explosions that rocked Karak Eight Peaks had been placed to kill Skarsnik and to disrupt the greenskins. In one fell move, the skaven had hoped to slay the greenskin leader and destroy those that encamped upon the mountainsides. They too must have noted the influx of tribes beyond count from the Badlands. No doubt the hated Headtaker wanted to finish off the dwarfs before turning his full attention to those he considered the more serious threat – the greenskins.

With that last thought, a grim smile finally cracked King Belegar's weathered face. The skaven were still in for a few surprises.

Further below ground the next wave of skaven attacks had begun to emerge all around the lower edges of the Citadel's borders. Once again, the attackers were the lowlifes of the verminous society – slaves that were driven to battle. Immediately behind them, however, were waves of better-fed and equipped clanrats.



Dwarf quarrellers on the Great Stairs shot until they ran out of bolts, and then defended their gate with axes. At the quay – where the underground river had been channelled to flow – dwarf warriors stood ten deep before the gates. At the western edges of the dwarf realm the great underground foundries filled with skaven – but the access tunnels to enter the Citadel were blocked by miners, their two-handed picks wreaking a terrible toll upon the ratmen. So passed sunless days and nights, with the skaven waves coming one after another. Everywhere the dwarfs held, but cracks were beginning to show.

In the bowels of the underdeeps, Queek Headtaker was growing ever more impatient. The promised destruction of four mountains had resulted in only one collapse. There had been no word on whether or not Skarsnik was slain. Reports told of the usual in-fighting amongst greenskin tribes, but the hoped-for power struggle had not yet materialised. It was as if they were all still held in check – an ominous sign of failure, thought Queek. The cave-ins and minor skirmishes would only hold the upper halls for so long. Meanwhile, the slaves and the worst of the clan warriors had been depleted by tens of thousands, but it was not enough. The dwarfs simply weren't killing them fast enough – irritatingly, the slave legions were still over half strength.

Queek knew the plan called for him to wear down the dwarfs with his slave legions. Yet it galled him to wait. He looked again upon the dwarf-skin parchment. It was seal-signed with Warlord Gnawdwell's clawmarks, yet those could have been forged. Queek recalled the Lord of Decay's private message to him – the eagerness to attack, to win quickly at the City of Pillars. Why then did the written-scratched orders demand a long war of attrition?

Queek Headtaker called for his bodyguard. He sent messengers out with word to each of the clawpack leaders telling them to begin their full attacks immediately.

'A messenger is coming,' said the shadow.

Kranskritt startled. It was unnerving how the Verminlord materialised out of darkness.

'There is always a messenger coming. Who? What-what?' responded the grey seer, testily.

'One of the Red Guard,' came the reply. 'He will give the orders I foresaw. Queek has guessed the deception. It is to the peaks you will go, hunting goblins. Do you remember our plans?'

Kranskritt shivered. They were most assuredly not his plans. He did not like this juxtaposition – it was typically he who had foreknowledge and did the manipulating. This creature was always two scurryings ahead of him. Possibly more.

Kranskritt turned to the shadows and found large eyes full of an ancient malevolence regarding him. Half concealed by the darkness, the Verminlord's magnificent triple rack of horns seemed to grow and twist sinuously. A clawed hand thrust out, holding an enormous gazing globe.

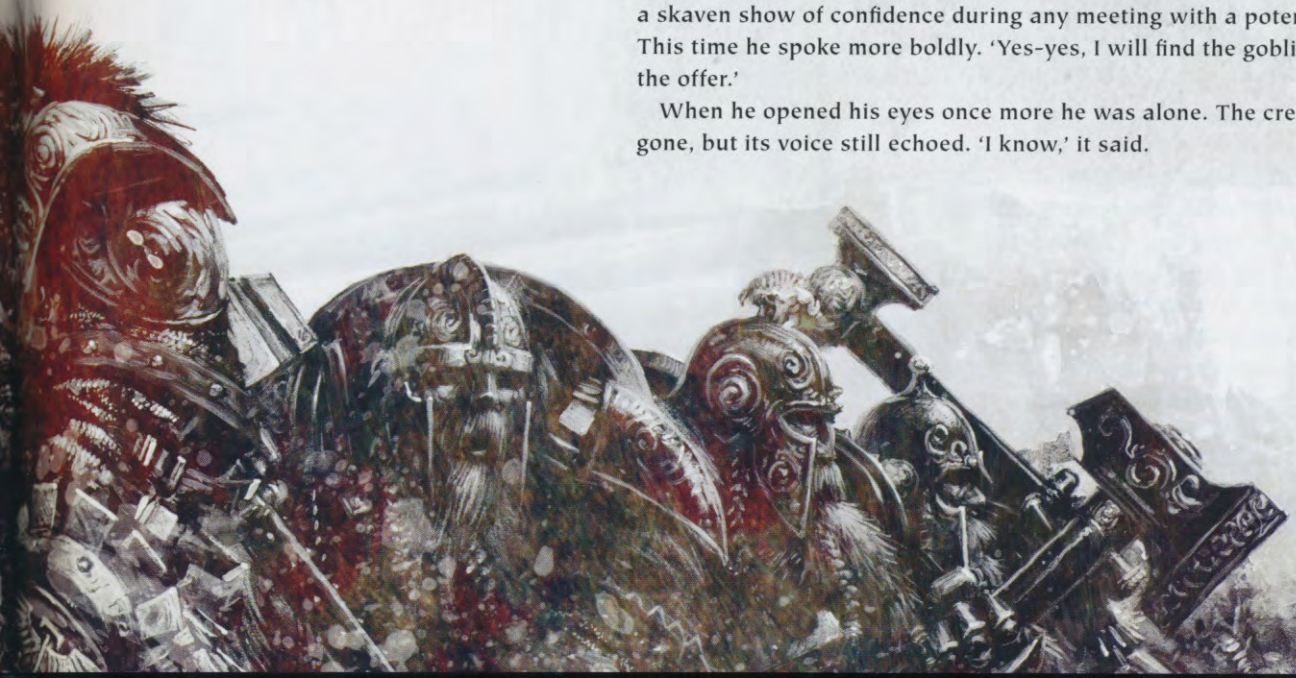
'You are right to fear the future, Kranskritt. Look-look. There are many paths to follow. All bad, but one. In life, I too walked as a grey seer – now I am more. Much more. I scry beyond space and time, the future is downwind. And I tell you now, there is no other way,' intoned the Verminlord Warpseer.

The voice filled Kranskritt's mind. It was at once compelling and threatening, it posed questions and provided answers at the same time.

'Yes-yes,' answered Kranskritt, 'I see-scry that now.' He wished to appear wise before this creature, but instantly regretted the hesitancy in his voice. It was said they could smell deception.

Kranskritt stood tall, thrusting out his horns. He closed his eyes – a skaven show of confidence during any meeting with a potential foe. This time he spoke more boldly. 'Yes-yes, I will find the goblin and make the offer.'

When he opened his eyes once more he was alone. The creature was gone, but its voice still echoed. 'I know,' it said.



As relentless as the sea, the waves of skaven attackers pounded again and again upon the dwarf defences. It was no longer the ill-fed lowest caste that surged upwards, but was instead contingents of clanrats bolstered with regiments of armoured stormvermin. All along the border fortifications, the dwarfs were hard-pressed, their armour and shields well battered.

At the Door of Bar-Undak, thane Borrik Norgrim took his turn in the front ranks. He wielded an axe forged by his forefathers during the golden era of Karak Eight Peaks. Its runes glowed in the darkened Hall of Reckoning as the thane joined the ironbreakers to hack down ratmen in droves. The shieldwall of the Axes of Norr remained unbroken. Several times each day they pushed out from their holed up defensive position. They drove into the wider chamber, sweeping away the skaven with their axestrokes, before disposing of their dismembered ruins. The toll had slowly been growing steeper.

Seven of the Axes of Norr had fallen, and all who lived bore injuries from the fighting. The ironbeard Gromley had lost a few links from his lower hauberk and had complained about it for days on end. There were more serious injuries, however. Dreksson could not lift his arm and was confined to the backranks, while Ulik the elder had lost an eye when a stormvermin's halberd had cracked through his helm. For what had now stretched to weeks of battle, it was a smaller price than most of the defensive outposts had paid. Many regiments of defenders had been destroyed, replaced along the underborders by the ever-thinning dwarf reserves.

Between charges, Borrik had his dwarfs sound off. Dwarfs pride themselves on their endurance and their ability to withstand gruelling tasks. Borrik still heard resolve as strong as steel in the voices of the Axes of Norr and the Forgefuries.

The bond of brotherhood between them had no weak link. No foe would pass through the Door of Bar-Undak while any of them yet lived.

What Borrik had not expected, however, was the signal tapping from inside the door. The code was struck true with the correct combination of three different sized hammers. It was the sign for the ironbreakers and irondrakes to make room for the door to be opened.

During the recent fighting, the Door of Bar-Undak had been opened once every few days. This was to collect the fallen dwarfs, and to pass out nourishment – typically a keg of wholesome dark ale. Such happenings were fraught with danger, for any ironbreaker knows that the weakest gate is the one left open. The skaven in the hall were forming up for battle once more as the metal-reinforced door swung open. A sliver of light broke into the Hall of Reckoning. The instant the dwarf thane saw what was coming through, he reckoned he knew what was happening.

Stepping into the narrow hall that led out from the Bar-Undak and into the wider hall were the unmistakable orange-crested figures of slayers. The veteran Borrik had indeed reckoned correctly. It had had been a difficult decision, but King Belegar had relented to the requests of the slayer contingent. They were not content to sit behind fortified doors and await their chance of glorious doom. In the end, the king had done this for two reasons. A force sallying out from the Citadel would take the skaven unawares. It was possible that one or more of the slayer squads would chance upon some great leader – perhaps even Queek Headtaker himself. Although the war-wise king doubted they would come near to ending this recent siege, the damage and the distraction they might cause could be invaluable. At the least, the slayers would grant a reprieve to those defenders along the fighting perimeter.

The second reason for letting them go was sheer practicality – the king hadn't been entirely sure he could stop them.

Before they had left the King's Hall, there had been a solemn send off for the slayers. Granted it lasted two days and nights, and many kegs were tapped. There was no need for speeches or rallying cries. After gazing at maps and taking the Elders' council, the slayers divided into seven different groups, save for Aldrik the Scarred, who chose to go into the underdark alone. Each force launched their assault from a different gate.



Borrik and his gromril-plated ironbreakers shifted to allow a single file of broad-shouldered warriors to pass. In true slayer fashion, they forswore armour, and advanced bare-chested into the fray. Borrik watched them pass. Some were old, their tattooed flesh bearing runic marks along with a patchwork of scars and battle wounds. A few were barely beyond beardling age. Most of the slayers had eyes glazed over, but to those few who met his gaze Borrik gave a slight nod. There was no need for words from either side, for they were dwarfs and fully understood duty, oath and honour.

The skaven that had been driven out of the Hall of Reckoning had begun advancing back up the stairs, once again forming up. They gathered in their hundreds as twenty one slayers came out and formed ranks just beyond narrow passageway blocked by the ironbreakers. With a resounding boom of finality, the Door of Bar-Undak closed, and once more there was nothing but the faintest of light from ancient glowstones high above. For many heartbeats all was silent, save for nervous tail twitching.

Without shout or warcry, the slayers took out their array of axes and strode towards the skaven hordes. Unnerved, the ratmen wavered for a moment, as if they might flee. Straightening up from the hunched pack, a skaven chieftain bared his fangs, swinging a cruelly barbed sword. This broke the trance that had fallen over the skaven, and the mangy mass hurtled forwards to meet the oncoming foe.

The unspoken leader of the slayer formation was Unfer. In each rock-like fist the dwarf carried a rune-covered axe. They sprang to light as he swung them, trailing streaks of fire as though red-hot from the forges. Many hundreds of red glints reflected back off the beady eyes of his suddenly fearful foes. Spinning with a grace that belied his stocky form, Unfer whirled into the rushing wave of skaven, lopping off speartips, heads, and limbs as he went. Whether by great skill, or violent happenstance, one of his first blows sent the skaven chieftain's head soaring across the chamber. In seconds the slayer had disappeared into that boiling sea of enemies. With a crash, the rest of the spiky haired dwarfs met the living wall of skaven.

The slayers did not fight as the ironbreakers did, in shield-locked and well-drilled precision. Instead, they were a mismatch of styles, not fighting as a unit, but as individuals. Some wielded axes in both hands, others swung double-handed weapons, cleaving wide arcs. All chopped paths of gore deep into the skaven ranks, spraying blood in all directions.

With sudden swiftness, the skaven had enough of slaughter. They fled, scampering for their lives in a mad rush to get away. Maintaining the same grim silence, the slayers followed, hacking down the stragglers. To Borrik, watching the fleeing ratmen was like seeing water drain into a funnel. Down they poured, flowing into the north and south stairwells. Without hesitancy or any orders, the slayers split into two groups and gave chase. The sound of fighting on the stairwell soon disappeared too, and the Hall of Reckoning was again free of all foes. At a nod from their thane, the ironbreakers broke ranks to once again hurl skaven corpses down the central tunnel. Amidst the heaped gore and broken ratmen there were five slayers who had fallen.

Across the dwarf realm the slayers had all fared similarly – carving a red path of carnage into their attackers before disappearing in pursuit. In the maze of passageways, the slayers' formations broke up, splitting off to follow their prey. Some of the death-seeking dwarf cult soon found their wishes. One-armed Svlok ran down the stairs and onto the spears of clanrats, who then tore and disgraced his body. The Brimlok brothers chased their quarry straight into a living wall of stormvermin arrayed across the passageway to discourage routers. Their remains were likewise defiled. Other slayers fought their way down until they reached the next attack waves. All the clawpacks had been released and were rushing up to join the fray. Many more slayers achieved their heroic ends.

Only Aldrik the Scarred and a handful of the widely scattered slayers lived long enough to continue their paths of destruction, winding off into the deeps that ran far below their brethren defending the Citadel.





The slayer counter-attack bought just enough reprieve for King Belegar to enact his next surprise move. The defenders of the gates from which the slayers had issued forth were pulled back to the next layer of fortified barriers. A few of these were narrow tunnels, but most emptied into a nexus point: the Hall of Clan Skalfdon.

Once one of the mightiest dwarf clans, the Skalfdons were counted amongst the nobility of Karak Eight Peaks. Clan Skalfdon traced their heritage back to Grungni himself. This hall had been the seat of their fiefdom, although none remained alive to see its near-ruined state. The last of their kind fell nearly a thousand years ago when they, along with King Belegar's great great grandfather, died in their efforts to reclaim the lost kingdom.

Now, half the hall's massive columns had fallen. The shattered remains of pillars made channels across the middle of the hall. There were scattered piles of fallen rubble, a few of which had been shifted in order to seal unwanted tunnels burrowed into the floor from below.

A growing throng formed in the hall. The dwarfs arrayed themselves along the northern half of the chamber, their war machines lining up their shots towards the three corridors leading from the south. Deep voices echoed to war chants as the dwarfs awaited the foe. All knew that they would not have to wait long.

Queek Headtaker ordered every clawpack moved upwards. This meant the tunnel-making contingents as well. Chieftains wielding whips set into motion slave legions with picks, while warlock engineers revved the motors of strange rock-boring engines. Elsewhere a fortune in warptokens had acquired a slew of warp-grinder teams. En masse warp-projectors were thumbed on, ready to begin melting new passageways. The sheer randomness of the tunnel-making did not endear the process to Queek – but perhaps these tunnels would open up a new avenue from which to attack the foe – perhaps not.

Skaven could not work stone like dwarfs. They were wholly unable to shape rock into anything aesthetically pleasing, and they cared not a dropping's worth for design or longevity. However, when it came to tunnelling quickly, gnawing through the bedrock of the world, there was no race that could match the skaven.

It was dangerous work. The slaves were drugged to increase production, and this left them deranged, prone to rebellious notions. Also, skaven gave no thought to trivial concerns, like supporting columns – so collapses and cave-ins were common. The Skryre-built devices speeded up work significantly, but were known to spontaneously combust. Even if none of those things happened, skaven tunnelings could drift. The tunnellers could veer off course after hitting a vein of ore, get distracted by the glow of warpstone, or simply be subjected to the whims of undisciplined minds. A newly worked tunnel could lead unsuspecting skaven straight into an underground river or terminate high up in a chasm many miles deep. Nevertheless, there was always a chance of a pivotal breakthrough.

Attacking by the established routes was much faster and more reliable. Long before any new tunnels could delve into enemy territory, the outermost dwarf fortifications felt the impact of the new skaven assault. Once again they lifted their shieldwalls against the hordes. Now they faced the full weight of the verminous arsenal of troops and weapons. All that the skaven had learned over thousands of years of tunnel fighting was put into action.

Waves of clanrats stopped a spear's throw away from their well-armoured foes only to part ranks while weapon teams scuttled forwards. Warpfire throwers melted the opposition with

green-black flame, while ratling guns sprayed deluges of bullets. Well-forged armour and rune-protected shields that had halted blade and claw could not stop the gas thrown by poisoned wind mortars. It was not all Clan Skryre war machines, however. At the triple gates of the west tunnel, armoured stormvermin crashed into dwarf clan warriors, giving every bit as good as they got. Rat ogres hit the shieldwall that stood before the Gates of Bar-Kragraz. The dwarfs shuddered under the impact, their mail-clad legs shifting as they braced and heaved against the monstrous weight crushing down on them.

Across the underborder of the Citadel, hundreds of dwarfs fell beneath the increasing skaven assaults.

Elsewhere, as the dwarf outposts began to waver, the skaven found themselves advancing against abandoned posts. Nervous troops scurried through the Hall of Reckoning, anticipating a trap. They had been forewarned of the iron-hard warriors wedged into the narrow hall guarding the doorway, but found no opposition. Growing bolder, they began beating upon the Door of Bar-Undak, but it would take mightier blows to so much as scratch that reinforced gate. Reports filtered back to Thaxx Redclaw, the leader of the first clawpack. He had been carefully watching for breakthroughs. By the time Thaxx arrived into the Hall of Reckoning, the skaven had improvised a way through the Door of Bar-Undak. Rat ogres had wielded huge hunks of rubble to batter the door, buckling the steel, and heaving the gates off their broken hinges.

Upon Thaxx's orders, the entire front was halted. It was his intention to ensure the first clawpack timed their attacks with all the others. The Headtaker, he claimed, did not want Clan Mors warriors bearing the brunt of any traps that waited beyond. Even as Thaxx made this claim, a formation clanked and jostled its way through the crowded chamber.

Pushing his way through the multitude was the grand warchieftain of Clan Mors. Queek Headtaker looked upon Thaxx, his top commander, with murderous intent gleaming in his beady red eyes.

'What bribe-gift did you take to betray Clan Mors?' asked the Headtaker, his tail swishing back and forth like a cave-adder about to strike.

Those around the two powerful warleaders spread out, forming a large challenge-ring. Walking sidewise, the two combatants began to encircle each other, their muscles tensed to spring.

Excuses, denials and renewed pledges were the tried and true skaven way of repairing, or at least delaying such confrontations. Thaxx Redclaw had known Queek Headtaker too long to attempt such pretences. He knew what was coming next. Baring his teeth in a hissing grimace, the warlord drew forth his own sword, its cruelly serrated edge glistening with warpvenom. Yet how did Queek know? Thaxx had told no one of his dealings with Clan Skryre. And how did the Headtaker get here so quickly? It was impossible – but now was not the time to think upon it.

As if guessing Thaxx's thoughts, the Headtaker sneered. 'I have informants you could never dream of... Now, tell me, what was the promise-pact? Not warptokens or breeders – I know you have too many of those already,' said Queek. 'Yes-yes, don't look surprised. I know what you hide in your under-warrens. No – the great Thaxx would not be tempted by what he already has. The offer was rule of Clan Mors, wasn't it? Yes-yes? Delay the attack long enough until I am replaced. Unless there is an accident first!'

Thaxx leapt forward, his sword a blur. Queek dodged out of range with ease, but Thaxx's attack was merely a feint, giving him space to draw a hidden warplock pistol from some secreted holster with his free paw.

'Die-die!' shrieked Thaxx, squeezing the trigger over and over.

Queek knew he had made a mistake when he saw Thaxx reach for another weapon. With the dextrous agility of a warrior born, Queek reversed course. Knowing he would never close the distance in time, he hurled his sword.

Thaxx had time to fire off three quick shots from his repeater pistol before Queek's blade knocked the weapon out of his paw. The sword also took off one of Thaxx's fingers, the digit still locked upon the trigger. In shock, the wounded warlord looked down first upon his bleeding paw, and then his eyes travelled to the fallen pistol. This was a mistake.

In a single bound Queek crossed the gap between them, bringing down a windmilling strike with the deadly maul Dwarf Gouger.

The next Thaxx Redclaw knew, he was on his back, looking up into the bared yellow fangs of Queek Headtaker mere inches from his face.

'I know a bribe from Clan Skryre when it's fired at me,' hissed Queek, 'but tell, who else is involved? That venom on your sword-blade smells like Clan Eshin good stuff. Tell me and I'll end you quick-quick.'

Queek leaned in, so that Thaxx's burbling blood-choked words were audible to him alone. Apparently satisfied, Queek ripped upwards, removing the spike of his weapon and Thaxx's innards with a single motion.

Straightening up, the Grand Warlord of the Eight Peaks stood tall and surveyed those gathered around him. 'First clawpack,' rang out Queek's voice, 'Thaxx betrayed Clan Mors – so I will lead you now.'





GREAT HOST OF KING BELEGAR

The dwarfs who fought for King Belegar were hardened veterans, well used to the perils of warfare. It was a hard life at Karak Eight Peaks, but every new battle presented opportunities to settle long-standing scores. Each of the dwarfs of that great throng had their own list of grudges against their hated foes.



KING BELEGAR

If resolve and unyielding defiance could be personified, they would have taken the shape of King Belegar. No matter the setback, predicament or ambush, the true King of Karak Eight Peaks never lost his iron-willed resolve. The years of constant warfare only steeled Belegar to continue the fight. He was outnumbered and trapped within his ever shrinking defenses. Yet while he breathed, and wielded the hammer of the kings, there was yet hope.

DURGGAN STOUTBELLY

A master engineer by trade, Durggan was a genius when it came to engines of war. Whether it was their repair, their positioning on the battlefield, or the laying of their sights upon an enemy's course – none could match Durggan's skill. The smell of black powder hung so heavily around Durggan that it was considered unwise to smoke a pipe within ten paces of him. Upon hearing of King Belegar's quest to reclaim Karak Eight Peaks, Durggan left his home in Zhufbar and joined the Ironhammer's cause.





THE IRON BROTHERHOOD

Dwarfs from all across the mountain realm came to join the Iron Brotherhood, the bodyguard of King Belegar. They were drawn for different reasons – to protect the rightful king, to join the crusade to settle grudge-debts, or simply to prove they could survive one of the most dangerous battlefields in the world. Those whose martial prowess and dedication earned them a place in the regiment were given the ceremonial hammers forged in the Golden Age from gromril mined from the depths of Karak Eight Peaks.

THE AXES OF NORR

The Axes of Norr ironbreakers regiment were the most famous of the surviving Norgrimlings clan. Hollering their iconic warcry, 'Gand Dammaz, Az Baraz, Norgrimssons-za!' – which translates as 'Suffer the axe-promise, the Ancestors of Norr are upon you!' – they had fought by Belegar's side since he returned to Karak Eight Peaks, winning renown at the East Gate. Led by then Borrik Norgrim, the Axes of Norr held off the greenskin onslaught long enough for the Citadel to be retaken. As veteran ironbreakers, they were well used to long shifts guarding vital passageways deep underground. They showed so much confidence in their unit that the back ranks often grabbed brief naps while standing upright, locked in place by tight tunnel confines and their own brethren.





STONEPLAITS

There were but forty members of the Stoneplaits Clan still walking the world, and all of them were to be found in a single regiment. It had only been a year since those battle-hardened longbeards fought their way into the Citadel, their great axes notched and worn. They did not speak of what happened to their relatives or hold, but said only that they did not wish to take the Slayer Oath. Instead, the Stoneplaits planned to die while still bearing the colours and banner that honoured their clan and ancestors.



GOLGFAG MANEATER

With the Ogre Kingdoms breaking apart from volcanic eruptions and war sweeping the Old World, Golgfag was heading west. He had gathered an army about him and planned on selling his brutal services to the highest bidder.

While crossing Death Pass in a blinding snowstorm, Golgfag was made an offer he could not refuse. To the most successful ogre mercenary captain ever, the epic battle of Karak Eight Peaks was nothing more than an enormous opportunity.

Belegar Ironhammer
True King of the Eight Peaks

The Iron Brotherhood
Three regiments of Hammerers

Borrik Norgrim
Thane

The Axes of Norr
One regiment of Ironbreakers

The Forgefuries
One regiment of Irondrakes

Stoneplaits
One regiment of Ironbreakers

Notrigar Angrund
Thane - Battle Standard Bearer

Clan Angrund Throng
Thane Burrogar Belegarsson, three regiments of Longbeards and one regiment of Ironbreakers

Clan Zhorrak Blue Caps
Two regiments of Quarrelers

Clan Hodak Throng
Thane Grokki, two regiments of Warriors and two regiments of Thunderers

Clan Zhudak Throng
Two regiments of Warriors and one regiment of Longbeards

Stoutbelly Battery
Two Cannons and one Grudge Thrower

Grimhall Battery
One Cannon, one Grudge Thrower and one Organ Gun

Thunderhall Battery
One Cannon, one Organ Gun and one Flame Cannon

Golgfag Maneater

Golgfag's Mercenary Ogres
Two regiments of Maneaters, one pack of Sabretusks, one regiment of Mournfang Cavalry and one regiment of Ironguts

FIRST CLAWPACK OF CLAN MORS

Behind the slave legions and massed assaults of the lowly dregs came the real strength of Clan Mors. Claw after claw of clanrats and armoured stormvermin scurried forth, supported by Clan Skryre weapon teams and beast packs from Clan Moulder. All bore the symbols and distinctive red of Clan Mors.



QUEEK HEADTAKER

Bold and conceited beyond belief, Queek Headtaker backed up his talk with swift action and victories. Those who failed him ended up on the pointy end of his military pick – the famed Dwarf Gouger. A master of underground warfare, if the warlord had a weakness, it was his open disdain for grey seers. The Headtaker maintained that Clan Mors, as the most successful of all Warlord Clans, should run the Council of Thirteen. It was his belief that it was only the manipulation of the grey seers that had kept them from their rightful place.

RED GUARD

It took a fierce skaven to survive in the underground slaughterways of the City of Pillars. To join the most elite claw-units of all Clan Mors, a skaven had to possess extraordinary strength, agility and martial prowess. Queek Headtaker personally took part in the selection and training of the elite Red Guard Stormvermin. He kept ten claws of these troops – each a hundred skaven strong. They were given the best arms, armour and feeding rights of all troops. In battle the Red Guard served as Queek's personal bodyguard, or as the spiked fist of his assault forces.





THE WARPSHIELDS

The Warpshields were a claw of Clan Mors clanrats that were spawned in the underbelly of the Glow-warrens, one of the deepest lair-nests. It was originally the old well network of the dwarfs, now long drained. The caverns still glowed, however, an after effect of the long-ago poisoning of the wells of Karak Eight Peaks with warpstone. The Warpshields were noted for the strange luminance of their green-glowing eyes, the green splotches on their clan-marked shields, and the sheer amount of wealth they had to spend. Where most claws were lucky if they could field a single weapon, no less than four ratling teams accompanied the Warpshields.

BLACKTAIL BERSERKERS

Deep in the undermines beneath the mountain Karagril was Blackrock – a deep strata of unknown material. The Clan Mors skaven from these caverns were known for their black tails and psychotic response to warpbrew, earning them the name Blacktail Berserkers. They carried triangular shields and black spears – but what truly made them unique was their extreme reaction to (and tolerance of) warpbrew. Just a sniff of that unnatural stimulant turned them into rabid, froth-mouthed fiends that could feel no pain and attacked with maniacal energy. Other skaven died shortly after such hyper activity, but the Blacktail Berserkers showed no ill effects, save for craving another dose.





SSIZIK'S DEADEYES

For long-ranged hitting power, Clans Mors called upon Ssizik's Deadeyes. These jezzail teams scurried into place and quickly set up their long rifles. In mere seconds they had deployed, shooting rapidly and with uncommon accuracy. Their leader, warlock engineer Ssizik Warpeye, trained his teams mercilessly. For target practice they often used captive dwarfs or night goblins, but also those who failed to hit their mark quickly enough. The dwarfs had learned to get behind cover when they saw those distinctive Clan Mors-marked shields, or they risked becoming another kill marking scratched into those hated devices.



VATBACKS

To clear out determined defensive blockades, Clan Mors relied on tunnel-clearing teams of poisoned wind globadiers. None had proven more effective than the claw known as the Vatbacks. Dwarf shieldwalls might have been resilient, and dwarf-forged mail might have been nigh impenetrable to blade and claw, but the gas-filled globes were stopped by neither. The Vatbacks, with glowing goggles, rasping re-breathers and badly oxidised storage tanks filled enemy warriors with fear – for when the poisoned wind blew, even the mightiest could not stand.

Queek Headtaker

Thaxx Redclaw
Warlord

Red Guard
Ten claws of Stormvermin

Warpshields
One claw of Clanrats and four Ratling Gun Teams

Blacktail Berserkers
Two claws of Clanrats

Ssizik's Deadeyes
Warlock Engineer Ssizik Warpeye and three Warplock Jezzail Teams

Vatbacks
One claw of Poisoned Wind Globadiers

Rotrik Maulclaw
Clan Mors Battle Standard Bearer

First Fang
Warlord Niktz Spiketail, six claws of Clanrats, one claw of Giant Rats and one legion of Skavenslaves

Second Fang
Warlord Skree, four claws of Clanrats, two claws of Stormvermin and one claw of Poisoned Wind Globadiers

Redclaw Horde
Thirteen claws of Clanrats, five Ratling Gun Teams, three Poisoned Wind Mortars and five claws of Stormvermin

Ironskins
Chieftain Ikk Hackflay and three claws of Stormvermin

Spinebacks
Warlord Vremix, five claws of Clanrats, two Warpfire Throwers and two Poisoned Wind Mortars

Beastpacks
Packmaster Grootose, eight claws of Giant Rats, three claws of Rat Ogres, two Hell Pit Abominations and two packs of Wolf Rats

Sling Pack
Ten legions of Skavenslaves



THE BREAKING OF THE MOUNTAINS

Thus far, the battles throughout Karak Eight Peaks had been small clashes. That would all change in the vast Hall of Clan Skalfdon.

King Belegar commanded the fewest numbers, but boasted the best-armoured and most elite troops. Thus, his tactic of defending chokepoints played to his strengths. Dwarf engineering had created deathtraps to maximise casualties. Now the dwarfs had given ground grudgingly, but this too was part of his plan. A skaven army was forming up, surging towards the great underhall – just where King Belegar wanted them.

Now King Belegar himself, at the fore of his guard formation, the Iron Brotherhood, took position in the centre of the battle line. His cousin, the thane Notrigar, held aloft the Ironhammer banner, proudly announcing to the foe that they faced the rightful king. Belegar surveyed his army, which was a formidable throng, but seemed lost in that immense space. It was built during an era when Karak Eight Peaks accommodated millions of times the number of dwarfs dwelling there now. He looked out at the far end where the first of the enemy skirmishers were just starting to filter cautiously into the cavernous hall. The distant black-clad creatures scuttled amidst the rubble piles, sniffing the air. They climbed atop fallen pillars to better scout out the dwarf forces arrayed across the great space opposite them.

It disturbed Belegar to watch these invaders. They were creeping and skulking things, but something about them angered the king further. Truly, this was their abode more than his – for the ratmen looked more at home amongst the ruins than did the dwarfs. This realisation annoyed Belegar, getting under his skin like a stone splinter under a fingernail. He, like all dwarfs, valued hard work. It was craft they took pride in, admiring cunningly wrought things. Here were creatures that conspired only to tear down, evolved to thrive amongst blight and decay. They did not build anything with skill or to last, indeed their kingdom was little more than the debris of dying civilisations. It was unfair that the skaven seemed destined to cling to the flotsam of history, while better, wiser races sank into the depths and were forgotten. To see the agile creatures clamber over toppled ancestor statues caused hatred to well up inside the king – their filthy naked feet scrambling over broken stone gods was nothing short of a defilement. But they would pay soon enough.

The skaven began to pour through the arched passageways in great numbers. It was like watching water escaping from cracks in a dam. The streams gushed forth a living cascade, a vermin tide that begin to fill the far chamber like a seething sea of mangy fur. At their fore came a swarm of slaves and giant rat packs; there were so many that they crawled atop each other in an undulating mass. Behind that, however, King Belegar could see that it was not all disorder. A sinister cunning was guiding the skaven, herding the rabble to the fore, while behind them enormous blocks formed, comprising clanrats and stormvermin in their multitude.

The dwarf king could pick out endless Clan Mors totems. It galled him that so many of those hated icons were familiar to him. On the left flank were gathered the Spinebacks and Redclaws – some of the warrior packs that had penetrated deep within the Citadel six months ago.

Their intrusion was part of the attacks during one of the brief times of alliance between the greenskins and the ratmen. All held a special grudge against them, for they had slain Yorrik, the master brewer in that raid. Although the distance was great, King Belegar had no doubt that at least part of the beloved alemeister now adorned the Spineback's standard. On the far rank flank he espied the symbol of the Rusthelms – stormvermin that had looted the under-armouries, making off with much store of irreplaceable dwarf mail. The king did not know that they were now known as the Ironskins, but he could not fail to note that many wore pieces of reworked dwarf armour jury-rigged onto their own gear. Each bannerpole and scratch-marked shield-design sparked further reminders of innumerable grudges and indignities suffered.

And then, King Belegar's eyes beheld the standard of Clan Mors and the all-too familiar Red Guard. He caught only glimpses of his foe in that swirling midst, but he knew now who led the skaven attack. As one, the dwarfs lifted up their battlecry, clashing axes upon shields and stomping their feet. They too had seen the most-hated skaven commander to ever haunt the dreams of dwarfs.

Far across the Hall of Clan Skalfdon Queek heard the uproar and knew his foe had spotted him. Chest swelling with pride, the warlord continued to call out orders and set his battle line. Now that the dwarfs were out of their boltholes, he could crush them. If all went well, in a few short hours he would be glutted on dwarf flesh and there would be long awaited new heads prominently skewered atop his banner pole. The ground beneath Queek's feet rumbled slightly, a hopeful sign that soon a new verminous host might burst forth. Any additional route for reinforcements would be useful, but if the tunnel-grinders turned up behind or in the midst the dwarf ranks, it would be possible to sweep up their lines quickly. While he walked with great swagger and exuded confidence, Queek was well aware that if he did not crush the dwarfs out in the open, they would retire back behind more fortified gates, prolonging the process. He knew skaven victory was inevitable, just as he knew his stubborn-minded foe would never admit defeat while their heads were still attached to their bodies.

When enough of the rabble had been whipped to the fore, Queek Headtaker gave the signal. Shrill squeaking, the clanging of discordant bells and banging of hand gongs rippled along the skaven front and back into the tunnels behind them. With a whip crack, the slaves and giant rats were sent scrambling forward at full speed.



The dwarfs looked on in grim silence. The hall was so large that their artillery did not open fire while the skaven hordes poured out of the three corridors and formed up. The dwarfs had already marked the varied ranges – the cannons and grudge throwers could open up when the foe reached the fallen ancestor statue, the organ guns at the highest piled rubble. This was dwarf thoroughness. The crew of those war machines, and the aged engineer Durggan who strode amongst them, knew each engine as if it were one born to him. They had even mentally factored in variances for shifting air currents high up in the drafty hall.

Timing their opening salvo perfectly with the approaching speed of the foe, the dwarf cannon batteries opened fire, roaring in voices of thunder. The dwarf lines watched as bloody furrows were ploughed into the oncoming wave of attackers. A rain of boulders followed this. The metallic twang of grudge throwers releasing their payload was lost in the concussive blast of cannonfire and few noticed the high arcing flight of the rocks they flung. The crashing shots caused spectacular blossoms of stone shards and mangled bodies to erupt wherever they landed. The crews were too busy swabbing barrels, priming black powder and recranking the torque to appreciate the bloody havoc they were wrecking amid the enemy hordes. However many they were killing, they knew they needed to do more. Sweat-slicked despite the damp chill, the crews worked with rapid, but well-drilled precision.

The sharp crack of warplock jezzails added to the din, as glowing green streaks traced the incoming shots. Several pattered off Belegar's rune-covered shield, but elsewhere the warp-bullets penetrated shield and armour alike, dropping handfuls of dwarfs. In return, the dwarf quarrellers unleashed their own volleys, sending hissing bolts to plunge into the onrushing slaves and scurrying packs of giant rats. The handguns fired next, clouds of smoke beginning to roll down the line. Many skaven fell, and some turned tail to flee, but most of the horde pressed forward. On the right flank the flame cannon sent its incandescent chemical fury spurting in a rolling cone of fire that swept over a unit. Belegar was close enough to see one ratman near the edge of the swathe of destruction hold up its arm and screech – the flesh falling off the stump, the bones shrivelled and twisted by the searing flame. In that one moment, he took in the gibbering and chattering horde, the foam at their mouths, and the steady stoicism of his brothers in arms. And then, the great wave of skaven engulfed him.

The crash of battle lines echoed in the hall. Axe met sword, spears shivered against gromril, and the clang of metal on metal rang out.

The battle in the Hall of Clan Skalfdon was savage and without mercy. Those who fell on either side, whether from wound or a slip upon the blood-slicked floor, never arose again. They were crushed, spear-gouged, hacked apart or dragged out of the combat to suffer a more prolonged agony.

Even after their first wave of attackers was smashed upon the rock-hard dwarf line, the skaven outnumbered their foe by more than ten to one. Yet in the first hours of that battle, the superior troops and matchless armour of the dwarfs negated any numerical advantage. The fire of hatred spurned Belegar and his troops on, driving them so they felt no pain or weariness. In that time the hall rang with dwarf battlesong, the fierce joy of a fierce people, cutting down those whom they had long begrudged. Axe blows hacked off limbs, while hammers broke and pulped foes with every swing. Shields of wood and scrap metal pushed against shields of thrice-forged dwarf steel.

Into this fray Queek steadily fed the never-ending stream of troops coming from the underdepths. The commander stood atop a piled mass of rubble and fallen pillars so he could best direct the onslaught. He knew there were many times more skaven in reserve than there were in the combat. Behind Queek, the hordes stretched back through miles of tunnels. All were pushing forward, scrambling to tear their hunk of flesh from the foe.

This was but the first clawpack, only a finger of his great strength. On the dwarf side, Queek reckoned that there were few if any reserves. Every claw that went down, ground to death in that maelstrom, took with it dwarf veterans that could never be replaced. And there was always another claw of skaven troops ready to rush into the fighting. With each whooshing blast of super-heated air, Queek knew a warpfire team had gouged holes into the foe's line with their smouldering blasts. The Headtaker knew that under enough pressure even dwarf-forged steel would snap. With each new wave, that moment was drawing ever nearer.

A new and terrible sound drew the attention of any who could spare a glance. Grootose of Clan Moulder had, at last, brought forth his most superior specimens. The Great Packmaster let loose his prime horrors – a pair of Hell Pit abominations. These living mountains of stitched-together flesh heaved their bulk forward, their many mouths mewling a hellish high-pitched cacophony. Just watching them made the most stouthearted of dwarfs quail, their senses rebelling at the queasy and unnatural things that simultaneously pulled, dragged, wheeled and slithered their way closer.

Despite their appalling gait, the Hell Pit abominations moved with astonishing speed. Each shuddering lurch seemed to torture the creatures, as if every step, every painful breath was itself an agony. Most likely it was, for as the dwarfs watched, new heads pushed out of misshapen mounds of unctuous flesh, shiny and red, screeching with newborn anger. Whatever pain the creatures felt at their own horrific existence did not stop them, but rather drove them on in a hellish rage.

The cannons from the Grimhall battery put several rounds straight into the closest abomination's chest. The hurtling cannonballs blew holes through the beast's thick, tumourous flesh, the force of the shots half spinning the creature around. Even as it stagger-heaved itself back on course, the beast's howls raised in pitch and volume. Blood did not run from the gaping wound in its body, but instead the torn necrotic flesh issued forth a stream of vermin. The parasitic rats locked their teeth upon ragged folds of flesh and began feeding in a gnawing and gluttonous fashion. The wound began to knit and fold, repairing itself and covering the rats. They could still be seen writhing beneath the newly formed flesh.

The living nightmares hit the dwarf lines like thunderbolts. Their verminous heads lunged out blindly while their grotesque bodies smacked down upon shieldwalls in an avalanche of malformed flesh. They burrowed into the dwarf formations, wriggling like rodents sinking into a corpse.

To the right of King Belegar's bodyguard, blue-capped dwarfs with crossbows attempted to bring down the rat ogres that were loping towards them. Several of the hulking beasts toppled, pierced by many bolts, but a dozen of the brutes reached their quarry to deliver a hammering assault. Triple-juiced beyond natural limits, the over-muscled rat fiends ripped dwarfs apart with their bare claws, sending showers of gore in wide-splattering arcs. The last few quarrellers attempted to flee, but were instead stomped beneath clawed feet. There were no dwarfs left to step into the gap, and the blood-mad rat ogres ploughed into the exposed right flank of the king's own Iron Brotherhood.

With the king's bodyguard occupied, Queek knew the time was right. All along the battle line the dwarfs were flagging. Previously, their king and his guard had rallied out to smash entire skaven claws, but they were now pinned by the rat ogres. It was time to break the dwarf centre. On his signal, a new wave of attackers surged forth – Queek and his Red Guard at the front heading straight for the beleaguered dwarf king.

Sensing his troops collapsing around him, Belegar nodded to his banner-bearing kinsmen, who passed the sign along. The golden horn of the Iron Brotherhood had been strangely silent all battle, but now sounded, its bold notes ringing clear through the cavernous hall. At this sign, the Skalfdon Gates were activated. Gears

and pulleys lifted the immense stone door, and golden light streamed into that darksome place. Briefly, the halls beyond were revealed, but the skaven only had eyes for the hulking silhouetted shapes that were emerging from out of the opened gates.

It had taken an immense sum of gold and a staggering amount of ale to hire Golgfag Maneater and his mercenary army of ogres. Luckily for Belegar, he had both.

It had been a troubling move for the king, as no dwarf parts with gold easily. Also, dwarfs had accumulated their own share of grudges against the ogres, something that was especially true for the notorious sellsword Golgfag. Desperate times required desperate measures, and King Belegar needed allies, even if he had to buy them. The dwarf king had drawn the line at gnoblars – it was out of the question that they should be invited inside his ancestral home. Unsurprisingly, the shrewd ogre captain had used this as a bargaining tool. He forced King Belegar to part with even more of his gold to atone for the anguish Golgfag said he experienced when forced to abandon the little creatures. Although Golgfag acted quite put out when forced to cut loose his smallest companions, Belegar was fairly certain the ogre had ended up eating them. None of that mattered at the moment.

Upon entering the Hall of Clan Skalfdon, the ogres wasted no time getting to work. Bellowing, they strode into the fray, their stone clubs and meaty fists sending broken skaven bodies flying through the air. A trio of cannon-wielding ogres unloaded scattershot into onrushing clanrats, melting the unit beneath a hail of iron shrapnel. Wolf rats had snuck around the right flank to menace the Stoutbelly battery, but a single pounce by sabretusks slew or drove off the lupine-vermin. The mournfang cavalry ripped deep into the skaven, their charge proving unstoppable. Of all the ogres, none were more ferocious than Golgfag and his maneaters. The professional fighters broke enemy units with a brutal efficiency that belied their disparate gear of war and individualistic attack styles.

Queek Headtaker caught only part of this ugly new development, for he and his Red Guard had smashed full tilt into King Belegar's Iron Brotherhood. The doughty dwarfs of that formation were mighty warriors, each equipped with a rune-inscribed hammer that could split a shield and smash down the skaven behind it. A single of these hammerers could doubtlessly hold his own against a dozen clanrats at a time, probably more. However, they did not face clanrats now, but Queek Headtaker, ruler of the City of Pillars and right claw of Clan Mors' Lord of Decay. Whirling, spinning, and driving Dwarf Gouger through platemail with ease, Queek had already slain ten of their kind. He was carving a path straight for their king.

The stormvermin of the Red Guard were exceptional fighters, standout killers amongst the massive skaven army. In their long service to their warlord, they had taken sacred banners from ironbreakers, brought down giants and worn necklaces fashioned from the teeth of black orc commanders. On that day, however, they could not match the Iron Brotherhood. For every hammerer they clove with heavy halberds, three or four of their own kind were crushed in return by smashing hammerblows that shattered mail, and reduced skulls to powder. If not for Queek's onslaught, and the rat ogres pounding upon the dwarfs' flank, the Red Guard would not have long stood that hammerplay.

Thanks to their vast numbers and the confidence instilled by their swaggering Warlord, the back ranks of the Red Guard continued to scramble forward to replace the fallen. This gave Queek enough time to reach his chosen prey.





Queek moved with a sinuous grace. By comparison, the dwarfs were clumsy and slow. They lumbered in bulky armour, and swung ponderously heavy hammers. The Warlord of Clan Mors vaulted one of the Iron Brotherhood, launching himself off the dwarf's helm and shoulders before he could react. Whilst in mid-air, Queek slashed out to dispatch two more foes before fluidly landing and ducking under an arcing hammer. With quick slashes, three more dwarfs fell, and now Queek stood directly before Belegar Ironhammer. The battle raged all around these two, but by unspoken words, each side knew it was a fight their leader wished to win unaided.

The dwarf king froze in position, the flicker of hatred in his eyes the only signs that his monumental stoicism might be slipping. Queek revelled in such moments. He delighted in the taunting challenge, and lived to watch a rival's eyes as he slew them. The warlord clashed his weapons together, bared his fangs and postured – daring his victim to fight him.

Queek moved with blurring speed, but Belegar anticipated the strikes – moving his shield to counter each. It was Belegar who landed the first blow – an overhand strike from the Hammer of Angrund that cracked Queek's spiked shoulder plate. Both combatants winced – the skaven from the sheer force of the blow, the dwarf from the feedback that emitted from Queek's warpshard armour.

Five times Queek was sure he had landed a telling stroke, but each time, Belegar shifted his shield in a flash of blue and gold. With nothing but a few scratchmarks to show for his efforts, the shrewd skaven next attempted to draw his opponent into overextending. Queek taunted the dwarf about their previous encounters, speaking of how he had slain Belegar's brother. The dwarf king's eyes flickered to the skull with matted beard impaled upon the skaven's backbanner. In his growing rage, and frustration at being unable to smash his hated foe, Belegar finally made the smallest mistake.

And all Queek had ever needed was the slightest of openings.

Catching a blow from Queek's blade upon his shield, King Belegar prepared for a second swipe from the spike-end of Dwarf Gouger. Instead, with a lightning-quick pirouette, Queek spun outside of the king's shield, putting all his weight and momentum into a backhand blow with the chisel-tipped edge of the vicious maul. For his troubles, Queek received a buffeting blow from the dwarf shield, caving a dent into his helm and sending him sprawling. Even as he tumbled upright, Queek was licking fresh dwarf blood off of his beloved maul-pick. Once beyond Belegar's infernal shield, Dwarf Gouger had again lived up to its name, punching through gromril and delivering a deep stab into the king's side.

Bleeding but defiant, King Belegar charged anew, quickly closing the gap between the two.

Queek's head twitched quickly, espying his surroundings. Despite his strutting arrogance, he was no fool. Queek knew he could slay the dwarf king, but even injured it would likely take some time. And from his quick scan, that was the one thing he did not have. The arrival of the ogres had reinvigorated the dwarf battle line. Moments before, the Iron Brotherhood were surrounded by foes, a stalwart island amidst a raging sea of skaven. Now, however, the opposite was true. Ogres and dwarf formations had pushed back the ratmen, sometimes routing them entirely. It was now Queek that was penned in by foes. The Red Guard were falling before the devastating hammer strokes, attacks that increased when the Iron Brotherhood saw their king injured. With all their other opponents destroyed, the hammerers were concentrated solely

on the stormvermin. Queek knew his guard must break at any moment, leaving him alone and surrounded by the king's bodyguard.

Queek bounded beyond the oncoming dwarf king's path and called for his troops to retreat. Skaven do not have to be told twice to fall back. Each member of the Red Guard turned-tail at once, knocking each other over in their eagerness to scurry away. Denied his true target, the Headtaker refused to leave without a trophy. Queek vaulted those who tried to block his escape and slashed out with his sword. At the end of an arc of crimson was the head of thane Notrigar, Belegar's banner bearer and kin. The head flew twenty paces to bounce upon the chamber floor where it was quickly snatched up by one of the fleeing Red Guard. The Banner of the Angrund clan toppled, slowing the pursuing dwarfs and allowing Queek ample time to rejoin his formation.

The ogres had turned the tide of battle within the Hall of Clan Skalfdon. In a few places the skaven army stood, or retreated in good order. The jezzail teams of Ssizik's Deadeyes had ensconced themselves amidst a high rubble pile, and began sending round after round into the ogres. It took many hits from the glowing warpstone bullets to fell the loutish brutes, picking them off as they stomped fleeing skaven. One of the Hell Pit abominations had held an entire dwarf flank from pursuit before finally succumbing to the axes of the Stoneplaits clan. The other abomination remained unstoppable. It had crushed a path from one end of the dwarf line to the other. Neither the pickaxes of the miners, nor the sporadic barrages of cannonballs could fell the beast.

Seeing that pursuit of his swift-fleeing foe was futile, King Belegar about-faced his hammerers and strode to do battle with the hulking Moulder-spawned monster. Although the pale abomination crushed many beneath its bulk, the king and his Iron Brotherhood hammered it down, eventually pounding the brains out from each of its squealing heads.

Then the dwarfs felt a dreadful stirring beneath them. The skaven, even those fleeing at top speed, halted. They too felt the growing vibrations churning through their feet. A tremor became a jolt and turned into a full hall-shaking quake. Even the ogres, who were notoriously imperceptive, noticed the swaying of their bellies and the cracks spreading outwards across the stone floor. Huge piles of rock heaved upwards into the hall as a series of tunnels were ploughed up from the depths below. The skaven began to chitter as they reformed, tails swishing eagerly in anticipation.

The stone floor cracked and buckled as mounds of dirt and rock pushed through, spouting across the chamber like enormous mole hills. An unnatural glow shone forth from under the cracking bulge in the northernmost mound. With a brilliant flash of luminescent green, a hole appeared in the newly raised conical mound. For a few moments nothing but smoke poured out, and then something emerged. It was not skaven, but instead a bounding storm of muscular bipedal red orbs – cave squigs! They sprung upon powerful legs, hurtling downwards upon nearby dwarf handgunners. Without time to raise their weapons, the dwarfs were overwhelmed as gaping mouths overpacked with razor-sharp teeth tore through them. Atop some of the squigs were night goblins, their robes and pointy hoods flapping behind them as they careened madly. Mobs of black robed archers emerged next, sending volleys of feathered shafts that the dwarfs attempted to block on upturned shields.

Skarsnik, the self-proclaimed Overlord of Karak Eight Peaks had joined the battle, leading forth the might of the Crooked Moons tribe.

The most powerful of all night goblins had called the Waaagh!. He had summoned to him not just the multitudes of night goblins, but all manner of greenskins and monsters alike. Orc tribes from the Badlands, forest goblins from the web-filled forests, and black orcs from the desolate Dark Lands began to push upwards into the hall.

In the turmoil it was difficult to see how many tunnels there were, but one – guided by malevolent force – arose right before the Skalfdon Gate. Night goblins bearing the distinctive yellow moon shield streamed out, their spears as thick as a subterranean forest. They were so near to the closest dwarf formations that the goblins flung out mushroom-crazed fanatics, their whirling chains and weighted cannonballs crumpling armour, shields and bones alike.

Skarsnik climbed forth and thrust out his prodder, sending a beam of green light crackling up where it melted a portion of the distant ceiling. Standing over the slain abomination, King Belegar immediately recognised his other great nemesis. At first the dwarf thought the beam of light was an attempt to bring down the vaulted ceiling, but only later did he realise what it meant.

The jet of green light was not an attempt to collapse the roof, but instead a signal. In addition to announcing Skarsnik's entrance in dramatic fashion, it was the prearranged sign for the ogres to switch sides.

Only recently, the maneaters and the ironbreakers had stood side by side, chasing off the fleeing vermin. Now, without warning, the club-wielding ogres turned and flattened many dwarfs before the bearded ones even perceived the betrayal. After many hours of hard fighting and a staggering death toll, the real battle for the Hall of Clan Skalfdon began. Death was everywhere.

The Verminlord known as Soothgnawer watched his plan unfold in the scry-glass. Soon it would be time for the grey seer Kranskritt to emerge. Little could have surprised him more than when a voice spoke from the shadows.

'Your pawn led the goblin-thing to the tunnels? Why-tell?'

For an instant, Soothgnawer lost composure. Black lightning crackled. No mortal creature – not even the legendary Snikch, the so-called Deathmaster – could approach the Verminlord unawares. The Warpseer had the power to see the future and could hear thoughts. Who had done this?

'Ahhhh,' said Soothgnawer, grasping the source of the startling voice and also the unseeable shadow that had interwoven through his augurations of late. 'It is you, Lurklox. Yes-yes. Now I see. That explains much. Even I could not see how Queek found Thaxx so quickly. We could not see-scry...'

Lurklox did not step out of the shadows. Instead, the sinuous creature was the shadow. He unfolded into the light. He was the knife in the dark, the thing that moved in the gloomlight. Few, mortal or immortal, had seen him and lived. 'The goblin-thing. Name-tell your plan,' he demanded.

For an instant, the Verminlord Warpseer considered blasting his peer, but he quelled the instinct. 'I aim for grey seers to regain a seat upon the Council of Thirteen. Clan Mors opposes this. Gnawdwell moves against my cause. In this battle,' Soothgnawer held forth the swirling scry-ball, 'Kranskritt will arrive to halt him. The Headtaker will reconsider alliance with the seer-caste,' he explained.

In truth, the plan had been to let the green-things fight it out with Queek and the bearded things before turning up at the end and destroying whatever was left. In this way, Kranskritt could claim credit for the victory. But he wasn't about to tell Lurklox that part.

Now that he knew Queek had a patron, the plans required adjustments and recalculations.

With the arrival of Skarsnik, every element of King Belegar's plan had gone awry.

The mercenary ogres switching sides was unexpected – not because the dwarf king had faith in the ogres – but because he had no idea when his foes could have made contact with the brutes. His anger over the broken bond was a freshly minted grudge, yet even the fires of that rancour paled before the hatred felt for the dwarfs' ancestral foes – the skaven and the greenskins. In their rage, many of the dwarfs lost all regard for survival, feeling the need only to bury their axes into as many of the enemy as they could. Belegar, however, knew it was his duty to sound the retreat. Yet even their withdrawal plan was in jeopardy – for the dwarfs' line of withdrawal had been blocked. The goblin tunnels were now between the dwarf throng and the gates leading back to the Citadel.

The new tunnels had split the dwarf force. Two thirds of the remaining army was with King Belegar in the northwestern corner of the hall, the remaining third formed a battle line on the opposite side. Master engineer Durggan Stoutbelly took charge there, the sturdy dwarf directing his remaining few artillery pieces to lay down devastating firepower. Cannonballs and gouts of flames tore swathes into the greenskin hordes that kept spilling out of the newly made passageways.

The situation looked grim, but Belegar still had at least one surprise of his own left. There was no time for thought just then, however. With a bubbling roar, the slain Hell Pit abomination lurched upright – a spark of life reanimating it once again.

Across the great hall, the skaven had reformed around Queek Headtaker and his remaining Red Guard. Newly arriving claws ensured that the skaven army was as numerous as it had been when the battle started. To get back to the dwarfs, they would have to cut their way through goblins. This did not trouble Queek at all. With the Headtaker in their midst, the Red Guard was soon scything their way through the greenskins.

Meanwhile, Skarsnik was in his element. The thrill of a good ambush never ceased to inspire him. He stood atop the ruin of old stunty statues alongside his enormous companion, the massive cave squig, Gobbla. Between shrieking out orders, Skarsnik sent jets of green energy from the end of his prodder. Perhaps it was the gale force winds of magic, or merely the tide of greenskin energies, but for whatever reason, Skarsnik's cruelly bladed prodder sent forth prodigious blasts. A single shot evaporated a pack of giant rats, while another green bolt smashed the Thunderhall battery's flame cannon, the subsequent explosion sending shockwaves through the hall. With each arcane burst, the leader of the Crooked Moon cackled and pranced.

The greenskin army that rose out of the tunnels was growing by the heartbeat. Black robed goblin archers and spearmobs marched in steady streams. On their shields and banners most of the night goblins bore the yellow moonface of the Crooked Moon, but there were other tribes as well. Orc mobs muscled their way to the front, the icons on their wooden-slab shields revealing that both mountain and Badlands tribes were represented. Squigs bounded by and mobs of stone trolls, distracted by

corpses, stopped to feed – shovelling broken bodies of skaven and dwarfs into their slobbering mouths.

Golgfag and his ogres had put a major dent into the dwarf battle line. One by one the dwarf shieldwalls were cracked by ogre clubs and pushed back by the overbearing weight crushing down upon them. Golgfag, who had fought plenty of dwarfs in his time, was not overjoyed to be doing so again. It wasn't that he minded double-crossing King Belegar – such business decisions were all about profit – it was that he rued the hard work. Dwarfs took too much effort to kill, and Golgfag preferred easier targets. But what Skarsnik was paying more than made up for a few hammerbruises and axe scars.

Their lines staved in by ogres and overrun by goblins, the dwarfs under engineer Durggan made a defiant stand. The last two cannons rained grapeshot, while the irondrakes of the Forgefuries formed a circle and fired alchemic blasts from their handcannons. They halted an ironguts charge, routed three goblin advances, blasted down leaping sabretusks, and with his pistols Durggan Stoutbelly personally felled a pair of fanatics that were spinning dangerously close. It was Golgfag and his maneaters that finally stormed the rubble mound. Durggan was amongst the last dwarfs that died. His final effort to fire the cannon point blank into the ogre captain was thwarted when a fist-sized round from Golgfag's pistol blew out the dwarf's vitals.

As his lads rummaged for plunder, Golgfag looked upon the rising sea of skaven. A black tide of night goblins was rushing to meet it. In the far corner, the dwarf king was temporarily holding off his doom. More and more goblins and skaven poured into the hall. They were all mad, thought Golgfag. This wrecked underground hall reminded Golgfag of a pitfight – the combatants would keep fighting until the end. As to which would crawl out alive, he did not know. Or care. Golgfag patted his pocket, feeling the weight of the brilliantly bejewelled crown of Karak Eight Peaks that Skarsnik had given him as downpayment. He felt like they'd already earned their pay, so perhaps it was time to begin looking for an exit...

From the centre tunnel came shrill shrieks from terrified night goblins. Next, an explosion of flame cascaded upwards in a geyser of fire, incinerating hundreds of greenskins. From the ensuing smokestorm strode a horned skaven, his light grey fur standing out in the darkness, further illuminated by a glow of arcane power. Kranskritt snatched magical energies from the rich flow around him. At a gesture from his outstretched hand, cracks in the floor grew, splitting outwards faster than a skaven could run. Rock groaned in protest as it tore itself apart, the stone splintering along many lines. A chain of yawning chasms spread out from the grey seer's feet.

Those who dared look upon the grey seer saw something else. Behind the him stood a shadow – another horned sorcerer that was larger and mightier still. A Verminlord had come to the Hall of Clan Skalfdon – contamination and blight made manifest. From it spread further ripples of ruin. Rents opened to swallow entire mobs of greenskins, and the slow-footed dwarfs fared even worse.

As the ground shook, the newly excavated tunnels collapsed. In that chaos, King Belegar ordered the horn signal to be blown. No sooner was this done than small explosions, expertly placed by engineers, rocked a dozen support columns. Immense teetering pylons of stone toppled over, crushing hundreds trapped beneath. Dust and debris filled the hall, and warriors from all armies were momentarily staggered.

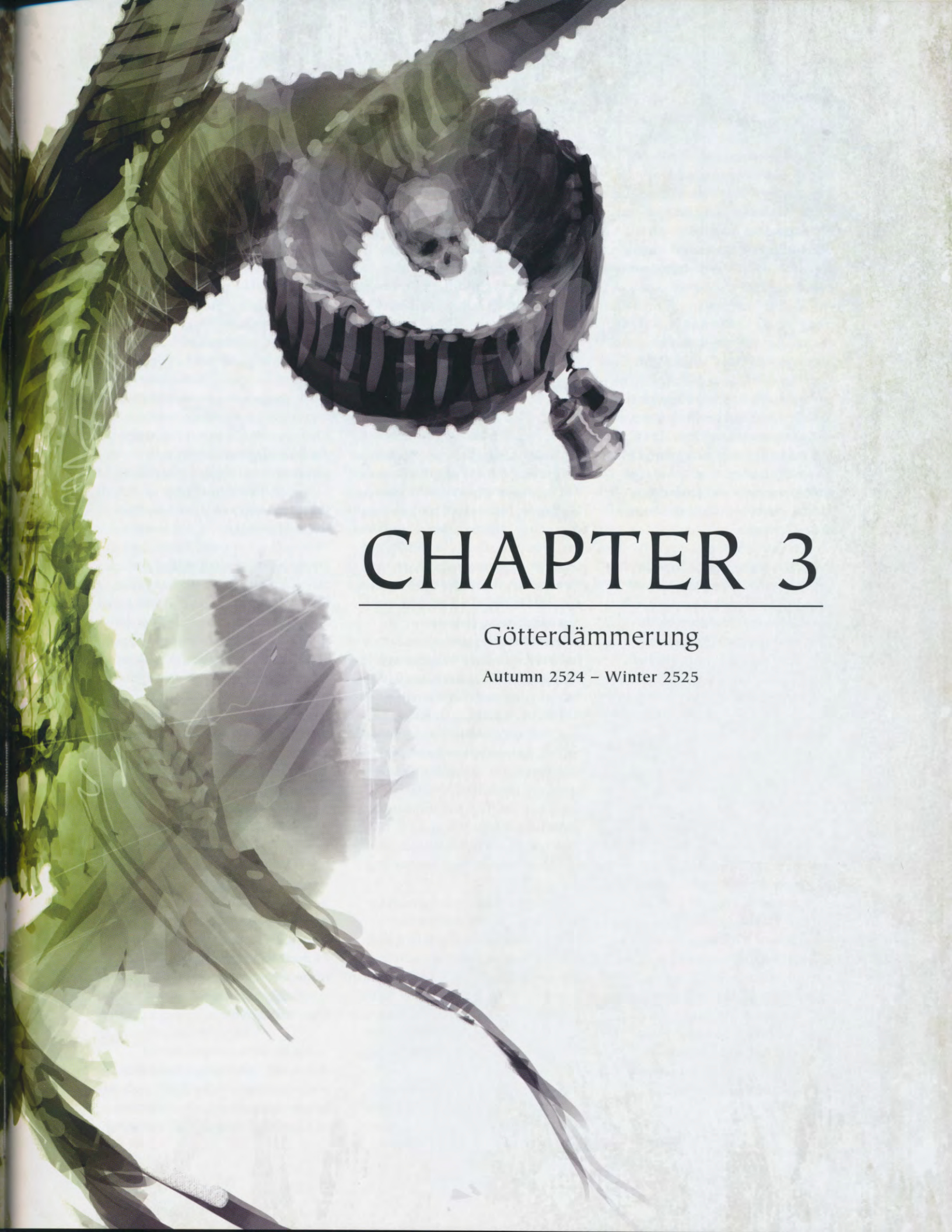
What followed was a desperate race to the exits for those that still could. Whole formations were trapped – surrounded on all sides by crevices too large to leap, or hemmed in by fallen pillars. Others remained locked in combat – skaven versus goblin versus dwarf. Fighting to the end, even as the Hall of Skalfdon collapsed upon them.











CHAPTER 3

Götterdämmerung

Autumn 2524 – Winter 2525

Aldrik the Scarred peered down the empty passage, sniffing the stale air. The slayer was headsore and bled from a score of wounds. Yet he did not stop – his mission drove him. Aldrik had lost track of how long he had walked the underdark. It felt like many months since he and seven groups of slayers had fought their way out of the Citadel's besiegement.

It had been a fool's crusade. Still, the venture had promised a better death than waiting behind fortifications. Slayers could defend narrow passageways, but they longed instead to hunt down and kill the largest and most ferocious of foes. They had petitioned King Belegar and he eventually agreed to let the orange-crested warriors seek their doom. By now, most of them had found it, thought Aldrik.

Death did not frighten Aldrik. He had taken the Slayer Oath – a vow to forevermore seek doom in battle against the most deadly foes. To perish fighting a dragon was an honour to both surviving kin and ancestors. It was a slayer's nightmare to die in ignoble fashion – falling to a cave-in or disease, or overwhelmed by lowly vermin. To confront your ancestors in the halls of the afterlife after such a menial death would be shame unredeemable.

There had been much fighting since Aldrik left the stone vault of Bar-Kragdi. It was difficult to remember it all. Below the surface there were no days or nights, only the underdark, but that hardly bothered a dwarf – nor should it have caused him to lose track of time. Rather it was the non-stop battles, to say nothing of his fearful injuries, that had disoriented Aldrik. The slayer remembered carving through scrawny ratmen, recalled them breaking before his wrath. He had pursued them into the deeps. Then there had been more skaven. Always, more skaven.

No matter how many he slew, more ratmen came. His foes had at least grown larger, but not even stormvermin could stand before the wide sweeps of Dammstok, his broad-bladed axe. In battle it shone with blue fire, each rune giving Aldrik strength of purpose, devotion to his doom. It was dark now, as he shuffled down the empty hall. The runic powers were sleeping in the metal, yet he still felt their comforting thrum.



Aldrik reached the end of the ventilation shaft. He had long sought his doom at Karak Eight Peaks, and had made many forays. With each journey he had worked his way deeper into the sprawling labyrinth of the underground city. Yet he did not know where he was now. From the stonework Aldrik could tell he was in the older mines. Gnawed additions had widened the passageway or defaced the ancestral images that had been cunningly wrought out of the living stone. Aldrik paused to listen for the sound of clawed feet. He had oft been pursued, forced to turn and deal more death. The brief halts helped, as the slayer was bruised and bleeding, a trail of his lifeblood spattered out behind him. Only the legendary stamina and stubbornness of his people kept him upright. Only the urgent need to tell Belegar what he alone had seen kept him moving.

In the overcrowded passageways Aldrik had mown down ratmen. He had slaughtered everything that dared approach him: clan warriors, stormvermin, rat ogres – all had fallen before Dammstok. How many hours he hewed his foe, Aldrik did not know. At last the ratmen had brought new weapons in the hope of eliminating him. As clanrats fled before his axe, Aldrik had a brief glimpse of a long-barrelled war engine. It was a ramshackle device, cobbled out of scrap, but the slayer recognised it as a lightning-throwing cannon. His last thought was that dying in such a fashion would not make a fitting end. Then everything turned black-green.

When next Aldrik could remember, he was lying beneath piled rubble. Although his head ached, the pressures let him know how far underground he was. The stone floor he had been standing upon had crumbled, sending him tumbling down many hundreds of feet into the dark. Aldrik knew this was not the far deeps, but was the middle levels. His best guess was some mishap of the ratmen's war engine had caused a massive explosion. He had seen the unstable warp-power melt stone, and supposed he was lucky not to have died. Death by inferior skaven worksmanship would not have been a worthy sacrifice.

Slowly Aldrik pushed, pulled and crawled his way out. His body was battered, and every bit of it was sore, but it was remarkably unbroken. He spent hours shifting stone before finding his axe. Dammstok must be with him at the end. When he limped out of the small cavern, axe in hand, Aldrik trudged down many tunnels. It was a chaotic warren gnawed into the rock, following no good sense. It stank heavily of rat musk.

At last Aldrik stumbled out of the narrow confines and back into dwarf-hewn corridors. The stench grew unbearable, and now he could hear something strange. He followed the passageway until it ended in a vast hall. He recognised the great stone chimneys and extrapolated where he must be – just above the blast furnaces of the north foundries. He could not believe what he saw within that vast cavern.

In his sojourns into the depths, Aldrik had come across foul breeding warrens before. Many dwarf raids had journeyed down into the blackness in hopes of finding and stamping out

such nests. Few of these missions succeeded, and fewer still were the dwarfs that returned to tell the tales. These infernal breeding pits were typically kept in the underdepths, and were always well guarded.

Breeders were rare, and skaven clans depended upon them for survival. The ratmen protected their breeders from raiders and rivals. Each of the fecund monstrosities could produce scores of litters, each composed of dozens of squirming ratman-spawn.

Stretched out in all directions, further than Aldrik's eyes could see, were breeders. Not one or two or dozens, but hundreds – no, thousands. It was a sea of packed, squirming flesh. The bloated beasts were chained to the stone floor. Their heads, which were tiny compared to their gravid bellies, mewled and hissed, snapping blindly into the air with incisors the size of swords. Multiple pairs of atrophied limbs clawed at the air in sporadic fits. Slaves and warlock attendants gravitated between the endless rows, injecting glowing chemicals into the supine creatures and snatching wet litters before they could be eaten.

Aldrik's mind raced. The breeders had only recently been moved up from the lower depths, judging by the levels of filth and excrement. The rumours were that such things happened before major skaven offensives. It was how the ratmen got reinforcements to the battlefront, as they sped the whelplings' growth unnaturally via alchemical stimulants and pure warpstone. From what Aldrik understood, verminous clans many times the size of the greatest dwarf enclave might have but several handfuls of these so called breeders. These were unguarded. Were the skaven so sure of victory? Were they no longer fearful of reprisal?

Aldrik began his grisly task. This was not a mighty enemy, but an extermination. The slaves scattered and the few defenders could not stop him. When the butchery was complete, the slayer continued on, only to make another disturbing discovery. The adjacent caverns were once great workhalls, places where ore came to be smelted, and silver and gold ingots were stacked in mountainous heaps ready for the forges. Those fires had long grown cold. Now the halls were full of skaven breeders. Each cavern was more filled than the last.

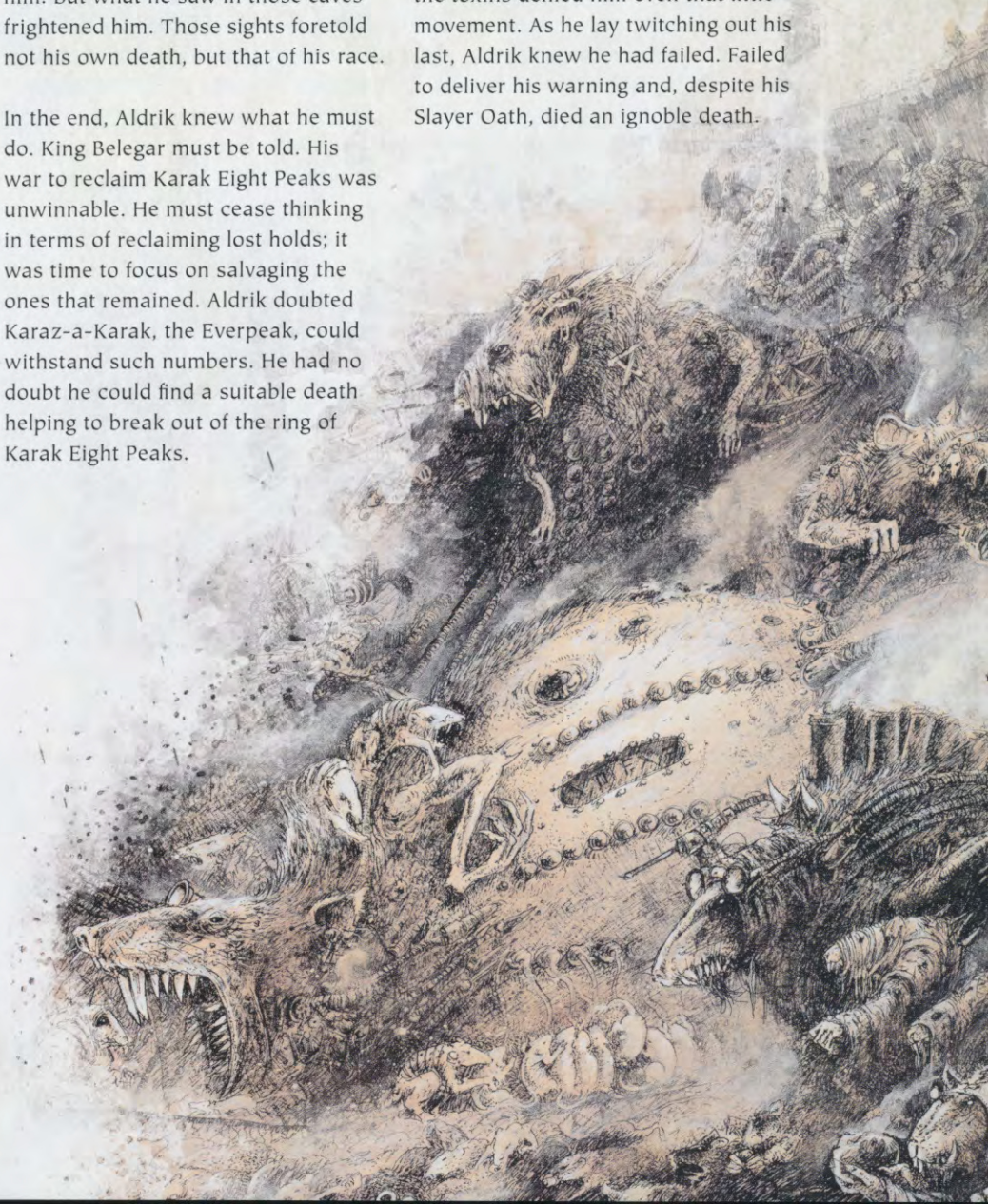
Even if no defenders came to stop him, Aldrik knew it would take an army of slayers and many days to kill them all.

Aldrik had sung his deathsong. He was a slayer and had accepted his doom, even if it had thus far eluded him. But what he saw in those caves frightened him. Those sights foretold not his own death, but that of his race.

In the end, Aldrik knew what he must do. King Belegar must be told. His war to reclaim Karak Eight Peaks was unwinnable. He must cease thinking in terms of reclaiming lost holds; it was time to focus on salvaging the ones that remained. Aldrik doubted Karaz-a-Karak, the Everpeak, could withstand such numbers. He had no doubt he could find a suitable death helping to break out of the ring of Karak Eight Peaks.

That had been several weeks ago. Since then, Aldrik had fought more battles, sometimes against creatures the likes of which he had never seen. Fangs gored him, claws scratched him. But still he plodded on, seeking paths that would lead him back to the Citadel. Now, however, Aldrik recognised the passageways. He was at last nearing his goal. The dwarfs, if they still survived, had pulled back behind further defences.

Anxious to deliver his message, Aldrik never heard the stealthy feet pad up from behind. The venomblade sliced deep between his shoulder blades; Dammstok clanged onto the stone floor. The slayer fell to his knees, dragging his unresponsive body onwards for a few more feet before the toxins denied him even that little movement. As he lay twitching out his last, Aldrik knew he had failed. Failed to deliver his warning and, despite his Slayer Oath, died an ignoble death.



It had been months since King Belegar had led the battered and dented survivors out of the Hall of Clan Skalfdon. They had been forced to clamber over fallen stone and traverse ever-widening ravines while fighting off skaven and night goblins. Even when they reached the Skalfdon Gate they had found it blocked by debris. While most of the dwarfs shifted rubble, the king and his Iron Brotherhood had formed an impenetrable line to protect them. The cost in lives had been high.

There had been some talk that the dwarfs' enemies might destroy each other. This false hope was quickly dashed by a series of attacks. The citadel was besieged above and below, by skaven, greenskins and ogres. Those armies might all have feuding factions – but they all desired to put the heads of the remaining dwarfs on the ends of spikes.

Six times since then, the dwarfs had been forced to shrink their perimeter. The most recent of these – the defence of the surface gates of the Citadel – had only ended yesterday. The first levels still echoed to the resounding booms of greenskin battering rams pounding upon the Great Gate of Defiance. Made of steel, stone and gromril, the gate was rune-protected. Previously, the dwarfs would have laughed at the futile efforts of their foes' crude war engines. Only by utilising fell magic could the enemy hope to defeat the great dwarfen bulwarks. Always, the runes of hearth and home – the protective sigils of Valaya – had overcome such arcane attacks. However, the runes of Valaya no longer functioned.

Runesmiths long versed in awakening ancient runes called upon the dwarfs' Ancestor Goddess, but their hammer strikes went unanswered. The runes of Valaya no longer shone bright when struck. It was as if the goddess of healing, protection and the karaks could no longer hear them. And outside, the Chaos winds were rising.

If Valaya had abandoned her children, thought King Belegar, it was no wonder his wound would not heal. Despite the menders' best work, the gouge into King Belegar's side showed little improvement. Injured, his army depleted, and enemies pressing into his ever-shrinking realm, the King of Karak Eight Peaks brooded. Yet it was not his own plight that most troubled the king.

King Belegar's hold on Karak Eight Peaks had always been tenuous. He had, after all, been under siege for over fifty years. What Belegar found far more disturbing, however, was the message he had received yesterday. Even as their surface fortifications fell one by one, the dwarfs had heroically kept open the rocky bluff of Tor Rudrum until the last hours. Although they were nowhere near the technological marvels of the mechanised aeries of Zhufbar, these carven rock shelves along the cliffs of Karag Lhune made ideal landing sites for gyrocopters.

Even as scrabbling swarms of spider riders scuttled across the cliff-faces, a last squadron of gyrocopters was seen rounding the peak from the north. Upon spotting a barrage of incoming fire, one pilot peeled off, heading back in the opposite direction.

Gyrocopters had long been used to carry messages into and out of Karak Eight Peaks, but they had come under increasing pressure of late. There were so many threats to the aircraft that only the most daredevil of pilots would risk what was known as 'the Gauntlet'. High up on the goblin-controlled peaks were rock lobbers and bolt throwers, and bat-winged doom divers or wyverns would make diving attacks on gyrocopters whenever they were sighted. Many pilots tried flying lower, hugging the contours of the slopes, but risked skaven jezzail sniper teams and the lightning-casting weapons of the warlock engineers.

The defenders cheered as the pair of gyrocopters flew closer, groaning when green flashes of jezzail fire sent one flying machine spinning to its doom. The resultant fireball lit up the mountainside. Leaving a billowing trail from a jezzail hit, the last gyrocopter fluttered to the landing spot. The pilot, engineer Torin 'Steamhammer' Algenonsonn, was only just through the stone-slab door into the mountainside when the first of the spider riders rose over the edge. He moaned and tore his beard in rage as he descended the many flights of stairs, for he could hear the sounds of his beloved flying machine being torn apart behind him.

The message Torin brought had come from Karaz-a-Karak. It bore the goldbound seal of High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer and was written in runes that could be seen by Belegar's eyes alone. King Belegar pored over the words many times. He sat alone in the cavernous Hall of Pillared Iron and brooded. The words were different, but the message was the same as that Belegar had received from the other great holds, save only Karak Azul, which had not answered.

Each of the great holds was under siege themselves – hard-pressed and on the defensive. No help could be sent to Karak Eight Peaks. Two of the holds – Zhufbar and Barak Varr – had even asked for the return of those of their clans that were fighting for King Belegar at Karak Eight Peaks.

In his message, High King Thorgrim explained why Karak Azul was silent. Firstly, King Kazador and Thorek Ironbrow had fallen fighting in the Lost Pass. This was a tragic loss, as Kazador's royal line was now ended. Thorek's loss would be felt even more deeply. He had been the most knowledgeable and active of all runesmiths. That irascible master had wrought magic with his hammercraft in a way that no other living being could match. Thorek had personally aided King Belegar many times in

Karak Eight Peaks and his gruff and conservative advice would be greatly missed. But the news grew worse.

Karak Azul had fallen.

Without the strong arms and resolute willpower of their king and Thorek to lead them, Karak Azul was attacked and overwhelmed by skaven. It was difficult to imagine the forges and smithies of the iron peak grown cold – they were the greatest ironworks in the dwarf realm. It had stood resolute for the long ages of the Time of Woe, withstanding sieges, invasions, earthquakes and the hellish daemon-tides from beyond. Not since the fall of Karak Eight Peaks had the dwarf realm suffered such a calamity.

The High King's message warned that gyrocopter flyovers reported refugees making their way along the high passes towards Karak Eight Peaks. They were still many days away. It asked that aid be sent – for those caravans would make easy prey along the dangerous mountain passes.

At least some of the skaven that sacked Karak Azul had come to the surface. Reports had them closely pursuing the long trains of refugees. Whether any skaven stalked them underground was unknown, although it seemed likely. Of old, three main routes of the Underway had connected Karak Azul to Karak Eight Peaks. In the Golden Age trade passed along those busy thoroughfares and whole armies could march swiftly to aid each other. Those pathways were broken, the flames that lit them long extinguished. It was still possible to make the journey via subterranean means, but the traveller would be forced into circuitous detours through numerous smaller tunnels. Aside from these difficulties, who knew what additional excavations the skaven had made? It was possible they were already much closer to Karak Eight Peaks – a dire prediction suggested by Thorgrim's message. They were coming, and soon.

So King Belegar sat alone in the Hall of Pillared Iron. In the growing dark of the world all choices now seemed ill. He had sent forth some rangers to aid the refugees. In truth, he could not spare the troops, and he was doubtful whether they could even break out of the encircling ring of foes, much less find and help the straggling caravan. Yet it was Belegar's forefather, King Lunn, who had led the exodus from Karak Eight Peaks. The terrible tales of grief passed down from that journey had forever haunted Belegar. He would not refuse aid, even if he had little to give.





Queek could hear the clanging iron frame and steam-venting hiss of the approaching dignitary long before he saw him. It was not by accident that Ikit Claw was forced to walk the lengthy corridor. Against the walls were heaped hundreds of bloodied regimental standard poles and totems. The right claw of Clan Mors liked to boast that he held more dwarf banners than did the dwarf king.

Ikit Claw did not speak until he had finally clanked to a stop before Queek's towering trophy-throne. A voice rasped behind the iron mask. 'Greetings, Oh Great Queek, Warlord of the City of Pillars. I bring-carry tidings. Yes-yes, I have slain many bearded-things – I have broken Iron-peak.'

Queek had heard that the rival Clan Rictus had as much to do with it as Ikit, but he felt it wise not to mention this. Too impatient to observe the ritual greetings and mock-flattery, Queek got to his point. 'Why-tell are you here?'

A menacing green glow emanated from Ikit's iron mask. 'I bring Great Queek tribute. The Council bid I gift you Clan Skryre weapons. Very kill-kill, these devices. I cannot stop-stay. I am bid-go to the mountain of the crested-dwarf things,' said Ikit. Without waiting for a reply, the master warlock engineer turn-tailed and began clanking back. 'I will be back if Queek cannot do the task,' said the skaven behind the mask.

With the constant flow of warfare in Karak Eight Peaks, King Belegar's realm had shrunk many times. As the dwarfs conceded ground before wave attacks, they decreased their perimeter. Not only were they falling back to ever more reinforced defensive positions, but also with each withdrawal more dwarfs were available to defend each chokepoint. In the past, this syndrome of ever-increasing defence had eventually bled attacks of all impetus. Previously, the timely arrivals of reinforcements had actually allowed Belegar to take the offensive. This time, however, no help seemed to be on the way.

A gradually withdrawing defence was a play for time. It was a chance for the multitudinous masses that attacked the dwarfs to self-destruct, turn upon each other, or simply grind themselves out of existence upon the gromril-hard defence. There were still three more levels of defensive lines left within the Citadel, before the enemy could assail the heart of King Belegar's reclaimed realm – the Hall of Pillared Iron.

The news from the rest of the dwarf realm was dire, but King Belegar reasoned that, if they could just hold on long enough, aid would eventually reach them. High King Thorgrim and Ungrim Ironfist, the Slayer King of Karak Kadrin, had never failed Belegar yet. They might be besieged themselves, but they would eventually win out and come to his aid. With his rangers sent to aid the refugees, King Belegar had rarely been so blind to his enemies' plans. He was not aware of the subterranean arrival of a great army of skaven from the south, nor did the dwarf king know of the influx of greenskins from beyond Death Pass. But he would soon find out.

The first position to feel the wrath of the new skaven offensive was the Arch of Kings, a wide bridge carved of stone. It was not built as a defence, but as a means to cross an underground river. Those waters, long ago poisoned and diverted, no longer flowed. This had left an empty chasm hundreds of feet below. The passage had long served as a natural chokepoint. The bridge itself was wide enough for an army to deploy upon, but it narrowed to a single well-protected door of stone at its southern end – the Archgate. Above this was a carven stone balcony, upon which stood guard a garrison of quarrellers.

As dwarfs had learned long ago, however, a door or gate without warriors to protect it was soon an open passageway for the skaven. If the fiends got close enough, they would unleash diabolic weaponry – melting gromril with warpfire, cracking rune-protected stone with warp-powered drills, or using warp-grinders to crush rock and metal alike. Therefore, ironbreakers stood guard long before any ratmen could get to the gated door.

The first skaven attempts could not weather the storm of bolts from the quarrellers. Like a tide, the brown sea of ratmen rushed up, lost momentum, and then scurried back. An especially large horde of clanrats and one armoured group of stormvermin survived the withering hail of shots and reached the next level of defence. Their way was blocked by a nigh-impregnable shieldwall. The heavily armoured dwarfs hacked the skaven down, while the quarrellers above kept careful watch. Any weapon team that detached itself and attempted to fire was riddled with bolts.

The war between the skaven and dwarfs had gone through many evolutions. The dwarfs, conservative traditionalists, refined what they did best. They made better armour, perfected runes of protection and drilled their shieldwalls until they fought and moved as one. The skaven approach was more random, and more open to experimentation. The ratmen cobbled together new kinds of weapon teams, stitched together never-seen-before types of creatures, and developed weaponised diseases. Many of these were failures, one-offs that never passed prototype stage. A handful – such as the warpfire thrower, the poisoned wind mortar, and the ratling gun – proved effective (and reliable) enough to put into mass production. As the defences of the Arch of Kings held fast, a new skaven weapon lumbered into action.

They were rat ogres, but with recently devised modifications. Clan Moulder used their flesh-stitching advances to attach packmasters directly onto the lumbering brutes. Strapped to the back of each rat ogre's scarred and heavily muscled back was a shrunken, atrophied skaven. Through experimental growth-juices, and a disturbing exchange of cranial fluids, the packmaster could (at least partially) stay the animalistic fury of the hard-to-control beasts. Then Clan Skryre had made the beasts a greater threat than ever.

Combining a rat ogre's unnatural strength with the cunning needed to work weapons opened up new possibilities. Brawny rat ogre frames could carry a large warp-harness. This powerful, albeit erratic, reactor supplied the energy to fuel a new variant of portable weapon. It took a two-skaven team to haul a warpfire thrower, but now a single rat ogre could carry an even larger device clamped over each of its bulging arms.

The first of these fire-thrower carrying stormfiends strode over the bridge in front of a clanrat unit bearing Clan Rictus colours. The quarrellers tried to bring the beast down, but their bolts pattered off thick gauntlets, armour plates, or reinforced storage tanks. Some thudded into vat-grown flesh, but the rat ogre carried on without noticing. The ironbreakers – the doughty Iron Axes of Clan Angrund – locked their shields and prepared for the charge. They had been on the receiving end of warpacks of rat ogres and knew they could expect a ferocious fight.

The stormfiend did not propel itself in rage-bound fury. Instead, controlled by its atrophied packmaster, the beast pointed the two barrels grafted onto its armstumps. With a wheeze, the warp-powered reactor flashed. From out of the twin nozzles came a blazing sheet of liquid fire. The black-green warpflame engulfed the Axes of Clan Angrund. The dwarfs had long respected (if loathed) the destructive power of the warpfire thrower. These blasts were more powerful still. The vile stuff clung to everything it touched, cooking the dwarfs alive in their super-heated suits of gromril.

The wave of heat hit the quarrellers on the balcony above an instant before the stink of burnt flesh followed. They looked on in horror as the rat ogre raised both barrels upwards. This time it shot not one cone, but two separate gouts. There were no survivors, only a thick pile of melted matter that slowly cooled and congealed.

It took three shots to melt away the runes, gromril and stone of the Archgate. Fingers of warpflame clawed through to the other side, slaying the door-warden. Across the Citadel, the rest of the dwarfs' third line of defence, or Kromdal's Line as they called it, met with a similar fate. The flame cannon and thunderers that held the Silvergate were blasted from afar by a stormfiend carrying poisoned wind globe projectors. A trio of heavily armoured weaponbeasts with motorised maces for fists battered down the shieldwall in front of the Stonearch of Varya. These studded orbs pummelled the ironbreakers, crumpling their armour beneath wrecking ball blows.

The skaven had discovered a potent new breakthrough shock troop.

When the Blackvault Gate was melted, dwarf regiments rushed to block the corridor. It was a main artery to the complex under the Citadel. Were it to fall, the skaven could flood through so quickly the second line of defence – the Khrokk line – would be breached before it could be properly reinforced. Desperate thanes led warrior regiments of Clan Angrund to make fast their shieldwall. Although prepared to lose their lives against a living tide of vermin, they were not expecting what came through the melted metal of the Blackvault Gate.

The multi-barrelled ratling gun had long been a Clan Skryre favourite. It could spit a fusillade of warp-laced bullets. The brutepack of stormfiends that came through bore similar, but improved weapons. Each muscular arm was outfitted with an upscaled version of the ratling gun. A third such weapon was strapped upon each rat ogre's chest. As the hulking figures strode forward, their warp-powered rotary weapons glowed bright green as their generators built up power. With rippling staccato bursts they filled the air with bullets, barrels screaming as they spun faster and faster. Shots punched lines of holes through shields and armour, and craters were blasted into stone walls.

Even guided by their attached packmaster brain, the rat ogres' aim was poor. The rate of fire, however, more than compensated. Casings cascaded to the floor as the whirling barrels chugged out shell after shell, scything foes in two. In seconds no dwarf was left standing, although this did not stop the rat ogres. The dead and dismembered danced to a shellstorm that splattered their remains across the stones. Even after the weapons' automatic shut-off mechanism clicked over, and the empty barrels spun with a whir, the stormfiends kept engaging the triggers. A connection snapped, and one of the atrophied packmasters twitched out of control. The rat ogre spun so that he splattered the clanrats behind with gunfire. It mattered not.

The penultimate defensive layer was breached. And many more skaven were coming.





SKARSNIK'S CROOKED MOON VANGUARD

The force Skarsnik led down from the peaks to do battle in the vale of Karak Eight Peaks was but a portion of his immense strength. He mixed his own mountain tribes with those greenskins pouring out of the Badlands and the Dark Lands.



SKARSNIK, WARLORD OF THE EIGHT PEAKS

The Chieftain of the Crooked Moons tribe, Skarsnik lorded it over all the night goblin tribes of the Worlds Edge Mountains. Skarsnik had all the ambition and drive of the most glory-hungry greenskin warboss, but the night goblin also had two things that no orc could equal. First, Skarsnik was deviously smart, showing cunning and ingenuity for ambushes that could out-sneak skaven (most of the time). Secondly, Skarsnik had Gobbla – a giant cave squig bodyguard with massive teeth and a voracious appetite.

CROOKED JABBERZ

How the Crooked Moons spear mob known as the Crooked Jabberz earned their name varied depending on who told the tale. Some said it stemmed from the exploits of their boss – the loud-mouthed Snargit – who had perfected the art of hunting squigs around tight corners by using a bent spear. Others said it was more to do with their reputation as the spear mob most prone to cheating and thievery. What was not debated was that they fought uncommonly well, and their fanatics used especially potent deathcap mushrooms. They went to battle under a Crooked Moon banner and carried the yellow-faced shields common to their tribe.





BIG RED 'UN

The colossal squig known as the Big Red 'Un was as large as a giant, and twice as hungry. It came up from the Shroom Pits long ago, and followed the Crooked Moons wherever they went. Skarsnik claimed the beast had latched onto him because it knew he was Mork's appointed, a goblin fated for greatness. Before they were knifed in the back, a number of Skarsnik's detractors said the Big Red 'Un followed him due to the long trail of chained dwarfs he led the creature on with.

DRILLAZ KILLAZ

The black orc warboss Drilla joined Skarsnik's Waaagh! with every intention of taking over. It was only right that black orcs from the Dark Lands should thump every gobbo into place. However, after just a few raids, Drilla realised he was in the presence of greatness. Since that time, he dedicated his fighting prowess to the most cunning of all goblins. The Killaz didn't like working for a night goblin, but a steady diet of fighting and a prime position in the battle line kept the dour mob in check.





SNAGLA GROBSPIT'S DEFF CREEPERS

The pull of Skarsnik's growing Waaagh! had lured the most infamous of goblin raiders to battle. All the way from the forests of the Old World, Grobspit and his Deff Creepers came to join forces with the night goblins. A master ambusher himself, Snagla and his wall-crawling spider rider mobs had proven themselves in dozens of wicked exploits around the Eight Peaks. They had only recently ended their running battle with the dwarf rangers that roamed the mountain – severed dwarf heads adorned the spears and totems of this fierce mob as they lined up under the banner of the Blood Feathers warband.



FRIK'S RAT-HUNTAZ

Frik's squig herd were once fed a diet of dwarf-meat, but stunties soon became somewhat scarce in the upper levels. In response, the practical-minded Frik had switched his ferocious charges onto skaven meat. Fighting as part of Odgit's Big Mob, they attacked (and ate) ratmen with such zeal that the skaven were known to squirt their fear musk and flee at the mere sight of them.

Skarsnik
Warlord of the Eight Peaks, with the Giant Cave Squig Gobbla

Snagla Grobspit's Deff Creepers

The Gnarl of Six
Six Night Goblin Shamans

Unkus Choppahawk
Goblin Great Shaman upon Arachnarok Spider

Krolg Krushhelm
Orc Warboss upon Wyvern

Crooked Jabberz
Night Goblin Boss Snargit, one mob of Night Goblins and one mob of Night Goblin Fanatics

Grabbla's Big Mob
Goblin Warboss Grabbla Twoblades, six mobs of Night Goblins and four Stone Trolls

Da Redklaw's Big Mob
Six mobs of Night Goblins and one Night Goblin Squig Herd

Odgit's Big Mob
Three mobs of Night Goblins, two Night Goblin Squig Herds and two mobs of Night Goblin Squig Hoppers

Drillaz Killaz
Black Orc Warboss Drilla and three mobs of Black Orcs

Blood Feathers
Goblin Warboss Mogwa upon Gigantic Spider, five mobs of Forest Goblin Spider Riders and two Arachnarok Spiders

Da Bounders
Two teams of Mangler Squigs

One-eye Battery
Orc Big Boss Ol' One Eye Nar, three Goblin Rock Lobbers, two Goblin Spear Chukkas and three Doom Diver Catapults

Big Red 'Un
Cave Squig

WAR AGAINST THE GOBLIN-THINGS

It was Queek Headtaker's intention to scour the vale between the mountains of Karak Eight Peaks and deploy a sweep and destroy mission to rid the vale of all living creatures. The army included formations from the first and second clawpacks, a show of force that would send a message to Skarsnik – after the dwarfs were finished off, Queek would be coming for the greenskins!



LURKLOX

Cloaked in shadow, Lurklox was one of the Deceivers – a Verminlord steeped in treachery and master of the art of the silent kill. Lurklox preferred to manipulate others to do his bidding, as he had always been loath to reveal himself. However, when all else failed – or when he wished to send a clear message to a foe – Lurklox was not above joining open battle. Indeed, such things were good for his reputation, as others could see the Verminlord unveiled in all his fury. Under normal conditions, any who saw Lurklox did not live to tell of it.



ROTRIK MAULCLAW

It was an honour to carry the Clan Mors Battle Totem – the trophy-laden banner of the most powerful of Warlord Clans. It was a grisly thing, full of skulls, beards, bits of armour, and fangs – as well as the bold symbols of the clan. The current bearer, Rotrik Maulclaw, was chosen after he singlehandedly slew an entire contingent of dwarf miners. Rotrik appreciated the prestige, but was only too aware of what had happened to the previous skaven who had held the position.

IKK HACKFLAY AND THE IRONSKINS

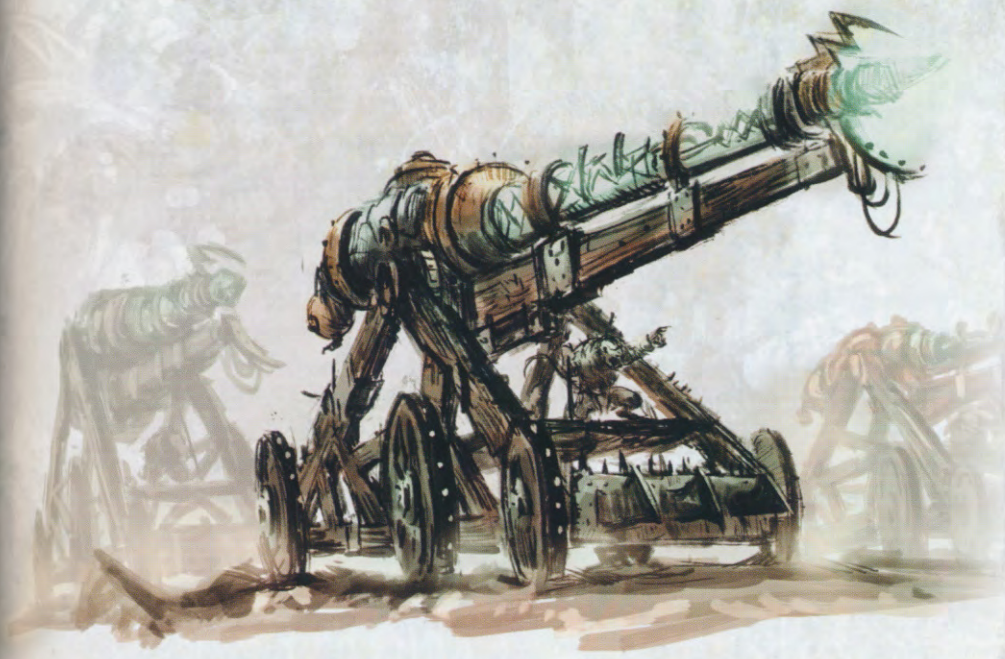
Through bloodshed and malice, Ikk Hackflay had risen through the hierarchy of Clan Mors. Once he was just a fangleader of the Rusthelms, when the stormvermin unit began to wreak its trail of destruction. It was Ikk that had led the looting of the under-armouries, stealing enough dwarf mail to rework their own patchwork protection. Soon enough, Ikk led the renamed Ironskins, and their ferocity and aggressiveness soon attracted the eye of Queek Headtaker.





GNAWBLADES

The Gnawblades worked their way up from the Dripping Caves – a lower level of the City of Pillars that is notoriously monster-haunted. They knew that to avoid being troll or blindwyrm fodder, they must seize any opportunity they could. To gain an advantage, the warriors filed their chisel teeth, using stones to grind them into razor-sharp fangs. Likewise, their shields bore not only the scratch-markings of Clan Mors, but also sharp spikes. By their swords, teeth or shields, the Gnawblades sought to draw blood any way they could.



BLACKARC BATTERY

Although Queek did not trust any Clan Skryre weapons, he was not so foolish as to not make use of them. Led by Zzikt, a warlock engineer out of Skavenblight, the Blackarc Battery was comprised of three warp-lightning cannons. It had been four war machines, but a warp-flux generator explosion took out the last device, as well as a great portion of the Blackgnaw Tunnels. Under Zzikt's exacting eye, the warp-lightning scaffold towers were wheeled into position and the most fearsome of enemy formations targeted.



BURROW-CRACKERS

Although from Clan Eshin, the Burrow-crackers were readily accepted by the skaven of Clan Mors. In the underground warfare that dominated the City of Pillars, the night runners' ability to follow their tunnel-grinder and open up new routes through the rock had earned the skaven many dwarf-beards. Armed with poisoned blades and throwing stars, the Burrow-crackers knew how to sidle around a battle and inflict damage with as little chance of being attacked in return as possible.

Queek Headtaker

Lurklox
Verminlord

Rotrik Maulclaw
Clan Mors Battle Standard Bearer

Red Guard
Ten claws of Stormvermin

Ironskins
Chieftain Ikk Hackflay and three claws of Stormvermin

Blackarc Battery
Warlock Engineer Zzikt and three Warp Lightning Cannons

Redshield Sharpshooters
Warlock Engineer Kravak and five Warplock Jezzail teams

Redclaw Horde
Thirteen claws of Clanrats, five Ratling Gun Teams, three Poisoned Wind Mortars and five claws of Stormvermin

Headtakers
Chieftain Szrat, three claws of Clanrats, one claw of Stormvermin and two Warpfire Throwers

Blackspear Clan
Chieftain Likspittl, four claws of Clanrats, one legion of Skavenslaves, one Warpfire Thrower and one Doomwheel

Burrow-Crackers
Three claws of Night Runners

Gnawblades
Three claws of Stormvermin

Clan Skryre
Three claws of Stormfiends, three claws of Poisoned Wind Globadiers and three Poisoned Wind Mortars

Beastpacks
Packmaster Grootose, eight claws of Giant Rats, three claws of Rat Ogres, two Hell Pit Abominations and two packs of Wolf Rats

Chained Pack
Three legions of Skavenslaves and one claw of Clanrats

BATTLE IN THE GREAT VALE

While the skaven stormed through the dwarf defences, a larger war was also taking place across Karak Eight Peaks. With King Belegar's dwarfs penned in, Queek felt it was time to turn his full attention to the greenskins.

Queek himself directed the first assault. The goal had been to sweep the goblin-shanties and orc tents that had been set up in the surface bowl between the eight mountains. The day was overcast, but the skaven blinked profusely as they formed up, their eyes adjusting to the dreary daylight. The plan was not subtle – when their army extended across the Great Vale they began to advance.

At first the ratmen were unopposed, as if the greenskins had been warned and were lying low. Scrambling over piles of rubble and bones, the army demolished crudely piled stone huts and tents made of skin. Warpflame scorched empty encampments, and poisoned wind globes were hurled down into suspected monster lairs. Rat ogres were called forth to topple greenskin idols, the brawny creatures ripping down primitive statues made of stone, wood or dung. Half of the valley was cleared when the mountainside rang with horns, drums and the roaring of beasts. At last, the orcs and goblins came forth to do battle. They entered the vale from the Grim Gates, with Skarsnik himself at the head of their black-clad masses.

Overhead, doom divers broke through the low clouds. Fired from high up on the mountains, they circled on thermals, before folding their wings and plummeting. The skaven countered, for they had wheeled out scaffold towers that housed warp lightning cannons. Arcing chains of black lightning sizzled outwards to burst in incandescent explosions. Gaping holes appeared in the approaching mobs. Streaks of green shot revealed warplock jezzails, and low *whumps* gave notice that poisoned wind mortars were lobbing spheres of toxic gas to crash deep into black-robed enemy formations.

As the lines closed, the night goblins released their mushroom-addled fanatics. Queek feared no greenskin, but had learned to be wary of the metal ball swinging lunatics. Whirling under their own crazed momentum, fanatics ploughed furrows of blood, gore and broken bones into the first wave of skaven. This was enough to send many slave legions fleeing, the malnourished wretches scampering off in all directions, biting at anything that got in their way. Some slaves even became entangled in fanatic chains, their deaths unwittingly aiding the skaven more than their miserable lives ever did.

Queek and his Red Guard hacked through two night goblin mobs in quick succession. The agile stormvermin with their heavy halberds were simply too much for the green imps. Although it was difficult to manoeuvre amidst the crush of combat, Queek slowly steered his claw towards the centre. There he hoped to find Skarsnik, but instead he ran up against a mob of black orcs. Thickly muscled and clad in iron plates, these foes were more of a match for the Red Guard. Choppas powered through the stormvermin's armour, while the ratmen's own serrated halberd blades proved equally adept at cleaving through the black orcs' mail. Amidst the slaughter, Queek leapt, spun and carved a path towards the enemy's leader – a hulking, armour-encased menace.

The duel was brief, as Dwarf Gouger punched through the orc's chest, and a sword thrust penetrated the eye-hole of its helm. Quickly, Queek pried off the steel helm and delivered a final chop. The skaven warlord held aloft the captain's head, and the black orcs quavered at the sight, yet they did not break. Pausing only to skewer his latest prize onto his trophy rack, Queek sprang back into the fray. Deprived of their leader's presence, and with the most bloodthirsty skaven they had ever seen in their midst, the orcs could not take much more. When their great horned totem was chopped down, they broke.

Upon seeing their most formidable mob fleeing, many of the surrounding night goblins broke ranks. In an instant, the greenskin centre collapsed, dissolving into a fleeing mass. Doubtless Skarsnik was in that frenetic mob, running from the field of battle. As he turned around to wave on his troops, hoping to massacre the foe before they could reform or make good their escape, Queek's screech of victory died in his throat. He should have known no battle against the cunning Skarsnik would be straightforward.

All along the skaven line ambush attacks were throwing Queek's army into disarray. A bounding storm of squigs had emerged out of the caves. They were led by the largest specimen of their voracious kind any had ever seen – a rotund red mountain of teeth and muscle. It hurtled into the skaven line like an angry avalanche. Greenskin magic had animated an idol of stone that was wading through the clanrats, each sweeping fist battering down a rank at a time. And worst of all, an entire spider-riding contingent had crept over the cliffs and high ridges to the rear of the skaven army. Many of the skaven did not know their peril until crushing mandibles and poisoned stings ripped them apart.

Tearing down from above came a new barrage of doom divers. The high-pitched wailing of their meteoric plummeting was unnerving. All who heard that shrill sound growing cringed. But an even more terrifying

screeching was also in the air. Beating great leathery wings to slow its descent, a wyvern landed atop a rocky outcrop. It roared its challenge while it scanned the battlefield for its next meal. Espying an exposed claw of clanrats, the wyvern swooped like an overgrown bird of prey.

The skaven had grown too accustomed to tunnel-fighting. Underground they would have had solid walls on either side, and the foe would have no easy way to get at their vulnerable rear. Panic flowed through Queek's force. In that moment, had Skarsnik's centre not been crushed and already fleeing, Queek's army might have been utterly demolished.

Near Queek, and the Great Banner of Clan Mors, the skaven held fast. Indeed, they had already routed all foes near them. After thousands of battles and years of hard campaigning, the Headtaker had learned never to surrender to panic. It was a flaw of so many of his rivals and underlings – the urge to give in the moment the clanrats acted like slaves and began to scamper. It disgusted Queek. He would reap heads from his commanders when this was over, but now was the time for decisive action.

With quick commands, Queek called out his reserves, and split his core of forces. He headed west with his Red Guard and a warpack of rat ogres. He sent the Ironskins stormvermin and the weapon teams to chase the still fleeing night goblin core. If they failed at that, they were to hold the centre.

Queek's orders and manoeuvres were instinctive. The flying monster was the most immediate threat and a challenge that called to Queek. Simultaneously, it had occurred to him that the fleeing night goblins would likely rally and rejoin the fight. In fact, their flight might even have been part of Skarsnik's plan. If the goblins renewed their attacks while the skaven were preoccupied with the ambushers, the greenskins would likely feast upon their corpses before the day was out.

Also filtering into Queek's snap decision was the fact that the Ironskins' chieftain, Ikk Hackflay, was getting too big for his command. The skaven called this 'outgrowing your claws'. By sending him and his stormvermin into the centre, Queek gave the would-be warlord a chance to prove himself, or die trying. Winning battles was never enough – with one claw a warlord had to find and raise up competent sub-commanders, while on the other claw he had to ensure potential rivals met sticky ends.

The wyvern had landed amidst the clanrats, where it was wreaking havoc. This was no graceful dragon with an aura of majesty, but a brutish and foul-smelling lizard. It plodded forward, using its broad horned head to batter foes, before gulping them down in a feeding frenzy. Loops of entrails drooled out of its mouth and the beast ingested so many ratmen that it was forced to clear room in its bulging belly. Sitting amongst its own piles of excrement, the wyvern continued to feed, snapping down anything and everything.

The orc on top was as battle-scarred as his mount, and he laughed at the carnage. He reached out casually with his long spear to skewer a fleeing skaven. Impaled, but still alive, the ratman shrieked in agony as the warboss dangled him playfully before his ravenous warbeast.

Signalling for the Red Guard to halt, Queek stepped forward alone, clanging his weapons in challenge.

The orc was Krolg Krushhelm, and he fought with the Broken Tooth tribe. Even in the Badlands they had heard of Queek Headtaker – for surely only that skaven leader could be so bold. Had the large stormvermin unit advanced, Krolg would have taken to the skies. As it was, no orc alive could refuse such a provocation. In answer, the wyvern spread out its wings and reared, releasing a bellowing call that echoed throughout the valley.

Krolg spurred his beast towards the strutting skaven. With a wing-aided bound, the wyvern sprang forward with more speed than its bulk suggested. The impact of the beast's landing shook the ground. Weaving his twin weapons into a blur of steel, Queek easily parried the orc's spearthrust and slashed backhanded at the wyvern's outthrust head. The reptile's scales were iron-hard, and turned the swordstroke with an arm-quivering clang. Thus began a back and forth duel. The lithe skaven ducked under spear jabs and dodged thunderous strikes from the wyvern's stinger-tipped tail. Queek's return blows gouged score marks into the creature's thick scales, but did no lasting damage.

Elsewhere, the skaven scurried out from the caves drilled into the Burnt Cliffs. These numbers helped stabilise the skaven flank at the base of Silver Mountain. The shock attack of chained mangler squigs had been devastating, but the berserk beasts now careened a wayward path spinning around aimlessly. The short breathing space allowed the ratmen to reform, while the warp lightning cannons drew a bead upon the ravening red orbs. The spider riders, under the leadership of master ambusher Snagla Grobspit, were another matter.

The spider riders scuttled straight into combat – pouncing to deliver their poisoned bites, while the goblins on top drove their spears deep into the skaven ranks. Other mobs of the eight-legged creatures used their long appendages to clamber atop the piled ruins. From there, the archers on their backs rained down a steady fire or arrows onto the clanrats. Striding through their lesser kin were enormous arachnarok spiders.

Each of the arachnarok spiders carried a howdah built of wood and web. From these swaying platforms, mobs of goblin archers rained death into the tumult below. One such spider carried a goblin shaman who sent forth jets of green death.

The largest of the spiders headed straight for the warp lightning cannons. Before the teams firing them could turn to face their foe, the monstrosity was amongst them. Chitin-covered appendages smashed the scaffold-towers into kindling, and the warlock engineer who ran the battery became the victim of a gruesome attack as the colossal abdomen rose before crashing down, the spider's stinger stabbing through the shrieking skaven so fiercely it embedded into the ground below. When the beast withdrew, what it left behind was a gory mess, still bubbling and smoking from the toxic venom.

Having reached the Grim Gates, Skarsnik gave the command for his forces to about face. More mobs of night goblins surged out of the ruined gateway that led back into the mountain the dwarfs called Karag Zilfin, but the goblins Howlpeak. He watched the play in the Great Vale below – waiting to see what his ambushers could accomplish and measuring what his old foe Queek could do. His beady eyes, which missed nothing, caught a glimpse of something he had never before seen.

A shadow moved across the valley. It flickered between the stonepiles, scurrying from place to place with a hard-to-follow quickness. Yet behind it, the blur left behind dead goblins. Metal flashed out from the pall of gloom and returned.

Lurklox, perhaps the greatest of the Verminlord Deceivers had revealed itself. When moving beneath a bright sun the rat daemon would have appeared shrouded in gloom, on that overcast battlefield it was a fast-moving blur of night-black shadow. Its chief weapon was more easily seen. In quick flashes, an enormous throwing disc spun out, leaving a faint flickering trail of warpstone radiance. The razor sharp projectile arced outwards in a graceful curve, slicing down all it encountered before circling back. From out of the shadow a deft hand snatched it, only to once more send the reaping star hooking outwards.

With a single circuitous toss, Lurklox cut off half of an arachnarok's legs – severing the segmented joints in a flash. The enormous spider toppled over, splintering its howdah. Volleys of arrows were directed towards the shadowy thing. With some trick of the eye, or perhaps movement beyond the ken of mortals, by the time the arrows landed, the shadowspot was no longer lurking there.

The gloom manifested itself behind the spider riders, and from it stepped the Verminlord, striding into their midst like some god of battle. Eyes gleamed from behind a black mask. By blade and throwing star, spider limbs and goblin heads were soon sheared off with scalpel-like precision. Amidst the massacre, the remaining spider riders fled before the rat daemon's wrath. With his stare alone, Lurklox sent more greenskins fleeing.

All of this went unobserved by Queek. His focus was bent wholly towards his trial of combat. It had taken time, but he now had his foe's true measure. Queek spun, putting all his effort behind Dwarf Gouger. The blow was perfectly timed so that the military pick plunged deeply into the wyvern's narrow eye socket. Instinctively, the beast pulled back with tremendous force, while a fountain of blood shot out. Queek held on long enough to gain momentum before releasing the handle. Flung skywards, the agile skaven swung his remaining sword to decapitate the orc rider. The skaven warlord twisted so that he could land nimbly on both feet, crouched in a battle stance. There was no more need, the fight was over.

Queek waited until the wyvern stopped thrashing before retrieving his favourite weapon and his gore-covered trophy.

On the slopes leading up to the Grim Gates, Skarsnik had seen enough. Upon his signal, the greenskins flowed back inside the mountain.

There was still fighting – as Skarsnik had callously left his ambushers to be annihilated. This was merely mop up duty, however, and Queek left Ikk Hackflay to finish up and supervise the victory feed. The dead of both sides would now be consumed – such was the victor's spoils.

With his fur matted with blood and armour dripping gore, the right claw of Clan Mors paraded past his troops. They dropped to their knees before him, eyes fixed upon the new heads adorning his trophy rack. Queek travelled down to his personal warrens. Wary of treachery, only the warlord's attendant slaves were allowed into this area. They were castrated, blinded and withered specimens – hardly a threat to Queek or his breeders. The slaves scuttled obediently to their master's command.

The Warlord of the City of Pillars was fastidiously clean, and could not bear to be filth-encrusted like some noisome plague monk. Well used to this post battle ritual, the snuffling creatures worked to unstrap Queek's armour, before bathing him with their long rasping tongues. They used their filed incisors to bite out tangles and scabs alike. Even the armour was scoured in like fashion.

The victory was a start, although Queek loathed that this recent success would reflect well upon Clan Skryre. It was a Warlord Clan's fate to do the real fighting and dying, while the Greater Clans claimed glory before the Council of Thirteen. Lost in his thoughts, Queek failed to see the shadows deepen in the corner of the chamber.

'Little warlord. Preening. Good-good. Sleekness is stealthiness,' said the shadow.

Even blinded, the thralls felt the powerful presence and scurried to get out. Although he had seen it many times now, Queek was unnerved by the way the towering Verminlord stepped out from the shadow, gracefully uncoiling itself.

Queek did not care for the way Lurklox spoke to him, nor did Queek did like the way his fur stood on end in its presence.

'What have you found out?' demanded Queek.

'Impudence. Haste-haste. Always the same – either too much greeting, or none at all. The Warlord Clans never change.'

Queek remained silent, and the Verminlord soon got to the point. 'The grey seer needs you as an ally. Your Lord of Decay, Gnawdwell, moves to ally with Clan Skryre. It is he that makes attempts upon your life. It was he that bid-told Thaxx to delay. It was he that called upon Ikit Claw. You are being used, Headtaker. Gnawdwell grooms many replacements for you.'

None of this was news to Queek. Every lord tested his lieutenants. Most died, some lived to be tested tomorrow.

Seeming to sense Queek's disappointment, Lurklox told the warlord something he had no way of knowing. 'I've come from counsel with Skarsnik. I've struck a deal with the goblin-thing for you.'

The shock on Queek's face was reward enough for the Verminlord. 'Yes-yes. Deliver the dwarf-king's head by sunset tomorrow and Skarsnik will leave the City of Pillars forever.'

'What did you give-promise Skarsnik?' said Queek.

'The promise of that head... and something Ikit Claw does not yet know is missing.'















The dwarf hold of Karak Kadrin stood far to the north. It had taken Ikit Claw and his procession months of subterranean travel to reach the besieged stronghold.

As Skryre was the most influential of skaven clans, and Ikit was the right claw of Morskittar, it was his right to call primacy. This granted passageway rights to dominant clans. For years, the grey seers had taken advantage of this, lording it over all others, as they demanded right of way. Now this right was Ikit's. Despite the call of primacy, however, Warlord Clans clogged the tunnelways. The lack of respect wore upon Ikit. Sending forth an armada of doomwheels, Ikit paved much of his journey with the blood of his lesser kin. Soon all would recognise the ultimate supremacy of Clan Skryre.

When Ikit Claw arrived at the Karak Kadrin battlefront, he was ushered into the schemer-cave of the skaven forces. Carved into the cliffs of Peak Pass, this site had recently been one of the many dwarf fortresses that guarded the mountain route. The stone halls bore the signs of fierce fighting – embedded cannon balls and the glowing remains of jezzail bullets pockmarked the walls. The floor was covered in blood splatters and the well-gnawed ends of bones. From the uppermost ramparts, Ikit could just see the mountain that loomed over the western end of the pass.

The stone horn that towered over that gap was Karak Kadrin, also known as Slayer Keep. In its glory days, traders from the Empire paid steep tolls to travel Peak Pass. The route was little used these days, save by invading armies, rogue monsters and wolf packs. The skaven had no use for the pass, preferring to travel under the mountains, but they knew Karak Kadrin. To the ratmen, it bore the dread title of Death-peak, for it had thwarted more skaven invasions than any other dwarfhold.

For nearly a year now the skaven had been laying siege to Death-peak once again. They attacked from below, from the surface, and from all directions at once. Successes had been minimal, which is why the trio of warlords commanding the operation were all newly appointed. They were the twenty-first through twenty-third to hold the esteemed leadership positions for the attack. Each of them was twitch-tailed at Ikit Claw's arrival, fearing that he had been sent to dispose of them and take over the assault on Karak Kadrin.

When he opened the war council, the Master Warlock Engineer was more interested in learning what the warlords knew than in allaying their fears. He asked questions about the defences, the number of claws under each warlord, and the size-capacity of various tunnels. The warlords did their best to answer. Yet it was weary work and he knew that like all skaven, these warlords sought first to save their own skins. After patiently paying attention to their answers for all of a few minutes, Ikit irritably sent forth a single almighty blast of warpflame from his clawed gauntlet. It washed over the gathered warlords, destroying them utterly. The fools, thought Ikit. What, after all, could he really learn from them? Of course he was there to replace them...

Even as the melted remains were scooped to the side, Warlord Rikcruk Sliceblade of Clan Rictus took over the military operation. He and his chieftains received orders from Ikit and his coven of engineers. Within days the regime change was complete, and any who questioned this new authority disappeared. While Rikcruk restructured the lesser clans, the warlock engineers had their own task.

The component parts hauled by their slave legions were unpacked and a great assembly began. Many Clan Skryre weapons were fitted onto rat ogres. Other prototype weapons were erected. They could not, however, find the warpbomb magnifier. It was a failing that cost three engineers and thousands of slaves their lives.

This missing apparatus was the only one of its kind. The more Ikit thought about it, the more it galled him. Had his worthless underlings misplaced it, or had it been stolen? He had not checked upon it since Karak Eight Peaks. Only the size of a rat ogre's skull, it was the most powerful explosive device Ikit had ever built – which was saying quite a lot. Clan Skryre's Chief Warlock had planned to build a doomrocket to deliver the payload, which he reckoned would evaporate much of the Death-peak.

That plan, which was no longer possible, would have quickly added another stellar victory to Ikit's impressive credentials. It would also have shown Lord Morskittar that he had made a mistake when he chose Ikit's upstart protégé, Skreeductor Zingetail, over the Chief Warlock. It rankled Ikit that he had been taken off the Warpmoon project, and the prized work given to Zingetail instead.

Ikit could still build a rocket, but it would now lack the devastating payload. Instead, he testily approved a plan to erect a battery of several enormous catapults. This could batter the main gates and crack open the stone towers carved into the mountain's rockface. This had been tried before. However, Ikit had a new plan. He had brought along several enormous vats of his improved poisoned gas. If he could batter away enough of the mountainside to expose the halls within, the battery could lob in enormous spheres of this new gas. While that cleared the upper halls, the warlords could launch further attacks. If all these attacks coincided with Clan Moulder's plan to break open the main gates, it might just work.

The battery was too large to be housed underground, so Ikit chose a building site on Peak Pass – some three miles from the colossal gates

of Karak Kadrin. As Ikit supervised the operation, it pleased him to think that the enormous dwarf faces carved into the stone fortress watched over their own impending doom. He made a note to himself to ensure that warp lightning cannons carved Clan Skryre symbols over those glowering visages when the siege was successful.

Perhaps if he had listened to the previous commanders, or spent any time amongst those who had fought in the siege over the last year, Ikit might have been better prepared. Ungrim Ironfist, the Slayer King of Karak Kadrin, had made many sorties out of his impervious defences. It was Ungrim who had led a slayer force to clear the Undertarn deep below Peak Pass. There, the dwarfs had wiped out an entire clawpack, destroying much tunnelling equipment. It was the Slayer King that stole a march to annihilate the skaven nest-lair of Blackhole. Ungrim had been aggressive at every step of the siege thus far. He was not about to allow the skaven to build some diabolical new weapon on his doorstep!

With a ringing of horns that echoed through Peak Pass, the mighty gate of Karak Kadrin was raised. Ungrim Ironfist marched forth. Ranked columns of armoured warriors trudged out, as did throngs of orange-crested slayers. Many of the dwarf-city's proudest banners could be seen. The gate batteries opened up, puffs of smoke dotting the mountainside. Explosions blossomed across the pass, driving off the picket lines of skirmishers and clanrats that stood watch over the dwarf stronghold. After the last of the warhost issued forth, the gates boomed shut behind them with an ominous finality.

Dwarfs on the march were not fast, but they were steady. It would not take them long to cover the ground between the main entrance and the scaffold-covered build site. From the top of a newly raised platform, Ikit Claw watched them advance.

Ikit barely tolerated the first panicked messenger bringing him the news, but the second he turned to a crisped husk with warp lightning. It wasn't as if he hadn't heard the blasted horns himself! In moments, his runners brought him the one whom he had requested.

Ikit turned his iron frame to face the three-armed newcomer. 'Throt – the Rictus fools will not last long. I need-quick a screening force to hold the bearded-things away from here.'

Thickset and malodorous like all Hell Pit dwellers, Throt did not speak with the same clipped rapidity as did Ikit. He was also more accustomed to giving orders than receiving them. 'I have many claws and warpacks,' he said, gazing down Peak Pass at the encroaching dwarfs, 'but the mountains have many hidden gun-things.' He gestured upwards at the peaks that overhung the pass. 'If you have not cleared them yet, nothing I have will last-live below.'

Cogs whirred as a telescopic lens appeared out of a hidden compartment in Ikit's armour. It slotted over his eyehole. At first Ikit could see nothing but rockface, but with a few adjustments, the engineer could soon peer through solid matter. Now Ikit could see the hidden levers and hydraulics. The cursed bearded-things were clever with their doors and portholes that looked like stone. He counted many batteries.

'Only my greatest creations will last under such fire,' added Throt. 'I already have them in holding pens prepared for the assault on the main gate.'

'Yes-yes. Of course. I just need a delay...' said Ikit, his mind seizing suddenly on a whole new plan. 'And while your creatures hold-stall the foe, I need those abominations. Only they must carry one more thing. '



DWARF THRONG OF KARAK KADRIN

The dwarf contingent that marched out to clear Peak Pass was an assault force especially chosen and led by the Slayer King, Ungrim Ironfist. He wanted to strike the skaven forming up in Peak Pass hard and fast – smashing whatever diabolical device they were building before it was completed.



UNGRIM IRONFIST

There was never a dwarf more torn between his duties than Ungrim Ironfist. As the King of Karak Kadrin, he was oathbound to protect his kingdom and his people. As the all-father of the Drakebeard Clan, he had to ensure that his blood relations succeeded, and as a sworn slayer who had taken the oath, Ungrim was also bound to seek his doom against the most powerful foe he could find. Never content to sit back on his throne and wait, Ungrim looked for any opportunity to lead his throngs to war.



AXES OF GRIMNIR

This large formation of slayers was composed of dwarfs from all over the Worlds Edge Mountains and beyond. As part of fulfilling their oaths, they all made the long and dangerous pilgrimage to Karak Kadrin. There, after making his offerings at the Shrine of Grimnir, each warrior had to make a lone journey to the western edge of Peak Pass. Those that returned joined the Axes of Grimnir for a year's service. They were called on to hunt the largest monsters sighted in the pass.



LOST BROTHERHOOD

As war ran rampant across the Worlds Edge Mountains, many of the smaller clan fortresses and mines had been ransacked. Straggling streams of refugees found their way to Karak Kadrin. Those too filled with horrific tales and grudge-debts took the Slayer Oath. The members of the Lost Brotherhood were grim warriors that sought only to destroy their foes or die trying. They tattooed outlandish blue patterns upon their bodies, a warning signal to all to ask no questions of their troubled past lives.

RORDAK'S RANGERS

None know Peak Pass as well as old Rordak, the chief ranger of Karak Kadrin. Often gone for months at a time, Rordak led his troops over the highest mountains, taking them along little known game trails and secret paths that only he could find. As he was an old drinking buddy of Karak Kadrin's chief engineer, Grumblesson, Rordak's Rangers bore a few unusual gadgets – cinderblast bombs, trollhammer torpedoes and their own keg of Bugman's XXXXXX for when the going really got rough.





GOLDSEEKERS

Part of the scattered Goldseekers Clan, these miners had settled in Karak Kadrin. In truth, they would all have rather been deep underground, using their extraordinary gift for smelling out rich veins of gold. However, they had sworn oaths to protect their hold, and eagerly accepted Ungrim's offer to join his attack column. Expert tunnellers, the Goldseekers carried with them especially potent blasting charges – useful for bursting through both stubborn rock formations and the range of foes they encountered along Peak Pass.



THUNDERFIST SQUADRON

The Hammer of the Greenskins, the Keepers of the Pass – the Thunderfist Squadron was a trio of gyrobombers that regularly supported attacks out of Karak Kadrin. Their base station was in the inaccessible peak of nearby Karag Zhundak. The dwarfs lost count of how many times the Thunderfist Squadron dropped out of the skies to deliver their deadly payload, sweeping Peak Pass clear in a barrage of booming explosions.

Ungrim Ironfist
Last Slayer King of Karak Kadrin

Durnok the Avenger
Daemon Slayer

Forek Fireaxe
Daemon Slayer

Ulleksson the Last
Dragon Slayer

Bulfast the Begrudged
Dragon Slayer

Alrufnok Ratbane
Dragon Slayer

Rordak's Rangers
Three regiments of Rangers

Axes of Grimnir
Eight regiments of Slayers

The Brothers Grimmsson
Giant Slayers Bundak and Zhurr

Thane Thordek Drakebeard
Karak Kadrin Battle Standard Bearer

Clan Drakebeard Throng
Thane Durrik Drakebeard, two regiments of Dwarf Warriors, two regiments of Longbeards and one regiment of Hammerers

Bar Dawazbak Garrison
One regiment of Dwarf Warriors, one regiment of Ironbreakers and one regiment of Thunderers

Lost Brotherhood
Six regiments of Slayers

Mad Kranok
Slayer Battle Standard Bearer

Red and Gold Squadron
Three Gyrocopters and one Gyrobomber

Overlook Battery
Three Cannons, two Grudge Throwers and one Goblin Hewer

Thunderfist Squadron
Three Gyrobombers

IKIT CLAW'S DISTRACTION FORCE

It had been Ikit Claw's intention to destroy the dwarf hold of Karak Kadrin through poisoned gas flung from afar. However, when the Slayer King led his army out to clear Peak Pass of foes, the Chief Warlock of Clan Skryre had a change of plans. As any great inventor knows, the ability to adapt quickly can be key.



IKIT CLAW

Impatient to get back into favour with Clan Skryre's leader, Lord Morskittar, Ikit Claw would go to any lengths to achieve victory. Ikit's war planning was much like his inventing – prone to spur-of-the-moment revelations and a touch of mad genius. Sometimes it worked out, and sometimes Ikit had to scamper away and blame the resulting implosions upon someone else. With a piece missing from his infernal device, Ikit has resorted to improvising a new battle plan.



THROT THE UNCLEAN

Throt the Unclean, one of the most talented of Clan Moulder's Master Mutators, had been assigned to work alongside Clan Skryre. Throt's latest experiments – bolstered by Ikit Claw's technology – had produced the stormfiends, thus far a powerful addition to the skaven arsenal. For his part, however, Throt longed to return to Hell Pit, as he worried what his underlings might be doing in his flesh-growing laboratories during his absence.

RIKCRUK SLICEBLADE

The number four warlord of Clan Rictus was powerful, fast and insanely ambitious. The black-furred leader did not envision himself ruling Crookback Mountain, the stronghold of his clan, but something far greater. He wanted to replace the Clan Rictus Lord of Decay, Kratch Doomclaw. He did not just desire to be the most dominant of all Warlord Clans; he wished to usurp the Greater Clans themselves. With his war-litter, his re-plated dwarf armour and his warpstone-forged sword, Rikcruk backed up his aspirations with swift violence.





SCRATTERFIRE TEAMS

The Scratterfire teams were two warpacks of three stormfiends. Each of the rat ogres bore three ratling cannons – the upgraded and upscaled version of the ratling gun. Capable of unleashing a tide of warp-infused bullets, the Scratterfire Teams had annihilated entire slave legions during weapon-testing exercises. Co-inventor Ikit Claw was greatly interested in seeing what the Scratterfire teams could do en masse. Throt, the other twisted genius behind the merge of rat ogre and Clan Skryre weaponry, did not wish to be anywhere near that kind of firepower.



THE HELL PIT HORRORS

Throt and his top packmasters had created and hand-reared half a dozen Hell Pit abominations for the Karak Kadrin assault. Fed a steady diet of captured dwarfs and greenskins, to say nothing of the growth-juice injections and warpstone-laced bloodgruel, the hideous amalgamations had grown powerful indeed. All of Throt's malice had goaded the beasts into constant fury. Only three remained, the creatures growing so fierce they had consumed the others. These three had already been fitted with augmented wheels, speed-juice injectors and warp braziers long before Ikit settled on his final plan.

Ikit Claw

Throt the Unclean
Master Moulder, third Lord of Hell Pit

Clan Skryre
Thirteen Warlock Engineers, three claws of Poisoned Wind Globadiers, one Warp Lightning Cannon, three Doomwheels and six legions of Skavenslaves

Clan Moulder Beastpacks
Packmaster Rritchit the Fang, Packmaster Skweel Gnawtooth, thirteen Packmasters, eight claws of Giant Rats, four claws of Rat Ogres, five claws of Stormfiends, two packs of Wolf Rats, six claws of rat swarms and four legions of Skavenslaves

Clan Rictus First Fang
Warlord Rikcruk Sliceblade, seven claws of Clanrats, eight claws of Stormvermin, four Warpfire Throwers, four Ratling Gun Teams, two Doomwheels and four legions of Skavenslaves

Clan Rictus Second Fang
Warlord Grzzt Blackfang, five claws of Clanrats, six claws of Stormvermin, two Warpfire Thrower Teams, two Poisoned Wind Mortars and four legions of Skavenslaves

Clan Snikbak
Chieftain Gratchflea, five claws of Clanrats and two legions of Skavenslaves

Natty's Longdroppers
Warlock Engineer Natty Longrifle and five Warplock Jezzail Teams

Thrall Clans
Chieftain Kilik Whiptail, two claws of Clanrats and six legions of Skavenslaves

Scratterfire Teams
Two claws of Stormfiends

The Hell Pit Horrors
Three Hell Pit Abominations

DISASTER AT KARAK KADRIN

Ungrim Ironfist was angry. In truth, he was always angry, but the yearlong siege had rendered his temper white-hot. The sight of skaven walking openly upon Peak Pass was enough to make the Slayer King livid. Having an entire verminous horde bold enough to dare encamping within sight of Karak Kadrin could not be borne. He had called for a mobile force to move out within the hour.

Now, striding at the fore of his hastily assembled throngs, Ungrim Ironfist prepared to vent his rage. Relentlessly the dwarfs marched, silent and grim. There was no noise save the gusting winds and steady rhythmic stamping of ironshod boots. The dwarfs had already covered nearly half of the ground between themselves and their ancestral foes. The skaven camp was even more of a den of frenetic activity now. Ramshackle scaffold towers surrounded a larger structure of wooden beams and metal cogs. Many slaves and workers scurried to and fro, lifting support beams, hauling felled logs, or assembling further levels of shanty scaffold towers. Strange vats and condensers nearby released oddly coloured vapours that were quickly dispersed upon the swirling winds. A pathetically thin line of clanrats bearing strange totems was arrayed before the constructions.

Lines of giant rats and clanrats began to stream out from tunnels along the sides of the pass. These were racing to reinforce the position before the rickety structures. Many of the dwarfs were actually relieved to see more skaven and their beasts appear. They did not fear open battle, but instead the underhand trickery of ratmen. All of them longed to strike their enemies, to drive them from Karak Kadrin.

Whipped and prodded, the giant rat swarms moved rapidly. This vermin tide had grown until it filled the wide pass, a living current that was scurrying to meet the dwarfs. Now the hidden gun batteries along the cliffs and mountainsides held silent no longer. Their opening volleys roared, tongues of fire briefly revealing their many hidden locations. In those cramped spaces, dwarfs worked and sweated over their war engines, loading, aiming, firing and reloading again. Looking down into the pass from their great height, it appeared like a brown river was flowing up it. Cannon balls ripped patterns into the oncoming hordes, making the flow recede as the first wave of rats broke and scampered away. In response, skaven long rifle teams worked their way upwards amongst the rockpiles, soon sending jezzail fire zipping and plinking amongst the stones.

Three times a new mass of skaven gained momentum and surged forth, and three times it was blasted back. By this point, the rat horde was not composed strictly of the four-legged kind, but a mix of giant rat warpacks, clanrats and stormvermin. On the fourth wave the line of skaven absorbed the firepower thundering down upon them, and kept on coming. It was this scurrying wall of vermin that struck the advancing dwarf line.

The dwarfs were silent no longer, but joined their king in battle song. Chanted in Khazalid – the harsh and guttural language of the dwarfs – it was a fierce song of hate and revenge. Each verse was punctuated with ringing clashes of metal and the meaty thunk of axes hewing into ratflesh. It was too much for the skaven, and only the fleetness of their scurrying feet allowed any of them to escape that terrible slaughter. Onwards pressed the dwarfs, closing in upon the half-built structures.

The next wave of skaven had already gathered. Despite the shelling from above, they did not waver, but advanced. Their Warlord, Rikcruk Sliceblade, had not risen to the top tier of Clan Rictus by accident. He was a fierce leader, and it was his willpower that drove his warrior claws on – for they feared him more than any enemy. Clan Rictus had thrived in the deadly Dark Lands, growing in size and power until it rivalled Mors as one of the foremost Warlord Clans. Rikcruk knew that Ikit Claw and his Clan Skryre engineers had little faith in his ability to halt the dwarfs, but the ambitious warlord would not be denied his chance to seize greatness.

Standing and issuing shrill orders from atop his war litter, Rikcruk Sliceblade was well positioned. At the onset, he was at the fore of the charge, but by the time the skaven closed upon the dwarfs he had subtly drifted back into the middle ranks. Carried by his thralls, the warlord seemed to float atop a sea of black-armoured stormvermin. They were the pride of Clan Rictus, and they trod over their injured and fleeing kin in their frothing eagerness to join the battle. The impact of their collision with the dwarfs halted the enemy advance, and the two armies pushed together to begin a grinding battle.

Slowly, inexorably, the dwarfs pushed back the multitudes that assailed them. In some cases this was because of the armoured might of the dwarfs – a massive heave from the red shieldwall of Clan Drakebeard's warriors or the nigh impenetrable gromril of the Bar Dawazbak ironbreakers. Mostly, however, it was the furious axe-churning attacks of the slayer throngs. Unlike their armoured brethren, the slayers paid a higher price for every step they advanced. Behind them, they left a trail of dead or dying dwarfs.

Torn by conflicting duties and oaths, and enraged at his inability to fully break the long encircling siege of his people, Ungrim Ironfist found solace

in but one thing. In the press and clang of combat, Ungrim felt only the joy of battle, the hot surge of dealing death to his hated foe – and none dealt out more punishment than the Slayer King. Swinging the Axe of Dargo in sweeping arcs, Ungrim singlehandedly carved a path of bloody ruin into the foe. With a mighty blow the king smashed asunder the skaven warlord's palaquin of planks, scattering his guard. With his next stroke Ungrim cut Rikcruk Sliceblade in twain. Shorn of their leader, the stormvermin of Clan Rictus scampered away.

This was what Ikit Claw had expected of the Warlord Clans. Fortunately, the next line of attackers had been prepared. Goaded and whipped by packmasters, Clan Moulder's beastpacks had been pushed out of the deeper tunnels and into Peak Pass. They were herded into position just in front of the construction area. Their first targets were not dwarfs, however, but fleeing skaven. Stormfiend warpacks moved up, stomping the last of the fleeing stormvermin as they came. Each of their hulking kind bore an array of weapons, the fell energies of their warpstone power sources emitting an eerie green glow. Once through the fleeing ratmen, the rat ogres had a clear target.

The fusillade that followed was pure devastation. Gouts of warpfire washed into the dwarfs, while a barrage of poisoned wind shells exploded, sending clouds of green gas billowing. Rat ogres bearing ratling guns broke into a loping advance, their multi-barrels spinning as each shot out a whir of death. The hailstorm of shots ripped into the unarmoured slayers, their bullet-ridden bodies jerking as each was hit many dozens of times.

While the dwarfs reeled from this hellish display of firepower, the stormfiends kept coming. Firing on the move, they crashed into the dwarf ranks. With fire-throwers on each arm still spitting flames, a rat ogre pushed amongst the ranks of those slayers still standing. It swung its burly arms, sending a handful of broken dwarfs flying into the air. The last sputtering jets of flaming liquid sprayed out of the open nozzled flame-throwers, adding to the carnage.

With more skaven emerging behind the stormfiend packs, Ungrim and his throngs faced the very real threat of being overwhelmed. The Slayer King, however, had not been so headstrong as to march out of his gates wholly unsupported. Timing their attack run perfectly, the Thunderfist Squadron rounded snow-covered peaks and dropped into the canyon of Peak Pass. Dipping low and approaching at maximum speed, the trio of gyrobombers released their grudgebuster bombs onto the massing skaven. Even as the explosions blossomed behind them, the squadron was gaining altitude, climbing out of the pass and veering around a mountain peak. Soon they would double back for another run.

The gyrobombers were not alone. A series of explosions along one of the steep scree slopes sent a cascade of tumbling boulders bounding into the skaven troops. Behind the avalanche came Rordak's Rangers, their own sliding descent slowed by ropes. Upon reaching the base of Peak Pass, the grizzled dwarf mountaineers unleashed fierce volleys of crossbow bolts into the slaves and engineers attempting to erect their great battery.

This was the reprieve Ungrim and his throngs needed. Although many dwarfs had fallen, they surged forward, hewing down the raging-mad beasts with many axestrokes. Ungrim led the way, hacking apart the hulking foes, sending heads and limbs flying in wide arcs. At the height of his rampage, as he slew the last rat ogre before him, Ungrim's axe penetrated the storage tanks that fuelled the creature's warpfire throwers. Blackened flames erupted, engulfing the Slayer King in a blazing fireball.





For the dwarfs it was as if time stopped and the battle stood still. Ungrim, who had survived battles and foes untold, was at the epicentre of that blast. The cloud of warpflame melted rock, blasting out a crater with its livid inferno. Even as the dwarfs began their curses, out of the roiling smoke clouds strode their king. Flames singed the ends of his crest and beard, and the Axe of Dargo gleamed in that blackness. Protected by his dragon cloak, Ungrim Ironfist emerged unscathed and angrier than ever. No skaven dared stand before his enraged onslaught.

The dwarfs pushed onwards behind their indomitable leader. Many of the slaves assembling the scaffolding towers scrambled for the caves. The warlock engineers, however, attempted to defend their works with an array of strangely shaped pistols and rifles. Several sent forth arcs of warp lightning. Sizzling bolts struck the encroaching dwarfs, but could not stop their advance. Within moments they were amongst the flimsy structures, hacking down support beams and engineers alike. Another Clan Rictus warlord – Grzzt Blackfang – brought up new clawpacks and a fresh battle waged over the wreckage.

Ikit Claw had abandoned the construction site long before, relocating to the caves. At his bidding, slaves followed, pushing crude wooden carriages that bore three cylindrical tanks. Ikit was uncomfortable being near the poisoned gas. Even with his rebreather and the protection of his iron frame, Ikit feared this batch. He had made it himself, and knew its fearsome potency.

The combination of the increasing winds of magic and the influx of warpstone payments to Clan Skryre had given Ikit everything he needed to create his deadliest gas weapon to date. During testing, the toxic clouds killed faster than anything he had ever seen from those fools of Clan Pestilens. Tens of thousands of wind globes could be filled from one of the enormous canisters. And there were three of them.

Ikit's plan had been to unleash these especially potent globadiers alongside the newly outfitted rat ogres. With these shock weapons, the skaven could fight their way into Death-peak. Yet the more Ikit thought about it, the more he realised that such a victory would take a great many months to win. Ikit longed to be back in the humid, overcrowded tunnels of Skavenblight, and as he dwelt upon thoughts of his protégé, Zingetail, having access to all the workshops, generators and apparatus of Skavenblight, he fervently wished to conclude this campaign quickly.

The war engine construction no longer mattered to Ikit. Before Ungrim Ironfist had covered half the ground towards the timber-framed constructions, Ikit was already plot-scheming a new plan to deliver his alchemic-bomb. This one should prove far more effective than simply inundating the outside of the mountain fortress with poisoned gas.

The idea had been sparked by his brief conversation with Throt. Previous collaborations between the two had resulted in the rat ogre stormfiends, and the warp-brazier wrecking balls fitted onto some Hell Pit abominations. It was thought that these might prove capable of battering into the dwarf hold. It was this plan that Ikit hastily rushed into operation – only with a fiendish new addition.

While Ikit readied the rune-scratched holding vats, Throt scuttled to the holding pens to prepare his hand-reared abominations. His ranks included the best of his packmasters – led by Rritchit the Fang and Skweel Gnawtooth. While those two led an army of handlers to distract, whip and beat their ferocious charges, Throt went to work. Using his blade to cut a gaping hole in the saggy underbelly

of an abomination, Throt pried open the wound with Creature-killer – his mechanised prodder-grabber. A tide of parasitic rats squirmed out, their needle fangs flashing. While fending off these voracious creatures, a team of engineers affixed the tanks full of poisoned gas inside the beasts' bodies. They welded, nailed, and tied the heavy cylinders, chaining them around bones and locking them into place with heavy bolts. All the while, the abominations roared and stomped, their unnatural vitality knitting the flesh back so quickly that several engineers were engulfed – entombed alive within the writhing flesh of the Moulder creations.

Ikit grew ever more leery of the plan. In their rage, the abominations were pulling up the heavy bolts that chained them to the stone floor. In a matter of moments Throt's crew would lose containment. Many had already died – snapped in two, or stomped to red paste – when, at last, a gas cylinder was embedded within each creature. Throt sent his handlers to goad the abominations one last time, stoking their fury, before ordering the lever that would release their heavy fetters.

When the abominations were unchained, the unluckiest of packmasters were left in the cavern as bait. They led their mutated charges through the vast caverns, exiting at the western edge of Peak Pass, directly across from the vast carven doors of Karak Kadrin.

Further down the pass, Ungrim Ironfist had just slain another Clan Rictus warlord. His army had driven off the last skaven counter-attack. The heavily tattooed slayers of the Lost Brotherhood, eager for slaughter, were still in pursuit. They chased the skittering remnants back to the caves. Leaning on his axe, Ungrim left such exertions to the younger set. This was not because he no longer had the energy for war, but because some other nagging sense pulled upon him. They had been led too far from the gates, and had left them unguarded for far too long.

Even as the Slayer King bid his thane to sound the recall, he heard the undulating shrieks of abominations and the roar of the main gate batteries. Ungrim's heart gave a lurch of misgiving. Although old and embittered – having lived to see the loss of his only son – Ungrim was utterly dedicated to Karak Kadrin. As the single clear note sounded the withdrawal, the dwarfs left behind strewn wreckage and the Lost Brotherhood alike, double-timing back down Peak Pass.

The trio of abominations moved towards the massive gates. They were bulky and misshapen, but they heaved and lurched at a frenetic pace. The packmasters who led them to this destination had long since veered off. Once the frenzied creatures emerged into the light, they were met by a barrage of war engine fire. Goaded beyond rage, the beasts charged straight for Karak Kadrin.

Rocks hurled by grudge throwers impacted near the abominations, filling the air with stone shards. Cannonballs skipped nearby, or embedded into the beasts' thick flesh. Soon organ cannons, quarrellers, and thunderers opened up, peppering the trio so that they hissed and bellowed as they churned forward. An army could not have survived the firepower of the front gate of Karak Kadrin. Only the warpstone-hyped regeneration of the abominations allowed them to live in that hellstorm. They shrugged off bombardments, new heads growing to replace those that were blown off. Holes blasted into the beasts reknitted so quickly that the sickly flesh seemed to writhe and twist.

One of their number fell, its death throes lost in a mushroom cloud of poisoned gas. This shrouded the other two so they emerged, their many heads coughing and retching, directly before the gates. Soon the sound of their impact echoed down the pass. The crack of their mighty boulder-sized fists pounding the ancient portal again and again thundered in the air.

The gates of Karak Kadrin had denied many foes since the world was young. Against that structure of stone and steel the sorcerous Green Foot of the orc gods, the enchanted energy bolts of the elves and the entropic tendrils of greater daemons had failed, their powers fading to less than naught before dwarfen artifice. For thousands of years, neither strength nor magic had proven capable of denting that protected portal. Until now.

With each resounding blow, the warpfire burning braziers and wrecking-ball fists of the abominations cracked metal and shattered stone. The runes of Valaya struck by masters of old did not glow in retaliation, but faded, one by one. As a gap appeared, an abomination squeezed its bulk in, wiggling grotesquely from side to side. Like a sewer rat squeezing through an impossibly small crack, the first monstrosity was through.

Within the entrance hall of Karak Kadrin the rampaging abomination met another hail of fire – cannonballs, handgun bullets and trollhammer torpedoes sent the beast sagging into spluttering mess. It began spewing jets of green gas that filled the entrance hall as the last beast entered.

Ikit Claw jabbed at the red button on the machine he held, glaring at the warlock engineers by his side. The detonation device did not seem to be working, and the beast had actually made it inside. Even as black lightnings answered Ikit's rage, arcing out to knife through his underlings, a loud *whompf* sounded across Peak Pass. What remained of the gates were blown off their hinges as the gas bomb detonation sent toxic clouds blasting everywhere. A green cloud rose up over Karak Kadrin.













A grim blackness had fallen over the dwarfs of Karak Eight Peaks. After gruelling weeks of desperate tunnel fighting, the skaven had driven the dwarfs back to their last bastion. The remainder of the Citadel had fallen to the foe, save only the final refuge of the Hall of Pillared Iron. There, the dwarfs had collapsed many tunnels and barred the remaining gates. Less than two hundred defenders could still stand and wield their axes.

Rather than attempting to defend the varied doorways, the dwarfs set up in a square in the middle of the cavernous hall. Amongst this resolute brotherhood strode King Belegar. He did not speak words of encouragement, nor did he make any speeches. Arms were clasped in silence, a solemn ceremony for a grim people. Just a few hours previously the king had sent forth all those who would attempt to break out of Karak Eight Peaks. The escape path was a narrow tunnel dropping straight down many thousands of feet. After climbing down on endless rungs of iron, the claustrophobic passageway wound miles south before leading back up to a secreted hatch buried beneath the surface rubble.

Only three dozen dwarfs had decided to leave. Several amongst their number had not left voluntarily – but upon orders from their king. These unfortunates protested, but could not deny a direct order from their liege. They were little more than beardlings, the youngest of the Clan Angrund. If the group was lucky enough and the tunnels were not discovered, they would be reaching the surface between the mountains now. It would be a difficult journey out of the enclosing ring of mountains, and then a long and perilous trek northwards.

Those that remained did so out of oath and duty. That they had little hope was never a thought or question. In truth, they never had. All recognised that retaking Karak Eight Peaks was a fool's hope, a desperate gamble. Difficult or easy, possible or impossible, these were not questions that the dwarfs had even asked of themselves. What was right by their oaths and ancestors steered them, and there was no second guessing.

Belegar held out some slim hope. He believed they could last long enough against the foe, and held out a glimmer that eventually reinforcements might reach him. Twice before the dwarfs of Karak Eight Peaks had been in similar circumstances, and both times they had been saved by the timely arrival of their brethren.

Just over a few miles of twisting underground passageways away, Queek Headtaker prepared the final assault. He had just come from war council and now the Grand Warlord of Clan Mors, and right claw of its leader Lord Gnawdwell, was glad to be back to fighting. He understood leading clawpacks, and understood fighting against dwarfs perhaps best of all. The bearded-things were tough, but consistent. For instance, he knew they would not be trying to escape. Some messengers or disparate bands might attempt to bolt, but the majority would be hunkered down and ready to defend. Despite being surrounded and overwhelmed, they would die fighting like some cave beast, rather than attempt to break out.

Aside from the upcoming fight, Queek was out of his element. The war council had brought him face to face with the grey seer Kranskritt and the Verminlord that always seemed to accompany him. At first, in the Hall of Clan Skalfdon, Queek had thought the rat daemon had been summoned and bound by the grey seer, but it took only minutes of contact for him to reverse that opinion. Soothgnawer was in charge, using Kranskritt to achieve some unseen ends. For his own part, Queek was accompanied by Lurklox, and that was new and uncomfortable. It was unclear whether the Verminlords were together or working at cross purposes.

Queek was certain it had been Kranskritt who had lead Skarsnik to the drilling tunnels and was prepared for open civil war. Lurklox had convinced him instead to ally with the grey seer and to attack Skarsnik. This, apparently, had only been a show of strength. The Verminlords wished to display to the greenskins that a war against the skaven would be costly and unwise. The infernal things got their wish, for after the Battle in the Vale, they had gone off and struck a bargain with the goblin Skarsnik behind his back.

To seal the deal and gain control of Karak Eight Peaks, all Queek had to do was present Skarsnik with the head of the dwarf king. With that, the goblin warlord would travel out of the Worlds Edge Mountains. Queek had been betrayed in alliances with Skarsnik many times before. The goblin was a liesmith, as two-faced and conniving as any skaven. What pact Lurklox thought he had made with the him, Queek had no idea. He would just as soon put Dwarf Gouger through the entire lot of them – for the skaven warlord did not trust the goblin, the grey seer, and especially not either of the Verminlords.

Clearing his head of these thoughts, it was a relief to return to matters he knew how to deal with. He sent the first clawpack off to war, then backtracked along circuitous routes to reach the other side of the dwarf-held hall. There, he sent the remainder of the attack force forward, reminding them that the dwarf king was his, and his alone. After launching attacks from all around, there was little for Queek to do, but wait. He knew dwarfs. He knew there would be traps – blackpowder and falling rocks awaiting the first to crash through the doors. He could almost picture the shieldwalls, the cannons facing each of the main gates.

By Queek's internal reckoning, he should wait at least seven or eight feedings (the greater part of a day) before he and his Red Guard should join the fray. Always impatient, Queek lasted about half that time. The corridors leading down were packed and full of stench, and entering the Hall of Pillared Iron the smell of grapeshot, entrails, and the musk of fear was overpowering. The dead lay in heaped piles.

Time after time the skaven had woven through the forest of pillars to assail the shieldwall. They were thrown back with great losses. Poisoned wind globadiers clustered behind a pillar, waiting until the fighting was at its heaviest. Then, with a scuttling speed, they closed upon their quarry, preparing to hurl their death globes. With only seconds to track their target and fire, quarrellers sent forth a single volley, and not a shot missed its mark. The few surviving globadiers scampered away, while the next attack came forth.

The mailed dwarfs in the centre were beset upon all sides. With cries of 'Belegar' and 'Karak Eight Peaks', they fought until their life's blood was spent. Step by step the dwarfs shrank back, closing their dwindling ranks, shortening their battle line. They fell by ones and twos, pierced by clanrat spears or jabbed in the vitals by serrated swords. With no respite, the last dwarfs closed in a defensive ring around their king, shielding him with their bodies. Tired, thirsty, and with limbs that felt leaden, the dwarfs fought on, hewing and chopping. With each death of their comrades, their kith and kin, Belegar and his warriors fought harder.

The skaven wavered and broke, but within moments, the next wave crashed home. Then came the crimson-armoured stormvermin of the Red Guard. Fresh, well-fed and bold – they were the largest and fiercest of their kind. Once more they faced the Iron Brotherhood – the hammerer bodyguard of Belegar. This time, it was the skaven that were triumphant. As their heavy halberds hacked down the last of that proud formation, the vermin plucked out trophies – heads, beards, and pieces of broken armour. Since before they, or their fathers ten times passed were whelped, the Iron Brotherhood had been a ratbane – a living terror that was finally defeated.

With their king in the centre, the last dozen dwarfs presented a ring of axes, hammers and shields that none could break. Time and again the skaven crashed against them, were broken, and fled back to reform. Calling upon his Ancestor Gods, King Belegar swept out with his great maul, swinging an arc of death that cracked bodies and armour alike. None could match the king's wrath or might in arms, but one by one those around him perished, dragged down by weight of numbers. Hemmed in on all sides, his armour rent, his shield dented, King Belegar was alone when the circle of ratmen broke to allow Queek through.

The duel that followed was fast and not as one-sided as Queek had imagined. Wounded and weary, there was no chance of any other outcome. Yet Belegar did not back down or show weakness, fighting his defiance until the very end. Queek, bleeding profusely, and his armour bearing a distinct hammer-shaped impression, bent down. When he rose again, he lifted up the dwarf king's head to the shrill victory squeals of Clan Mors.



The world was changing, and not for the better.

High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer looked out from Karaz-a-Karak. He stood upon a carven spire near the mountain's summit, and it was very much like standing on the top of the world. He looked down upon the clouds and the lesser snow-covered peaks of the Worlds Edge Mountains.

The sun was sinking beyond the margin of the land and its last slanting rays coloured the mountains red. Smoke hung on the horizon, signs of war and volcanic unrest. To the north, the skies shimmered with an unnatural aurora, a multi-coloured storm. Flashes of lightning arced across the skies.

Miles below, the greatest of dwarf strongholds was under siege. Many gates had been assailed – not just the main ones along the Silver Road, but portals across the spurs and ridges of the colossal mountain. Some of the concealed entrances had been assaulted also. Below ground, in the ancient mineways and underdepths, the attacks were more savage still. There also, long barred passageways and secret tunnels echoed to the sounds of battle. That so many of the hidden ways were under attack was further proof that this was no sudden invasion or random uprising, but a calculated campaign of annihilation.

Messages from as far away as the Grey Mountains told the same story – dwarf strongholds and mines were falling. Skaven were storming up from below in never-before-witnessed numbers. Unlike the men of the Empire, the dwarfs had always considered the ratmen to be a major threat. Yet none could have predicted that their ancient subterranean foe had grown so numerous and so bold. Karak Azul had fallen. Gyrocopters told that green clouds still hung over Karak Kadrin, and that its gates lay broken along Peak Pass. Zhufbar had closed all gates, hoping to shutter the mountain in a ring of iron. The dwarf fleet had been badly defeated while defending Barak Varr, and now that great hold smoked from within.

Surely this was the twilight of the dwarfs, the ending of the world? Dwarf legends said that the Ancestor Gods themselves would return for the final battle. Despite the constant stream of visitors to the great shrines of Grungni, Grimnir, Valaya and the lesser gods, no answers or divine visitations had been forthcoming.



The news from other realms – although not as reliable – was equally bleak. Tilea and Estalia had collapsed years ago, and Bretonnia was now overrun by skaven. Much of the Empire was in ruin, and varied reports named their Emperor Karl Franz as dead or missing. Nagash had returned, the vampire counts and the undead spreading out of the black heart of Sylvania. And from the north came armies of chaos, marching openly, while a horde of monsters rampaged before them. There were persistent rumours that the distant high elves too were embroiled in war with their darksome kin. The dwarfs shared a complicated past with the elves. Yet just as Thorgrim was sure that the fickle race had drawn their own troubles down upon themselves, he also knew that the haughty elves of Ulthuan were better allies than none at all.

Karaz-a-Karak had weathered many hardships during its long and glorious past. It was the largest of their mountain strongholds, the stony heart of the dwarf empire. Much of their realm had dwindled, and now far less than half of the capital city's halls were occupied. But all who gazed within saw one of the true marvels of the world. Endless halls and deeps held the history of the dwarfs carved in stone. Within its vaults lay the greatest single concentration of wealth and magical artefacts anywhere in the world.

Over the ages Karaz-a-Karak had endured. Its very name meant 'the pinnacle of mountains', although in Khazalid the word for mountain can also mean 'thing which endures'. Hence, its name also translated as 'the most enduring' or 'everpeak'. Karaz-a-Karak had preserved through the Time of Woes, the Goblin Wars, the besiegement of the elves, and thousands of battles and invasions. So long as the Everpeak stood, so too would the dwarfs.

With the skies gone black and the second moon rising in its leering fullness, Thorgrim turned from the mountaintop vista. The eerie light of the green moon felt unnatural. He descended the spiral stairs for hours, before reaching his awaiting thronebearers. Taking his seat upon the Throne of Power, Thorgrim reached out and touched the Rune of Azamar – the one and only rune of Eternity. Its warm glow was a comfort as the old king was carried back to his dais to endure another long session with his advisors listing out the woes of the world.

Grey Seer Thanquol was deep in the sewers of Nuln, and he was very desperate. His dream of leading a glorious victory seemed impossibly distant. The plans to capture the man-things' city were failing. Not for the first time, he was being blamed. The Council of Thirteen had made it very clear – the mission would succeed, or heads would be forfeit.

Although his past efforts had ended in disaster, once more the white-furred sorcerer attempted to slice the veil between realms. Once more he attempted to summon forth a Verminlord...

... and once more Thanquol failed. This time, at least, he had not done so with the same disastrous consequences as his previous attempt. Tail lashing, the grey seer paced out of the crude symbols scratched into the stone floor, the small gouges filled with rivulets of blood.

It was then that Thanquol perceived a shadowy hand reaching out of the blackness. Its claws ripped through reality with a screech that sent pain running down his spine. The enormous hand lifted Thanquol upright, dangling him upside down as its owner stepped out of a black abyss of shadows.

Thanquol could do nothing but squeak in wide-eyed wonder. He had seen Verminlords before, of course, but never anything like this. Horns grew from its head – a sign of nobility to skaven – but none had ever sprouted so majestically as these. Multiple sets curved and entwined its verminous head. They seemed to sinuously curve and move as Thanquol watched them.

'Ahhh, Thanquol,' it purred. 'We have waited for you to call us, little seer. Yes-yes, we have much to do.'

'Who-what are you, oh Great Master?' said Thanquol, as the creature placed him gently along the side of the culvert. Only then did the grey seer notice that the Verminlord's claw-like feet did not sink into the river of filth. The ancient being stooped to Thanquol's level, and the grey seer could see that one eye was missing. The empty socket was a black hole of endless nothing.

'Our name is Skreech Verminking,' said the Verminlord. 'There are many of us in here.' As he spoke, Thanquol saw before him the varied aspects flicker – the contagion-ridden body of the plague priest, the shadowy assassin, the hungry hordes, the tinkering weaponsmith, the future-gazing seer. 'The ruins, the decay – they give us power. We were called here by blight and destruction,' it said, sniffing the air and craning its neck. 'And by you, Thanquol.'

The grey seers had long spoken in whispered legend of the one. A Rat King – a conglomerate evil. In skaven society all things were hierarchal, from clans to caste. Had he really just summoned forth the most powerful of all Verminlords? Thanquol had always known he was special, but this was pleasing confirmation. Pleasing indeed.

The grey seer looked up into that strange face staring back at – and possibly through – him. It seemed to have read his thoughts, for it looked down upon him indulgently, its enormous claw reaching out to ever-so-gently stroke his horns. 'Yes-yes, little seer. Together we shall conquer.'







CHAPTER 4

The Bell Tolls For Nuln

Winter 2524 – Spring 2525



The skaven attacks upon the Empire began at the same time that Clan Pestilens launched their assault upon Lustria. The timing for the underground rising was perfect, as the Empire was in tumult, riven by battle and beset by plague. Timing, however, was the only thing that worked in the ratmen's favour.

The skaven offensive was separated into several dozen operations, each composed of a handful of lesser Warlord Clans. Lacking a single preeminent leader or clan to organise efforts, the varied campaigns across the Empire either had little to do with each other, or worse yet, worked openly against one another.

After months of preparations and undertunnelling, many attacks never took place. In some cases the Warlord Clans fell upon each other in backstabbing wars. In other instances, the skaven simply arrived too late. War had already come to the Empire. In the north, Reikland and Nordland were burning. A few clans, although none with affiliations to Pestilens, even fell prey to the plagues that swept the human lands. In many cases the skaven had little more to do than creep into the ruins the Chaos armies left behind. They became squatters rather than invaders – scavengers content to pick over the detritus left behind.

Four Warlord Clans were assigned to attack the city of Nuln. They were Clans Gristlecrack, Vrrtkin, Kryxx, and Carrion, and each of them had further backing from the Greater Clans. Due to the importance of the target, this support included a great number of warlock engineers under Great Warlock Skribolt, and a pair of grey seers – Thanquol and Gribikk. Before their recent fall from dominance, the mission would have been under the leadership of either of the grey seers, yet a new era had begun. Since their ejection from the Council of Thirteen, the horned sorcerers were purposefully relegated to little more than lickpaw-lackeys. At best they held advisory positions to those who now wielded the power.

With the ascension of Clan Skryre to the top of the clan hierarchy, it was one of their number that rose up to lead. The Great Warlock Skribolt was a gifted inventor and a powerful master of dark lightnings. He was not, however, a skaven who could lead more than a team of technical underlings. His attempts to deploy the Warlord Clans had been disastrous.

The first attempted rising, which was to take the black powder storage of Nuln, never left the tunnels. Greedy for all the scavenge rights, Clan Vrrtkin turned upon their erstwhile allies, Clan Carrion. Thanquol was blamed for this loss, although at the time he was many miles away. He had been sent to investigate a series of old tunnels that led beneath the River Sol. When recalled, and told of his failures, the grey seer was then forced to explain the loss of so many warriors to representatives of the Council of Thirteen.

For his part, Thanquol was aware that a scapegoat was sometimes needed to pin blame upon. Due to inadequate support in the past, he himself had been forced to point a claw at others. However, only the weakest were chosen to take blame, and Thanquol was incredulous to think that he and the remaining grey seers had fallen so low. Even worse, the Council's messenger was not a grey seer, but rather a Clan Skryre techno-tinkerer. To see such a lowly sorcerer flanked by the albino bodyguard of the Council was a slap in the whiskers. There was no solace for Thanquol in that meeting, only dire consequences listed out in case of further failure.

Thanquol's next assignment was mere scurry-work, but something else happened that set off the grey seer's paranoia. Clan Skryre engineers had taken his bodyguard Boneripper from him. This was ostensibly to upgrade the creature's warpfire thrower, but Thanquol was not convinced. Shorn of his bodyguard, he felt vulnerable. When he returned from his messenger duty, Thanquol discovered that a second attack had been made. It too had failed, though the clanrats had at least reached the surface. This foray was made by Clans Gristlecrack and Kryxx, but was once again set upon by Clan Vrrtkin. The humans, drawn to the clashing skaven, had seen them retreat back into the sewers. Many casualties were left behind.

Once again, Thanquol heard he was linked to the flawed attack plan. He had no doubts as to who would be made responsible in reports. That the grey seer had not known of the plan would not matter. At the next war council, Great Warlock Skribolt's first order of business was to dismiss Thanquol, ordering him to report the dire news of the latest failure to Skavenblight via farsqueaker.

Knowing that to detail another defeat to the Council was a death sentence, Thanquol reverted to what he did best: he lied. The grey seer spoke elaborate untruths, fabricating a tale of delayed success that would, at any moment, ripen to glorious victory. Before any questions could be asked, Thanquol knocked lose as many wires as he could from the contraption. This was followed by an accidental drop, and then another, as the first one hadn't seemed to do the job. When the grey seer next attempted to regain the signal he picked up nothing but crackle from the other end.

When bewildered engineers burst into the room, Thanquol berated them and their faulty invention. Before they could fix the machinery, Thanquol stalked out. The warlock engineers, no doubt, would report him to Great Warlock Skribolt. Nervously, the grey seer pulled out his stash of warpstone shards, dropping one into his mouth. Immediately he felt the raw magic flow through his system, calming him.

In a better frame of mind, Thanquol made straight for the sewers. Desperate measures were in order. In the secluded darkness, he scratched the sacred runes of summoning.

Meanwhile, the skaven war council went on and on. For hours the group had listened to and rejected ideas for how best to attack the man-things. The mood turned confrontational. Warlord Throttlespine, leader of Clan Kryxx, had drawn forth his blade and was challenging the Grand Warlord of Clan Vrrtkin, Trikstab Gribnode. Unable to get any to listen to him, Great Warlock Skribolt had begun cranking up his warp lightning generator when a disturbance in the outer chambers brought all to a sudden halt. Clangs sounded as armoured stormvermin were hurled against walls, and a deep-throated roar made even the bravest of them clench their fear glands.

A single blow felled the plank doors and there loomed the largest rat ogre any of the gathered skaven had ever seen. This included Grand Packmaster Manxrot, a Master Mutator from Hell Pit who had seen more than his share. The four-armed behemoth doubled over to squeeze its bulk through the doorway, staring at the assembly with hate-filled eyes. Following the lumbering monster into the room was the recently banished grey seer, Thanquol.



'Good-good, all still here? I bring news from the Council,' said Thanquol, who was puffed up and obviously pleased with himself.

This proclamation seemed most stunning to Great Warlock Skribolt, whose claw still churned the handcrank on his warp-energy condenser. His muzzle twitched as he grasped for what to say.

'Yes-yes. After so much incompetence,' and here the grey seer paused, looking at Skribolt, 'I am to be in charge. Any disputes can be directed to my bodyguard, Boneripper.' At this, Thanquol nodded his head to the hulking beast snarling behind him.

'But that is not...' Skribolt started to say, but the grey seer cut him off.

'My *new* bodyguard Boneripper,' said Thanquol, 'The old one was mostly dead,' he added, dismissively. 'This one is better.'

'Now that the element of surprise is gone-lost,' Thanquol continued, 'I feel it is time to switch tactics. *My* plan is to...'

At last, Skribolt, found his tongue. 'Enough! No more! Halt-stop!' said the great warlock, the last words coming out perhaps more shrilly than he wished. 'On whose orders were you gift-granted authority? Why-tell was I not informed?'

Skribolt was standing, the lightnings wreathing him as his whirring contraption sucked in the winds of magic. All the other skaven present – warlords, a top assassin, and a master moulder – took steps backwards away from the two.

When the voice spoke from the shadows, all turned. Such was the power inherent in its slightest whisper that several of the lesser warlords let loose their bowels.

'On my authority, great warlock,' said the shadow. The room went black, lit only by dancing chains of lightning. A long, elegant claw reached out, snuffing out the sparks that flew between Skribolt's backpack conductors. In the blackness, a single terrifyingly evil eye radiated over them, holding them each in turn.

As suddenly as it appeared, the blackness was gone – it was just the war council again, lit by dimly flickering warpstone braziers.

'What do you bid-command, o Great and Exalted Leader Thanquol?' intoned Warlord Throttlespine, bowing low. The rest of the skaven followed suit, although they did subconsciously shuffle away from those who had befouled themselves.

Thanquol had already surmised that Throttlespine was the smart one, yet it was gratifying to be proven correct. Nodding his head slightly in acceptance, Thanquol began again. 'As I was saying, my plan...'

The city of Nuln was on alert. It was a powerful city – one of the greatest in the Empire, and perhaps Altdorf's only true rival in wealth, industry, and population. Situated where the confluence of the rivers Aver and Sol met the Reik, the city was known for its walls and bridges. Most famous of all, however, were the armaments factories of Nuln.

Nuln's coffers were always full, and it had everything to do with the city establishing itself as the arsenal of the Empire. The forges, foundries and shot towers had grown rich through selling ordnance and ammunitions to every other province and city-state. No other manufacturer could produce and sell such fine artillery pieces, such explosive black powder, or such well rounded cannonballs as did Nuln. Only a dwarf would dare dispute that claim, and as the mountain folk did not actually sell their war engines or black powder to any but their own kind, there could be no competition.

It was often said that the more dangerous the times, the more gold flowed into the city. And never before had the coffers been so full. With so much of the Empire already burning with war's flames, there had long been a demand for more weapons than Nuln's factories could produce. Night and day, the forgefires of Nuln blazed, so that the entire city was permanently crowned with clouds of acrid smoke. Soot and ashes were everywhere, falling out of the skies like rain.

Adding to the usual fervour of the factories, the city had locked all its gates. From across the nation, the news coming in was all bad. Far to the north, the Auric Bastion had been breached, and the forces of Chaos were rampaging through. Armies of undead marched out of Sylvania to walk openly through the lands. Marienburg had fallen, and an invading army of barbarians and daemons marched upon Altdorf. Troubles came from not just the north, for a stream of refugees straggled in from Wissenland and western Averland. Armies of ogres and greenskins cut seemingly random paths through the land. It appeared nowhere was safe.

Entire battalions and artillery trains had already marched out of Nuln's gates to the succour of the realm at large. Some scattered reports had returned, but the soldiers had not, nor did it seem likely that they ever would. Despite these losses, the city maintained a strong standing army. The guard that stood upon the walls and bridges of Nuln remained an impressive force. Their defences bristled with guns – the best ordnance in the Empire. The battle-hardened men of the Iron Companies stood ready. It was often said that Nuln could look after her own.

It was, perhaps, this martial pride in their city's defence that made so many nobles and commanders scoff at the recent troubles. There had been talk of an invasion – not from outside, but from below. The word through the streets was that ratmen had been sighted, rising from the sewers.

Such a thing was to be expected, said soldiers and citizens alike. They claimed that dastardly foes would not dare attempt to besiege the main gates or attack the high walls, and so an attempt to infiltrate Nuln only made sense. Many of those who voiced their opinions still clung to antiquated notions that ratmen were but a child's myth. They begrudgingly might acquiesce that a tribe of beastmen had broken into the sewers, but even then they would assert it was but a weakling strain. In recent memory, Nuln's defenders had turned the host of Tamurkhan and innumerable greenskin invasions away. If such enemies as they could be stopped, what hope had enfeebled scavengers? Not everyone in Nuln shared this casual disregard, however.

Captain Drechsler of the Black Tower Companies was one officer who was alarmed. It was his regiments that had come face to face with the invaders from below. Drawn off their standard night patrol route by the sounds of battle, they had come across a chaotic scene. An army of ratmen had crept out of the sewers near River's End and was fighting itself. While the men stared in wonder, Captain Drechsler slapped them into formation with the flat of his sword. He did not know what these gaunt rat-like creatures were, or why they had invaded his city, but he didn't imagine it was to fight themselves. Within moments, the patrol had formed a line, and the handgunners began firing systematic volleys into the mayhem. Drechsler had drilled his men well, and was satisfied to peer through the smoke and see the beastly creatures dropping in waves.

Even with regiments of handgunners raking fire into them, the ratmen continued to tear at each other. More patrols arrived at the battle, and Captain Drechsler directed them so that they formed into a cohesive battle line. By this time, some of the ratmen had directed their attention to the Nuln patrols, but they lacked the organisation and coherency to properly press forward. Milling about in confusion, the ratmen at last broke ranks altogether and scrambled back. They fled with astonishing speed, hurling themselves down into the sewers. In moments they were all gone, but now troops from all over the city were converging upon the clash.

As the officer in charge, Captain Drechsler was asked many questions, even receiving a visit from Grand Marshal Erkstein, the commander in chief of Nuln's armies and river-navy. Were it not for the massive piles of dead ratmen, Drechsler was not sure his tale would have been believed. For so many to appear so suddenly in the midst of the heavily defended city was nothing short of astounding. Casualties amongst his own men were

few, but Drechsler attributed that to the fact that the skaven were really fighting themselves.

Drechsler was a professional soldier who had seen his share of battle. Whatever Drechsler believed before then, he certainly considered the ratmen a threat now. He had seen firsthand their savagery and numbers, as well as several unorthodox weapons – a fire-throwing device and some form of mortar that hurled glass phials of poisoned gas. He hated to think of the havoc those infernal devices would have reaped had they been directed at his own forces.

Praise was lavished upon the Black Tower Patrol and their captain. As for the dead ratmen, the learned masters of the University saved a few for study, but most were piled into a mountainous pyre and burned. When Captain Drechsler and his men asserted that more of the skaven escaped back into the sewers than were slain, the statement was met with scepticism. Dutifully, a handful of sewerjacks were summoned and patrols launched to explore the under passageways. This was, unsurprisingly, a very unpopular manoeuvre amongst both soldiers and officers, for the smells and filth in those ancient tunnels was nauseating. This half-hearted measure did little to explore the vast labyrinth of tunnels below the city.

These journeys into the dark beneath the city did find a great many rats, but they were of the normal four-legged kind, so no further alarm was raised. Captain Drechsler's worries, however, were not assuaged. It was his contention that only the ratmen turning on each other had raised the alarms and allowed his patrols to intervene. It had been good fortune, he continued, that prevented the seizure of the Krupthof Foundries – one of the city's largest and oldest manufacturers of cannon and artillery pieces. After contemplation, that is what he reckoned the ratmen were after, based on the sewers they used and the direction he believed they must have been heading.

Drechsler was not surprised that the marshal and his cabinet of high ranking officers scoffed at these notions. They pointed out the piled dead of the skaven and the total lack of any more in the sewers. None of the dead bore any of the exotic weapons the captain described. Instead, they carried only rusty blades, warped spears, wooden shields and scrap-made armour. They were dismissed as being a ragged raiding warband that worked its way into the city through some distant river culvert. That the beasts might target a foundry seemed a baseless assertion. The rathole must be found and stopped up, but there was no further worry from that quarter. If you must look for doom, look elsewhere, they said – it was common enough in these black times.

Only the wizard Berndt Aberwald – a heavily bearded and taciturn individual – stayed to ask further questions. He obviously believed Captain Drechsler, and shared his concerns about the skaven.

After repeated requests from Captain Drechsler, regular patrols ranged through the accessible parts of the sewers. He was even allowed to hire groups of militia to aid in the process. Acting on an old soldier's intuition, the Black Tower captain ensured that patrols around the foundry district were stepped up in size and regularity – Drechsler would not be caught off guard again.





It had taken Thanquol several sessions with the Great Warlock Skribolt to unravel what the true objectives in Nuln were. It helped to have the assistance of a creature that could sniff out lies and half-truths. Previously, Thanquol would have been privy to all this information, and it rankled him to learn of the mission only through coercion.

Thanquol gathered that the objective was not to simply sack and enslave the city, as they had done so successfully in Tilea. Such things were secondary to the main goal. Instead, the task was to retrieve specific spoils to further an important Clan Skryre project back in Skavenblight. These items were, quite possibly, the keys that would unlock total victory – or so Skribolt had been told. Only in Nuln could the skaven find their target, for they were to steal black powder in vast quantities – mountains of the stuff was needed. The mission also requested a working steam engine.

Thus far, Skribolt had seized exactly none of these things. Instead, he had set the rival Warlord Clans against each other and alerted the humans to the skaven presence in the sewers. Thanquol shook his head. It had always been his curse to work with incompetents. Skribolt also informed Thanquol that under no circumstances were the skaven to risk harming the needed substances. This explained the decision not to simply overrun the city – for such an invasion could take weeks of back and forth fighting. Thanquol remembered only too well how quickly the armies of Nuln had mobilised.

It had been years since Thanquol had been in Nuln, but it had left a mark on the grey seer. He had nearly grasped victory then, but it was snatched from his claws. It was a point of pride that, even in his failure, Thanquol had burnt half the city. This time, he swore, when he was done there would be no more Nuln.

The grey seer fished out several glowing chunks from a pouch and popped these into his mouth. Sometimes Thanquol crunched the warpstone; at other times he held it in his mouth, dissolving it slowly as he used his tongue to shift the shards from cheek to cheek. Although far underground, he could feel night falling and the immense warpmoon rising. The warpstone flowed through his system, giving him visions. Such times were best for planning.

There was not much time left to act. Clan Skryre agents had most likely already informed those back in Skavenblight that Thanquol had taken over. The first thing the grey seer had to do was to stop the internal fighting amongst the warlords. His inclination had been to make a messy example of the chief source of his woes, the overly aggressive Grand Warlord Trikstab of Clan Vrrtkin. As a motivator, fear of black lightnings had always served Thanquol well. The Verminlord, Verminking, however, had suggested another way. Awed by the presence of the magnificently horned manifestation of power, Thanquol acquiesced. The next step was to discuss the attack strategy.

Skribolt's plan had been to surround the munitions district with skaven, allowing time for slaves to dismantle everything and haul it underground. Such a strategy was not worth a dropping, Thanquol decided. The black towers that surrounded the area were full of troops. The human armies would respond quickly. The skaven would need more time to plunder.

Thanquol had many questions, but it was difficult to speak with the Verminlord. Soon after helping the grey seer claim leadership, the unnatural being had retreated back to the shadowlands. That had been a few days ago. Since then, Thanquol had heard Skreech's voice inside his own head several times. This happened at night when the green moon was out, and when the grey seer had consumed

much warpstone. During such times, cunning plans flashed through Thanquol's mind in rapid-fire fashion. While the physical world grew hazy, visions of the future, as well as the motivations and intrigues of those around him, became perfectly clear.

During these warp-entranced states, Thanquol suddenly knew – as if someone whispered in his ear – how best to get his way. Whether his sub-commanders needed coercion, encouragement, fawning compliments or the crackling threat of a lightning bolt, Thanquol could see it more clearly than the whiskers on his muzzle. He inherently knew when to bare his fangs for maximum effect, when to coalesce a sizzling aura about his clenched claw, and when he could get his way simply by narrowing his eyes to slits.

With deft precision, Thanquol set the two-stage plan to begin the following evening. The grey seer called for the gutter runners, for only by their stealth could the first step be taken.

Clan Eshin had agents across the world, and the gutter runners known as the Ripshades were their top eyes and ears in Nuln. For two years they had dwelt beneath the city, making furtive forays to spy upon their foes. Masters of disguise, they donned cowls and crept out amongst the city's poor. During masquerades, they slipped into the palace of Countess Emmanuelle von Liebwitz, the Elector Countess of Wissenland, who made her base in Nuln. There was nowhere they did not venture, and they knew the undertunnels like it was their own warren. The Ripshades quickly grasped Thanquol's plan and saw the simple genius of it.

Taking with them several claws of night runners as support, the Ripshades left the underlairs. Up they went along winding passageways gnawed deep below the city. They climbed vertical shafts to drainage tunnels until they reached the sewers. They were moving at scurry-speed, as fast as the quickest man could sprint, but this was not their fastest pace – not yet. It would be a long night's work, and they would need to conserve energy. When the skaven reached a crossroads in the sewers, Deathrunner Skewit held up a claw, sniffing. The leader looked all ways, then flashed another signal to his team. At this, the skaven silently scattered, each different group heading off to complete their own prearranged mission.

Moments after being crammed with black-clad skaven, the sewer crossroads were left empty again. The only sound was dripping condensation. Then came furtive scratching, as the four-legged denizens of the sewers slowly crept out to scavenge. It was not long before the rats were forced to flee again, this time from the tramp of heavy boots as a torch-lit patrol of Empire soldiers marched past.

On the surface, the warpmoon hung huge in the sky, casting strange shadows upon Nuln. Over the deserted streets the skaven flitted, darting from one patch of darkness to the next. They worked their slinking way down twisted back alleys, and through the maze of rubbish-filled backstreets. Only the faintest click of clawed feet racing across cobblestone could be heard. At the slightest sign of movement, the skaven froze, squeezing into cracks or ducking into shadow behind rubbish heaps. The unseen lurkers were not detected by late-night drunks weaving their way homeward, or even by torch-carrying patrols that marched within an arm's length of the crouching skaven.

When the streets were quiet again, the skaven once more detached themselves from hidden nooks of darkness, and scuttled across the foundry district to complete their clandestine mission.

'Sigmar's Hammer, I hate Captain Drechsler,' griped one of the men at the front. Probably Klaus, but possibly Arnulf.

Even though it was most likely mumbled just to get a rise out of him, Sergeant Bruno bristled. 'Next person to bellyache or moan about the patrol gets a knock on the helm from me,' said the sergeant. 'The sooner we bump into Gloff's patrol, the sooner we can get out of here.'

In the close confines of the sewers, sounds were magnified – boots marching, the rattle of the soldiers' accoutrements, a shield clanging against a slime-coated wall. Now, Bruno's gruff commands seemed to fill the space, echoing far down the tunnel. In truth, the sergeant hated the sewers too, but right now he was starting to worry. They should have met the other nightwatch by now.

'Aren't duties like this the reason we have militia, sergeant?' asked Klaus as he wiped his sweating brow. It was damp and humid in these foul-smelling passageways.

Just as Sergeant Bruno drew his blade, intending to smack Klaus' head with the flat side, Berndt gave a yell of dismay. Pushing his way to the front of the patrol, Bruno saw that at the edge of the torchlight were crumpled bodies. They wore the same uniforms.

Grown wary now, Bruno edged closer, driving off the rodents that had already begun to feed. Upon the bodies they could see signs of cruel sword strokes, and some of the fallen men had star-shaped metal discs sticking into them. 'Looks like we found Gloff's patrol,' said Bruno grimly.

Dawn was breaking by the time the gutter runners returned from their mission. Deathrunner Skewit collected the reports and carried them down the warrens to Thanquol. The mission had been completed; each of the devices had been planted. Almost all of the claws had successfully dodged the nightwatchmen and patrols, which had been out in unusually high numbers. There was one last detail Skewit thought about neglecting to tell the grey seer, but the way in which Thanquol gazed at him made the Clan Eshin warrior feel like the white-furred sorcerer could guess his thoughts. There had been several unavoidable run-ins, although the gutter runners swore that any who had seen the skaven were now dead.

While he gave his reports, the deathrunner noticed something moving behind the grey seer in the shadows. It made his fur bristle. He had seen such a shape only once before. Then too, he had felt its aura of verminous power. Once back in his own lair-nest, he told his clawmates the powerful Thanquol did indeed have a Verminlord in his service. All took that as a sign of the Great Horned Rat's favour. Victory would soon be theirs...

On the surface above, the sun rose, but it did not shine upon Nuln. So much smoke hung over the city that it was difficult to tell it was morning. Only the observant noticed a little light sneaking past the pall. One such perceptive man was Captain Drechsler. The reports coming in only made him gloomier. One of the extra patrols he had ordered was missing, and another had been found dead in the sewers.

Captain Drechsler didn't like these developments. More than ever, he felt there was something still lurking down in the sewers. Perhaps this had nothing to do with the ratmen invasion, and there was some beast loose below the city? But no, it felt connected. To attack and destroy an armed patrol was no easy feat. There could be an entire army down there for all anyone really knew.

Once more Captain Drechsler dutifully reported to his superiors. It was pointed out that the unaccounted men were militia, and it was not unheard of for them to go wandering. Often enough, the missing men had the nerve to turn up days later, still smelling of cheap booze. Drechsler had known such an argument would be made. The militia might have absconded, he allowed, but the patrol, he responded, had been professionals. They were Black Tower men like himself. And they hadn't gone off to visit taverns, but were found lying in their own blood in the dank sewers.

The dead patrol had been discovered close to the foundries, again leading Drechsler to believe there was some connection. He put everyone on duty – even sending out cooks and stableboys to join the watchmen. He called up more militia. Tonight, Nuln, and particularly the smog-ridden munitions sector, would be filled with patrols. With all his assignments made, Captain Drechsler went off in search of Gunther Maybach. He knew the old engineer had been tinkering with the *Deliverance*. The captain had the feeling the steam tank was going to be needed soon.

It took some time to track down the eccentric engineer, and it was already afternoon by the time Captain Drechsler's subordinates learned of his whereabouts – he had last been seen within the sprawling Krupthof Foundries. This was not good news. As one of the city's largest and oldest makers of cannons, mortars, and volley guns, the Krupthof facilities had grown vast. The complex was like a fortress, and inside the walls were many stone buildings: workshops, smithies, forges, and warehouses, all of which were clustered around an immense courtyard that served as munitions testing grounds. Drechsler knew he could spend hours searching out Maybach. Luckily, however, the captain spotted the engineer right away. He was tinkering with some device in the great courtyard, and took absolutely no notice of the impatient Black Tower commander.

Gunther Maybach was examining a cylindrical device – it looked like a cobbled-together shell with wires and conductors poking out randomly. There was a corkscrew tip on the end, like some strange drilling machine. When throat-clearing failed to capture the engineer's rapt attentions, Drechsler simply began talking. He was, after all, a busy man preparing for an emergency.

The sound of a loud voice very close startled the engrossed engineer out of his reverie. After shushing the captain with flurried hand gestures, Maybach explained, in a whisper, that he was examining what he thought to be a kind of a bomb. The device had been found at the nearby docks and brought to the workshops. It had piqued his curiosity, for he had never seen a device such as this. The saboteurs seemed to have an unusual grasp of bomb-making. Parts of the build were ingenious, while other bits looked like the handiwork of disinterested children. Captain Drechsler had no expertise with munitions, but the ramshackle design of the bomb had a familiar aspect. It looked very much like the strange devices he had seen the ratmen using. He quickly explained his growing fears to Maybach.

At the mention of skaven, Maybach grew more concerned. He edged away from the device. He had heard rumours of the ratmen and their wyrdstone-powered war machines. Suddenly the lack of black powder and the glowing greenish sand that filled the shell made the engineer increasingly worried. What had seemed curious before now seemed inhuman and dangerous. If the device was a bomb, and it did come from the ratmen, then the situation had taken

a serious turn, Captain Drechsler thought anxiously. A disturbing notion crossed his mind. Were there any more of them?

The captain did not know it, but strange eyes were gazing upon him at that very moment.

Between the colossal Krupthof Foundries and the docks was a shanty town. It was a dense and decrepit part of the city – a maze of sagging grey timber-framed buildings leaning in upon each other. It was the kind of area where half the buildings were empty and those who dwelt in the other half asked no questions. The skaven had tunnelled right up into the dirt-floor of one of these abandoned and boarded up shacks. If anyone heard the whirring sounds of a warp-grinder, or the noise of scuffling and rock-shifting, none bothered to investigate. In such slums it was better not to know.

Inside the claptrap dwelling were mounds of excavation piled to the rafters. Scattered about this heap were night runners. They did not favour surface missions, especially in the daytime, although the thick smoke and overcast skies made for an early gloaming. They were there to provide guard and escort on this reconnaissance mission, while Zrrk, a warlock engineer, did the spying. The canny ratman mechanic was using his spotter-scope to see straight through the wattle and worm-eaten slats of board. By adjusting dials he could also peer through the stone walls that surrounded the Krupthof Foundries. Zrrk zoomed the focus in so that the two talking humans and the drill-bomb dominated his field of vision.

Zrrk watched while the humans tinkered a little too much with the device and accidentally activated its warp-drill. The device did not work perfectly, ricocheting off the cobblestones and sending showers of green sparks upwards while the man-things fled. For a moment, Zrrk lost sight of the drill-bomb, but then he espied a rising column of green smoke. Lowering his view, and adjusting the dials took time, but eventually the warlock engineer found what he was looking for. The drill had ceased its erratic flight and had landed and begun burrowing. This was bad luck really, thought Zrrk. So many of the devices malfunctioned even in the most perfect conditions. Truthfully, Zrrk was still angered that the grand warlock had chosen another's design and relegated Zrrk to spying duty.

A great mound gave evidence of where the drill gained traction and delved below. The warpstone fuel made it quite a powerful digger for its size. Not even the humans could fail to figure out what the bomb's purpose was now, thought Zrrk. He had seen enough. Within a few moments, the skaven were gone.

Meanwhile, Captain Drechsler was rushing off. He needed to warn Grand Marshal Erkstein, and also find able-bodied men that could comb the city for more of those bombs. Not too long afterwards, the main gates of the Krupthof Foundry swung open. Clanking and wheezing as it came, the steam tank *Deliverance* rolled forth. Answering the Black Tower Captain's request, Gunther Maybach was taking the ironclad behemoth out. His new upgraded engine was just warming up to full power, hissing steam as the tank chugged forward.

The sun was setting. Its dying rays could not penetrate the gloom that hung over Nuln, but backlit the roiling clouds instead. For a few fleeting moments, the city was bathed in a reddish glow, like that of burning embers. Soon enough, darkness fell.

And then the bells began tolling...



They came from the sewers. It happened all across Nuln, starting in the northern districts. At first it was a trickle of rats. They squeezed out between iron-wrought grates or rose from cesspits. From drains, culverts, and cracks in walls, they poured forth. The sporadic flow became a steady stream. They were common city rats – grey or black vermin, their oily fur giving way to long, worm-like tails. The citizens of Nuln, especially in the poorer quarters, were familiar with rats. The observant could spot them at dusk, but to see them moving in the open was unusual. Many pointed at the novelty, others shrieked. More rats came. Millions more.

The streams became a torrent – a raging river of rats. What started as curiosity for the citizens of Nuln would soon change into something else. Drinkers gathered at a tavern laughed as they watched a drunk stomping the rats. It was a demented jig, each heavy boot breaking a handful of the scuttling creatures. A perfect landing squished out pink coils of innards to raucous cheers. As the current of vermin increased, they grew bolder, running up legs and biting at exposed flesh. They went for soft places first – eyes, open mouths or fingers. There were too many to fight. Like so many others, the cavorting drunkard was pulled down and gnawed to death by dozens, hundreds, thousands of tiny teeth.

People fled inside, slamming doors behind them. Those with upper storeys threw open their shutters and gazed upon the vermin tide that swept the streets. Not a cobblestone could be seen, only a seething carpet of rats. Warning bells clanged all over the city.

This was but the bow wave of the dwellers from below. In truth, they were only racing away before the real invasion that followed on their tails.

Behind the swarming rats came the skaven, and they came with a vengeance. In an instant, the northern half of Nuln was under attack in dozens of locations. From the Sumpdocks along the river Aver hordes of skaven surged out from drainage pipes. A sinkhole appeared in the middle of the Grunplatz, and out scrambled thousands more. From the shantytowns of Folly's Quarter to the burial vaults of Morr's Hill, ratmen surfaced. The skaven – gaunt and wild-eyed – slew anything that moved. Some immediately stopped, crouching on their haunches to devour the fallen. They wolfed down human, horse, cat or dog – whatever they could catch. Nothing was safe from these ravening hordes.

Trikstab Gribnode – the Grand Warlord of Clan Vrrtkin – led the assault upon the northern half of the city. Thanquol had given him that honour, and even treaty-pledged Vrrtkin the first scavenge over the ruins. In order to properly prepare his slave legions, Trikstab had purposefully starved them. The ever-more frantic pangs of their churning metabolisms had driven the scrawny creatures into a maddened frenzy. The Black Hunger was beginning to consume them – turning them whipsnap angry. After they were unchained, the slaves were driven upwards. Warpbrew was passed amongst the wretches. Its unnatural vitality lent the skaven ferocity beyond what any sane being thought capable from those frail, starved forms. They were agitated enough to chew through wooden doors, maiming themselves in order to hack down and devour anything that moved.

Behind the slaves came clanrats – endless ranks of them. They bore scratched runes on their shields, and upon their banners were fell symbols and grim trophies. Amidst their numbers were weapon teams.

Clan Skryre had heavily backed this invasion - Vrrtkin were amongst their most favoured thrall clans and came heavily armed with the best Clan Skryre devices. Ratling guns stitched lines of fire across rows of timber-framed houses, while warpfire thrower teams gushed out black flames tinged with an eerie green light. Here and there, red tongues of flame stabbed upwards as buildings caught alight, blazing like kindling amidst the shrouded city.

On Nuln's high walls, no word had yet reached the defenders. Although their height commanded a distant view, night and the blanket of smog had darkened everything. Yet they knew disaster was occuring. They had heard the clang of warning bells and recognised the distant mustering horn calls. Along some portions of wall, soldiers could discern the screaming and the baying of hounds. They heard the unnatural chittering of the millions-strong tide of vermin. Flames leapt up across the city. It was obvious that there was no enemy army outside their gates. There was no sign of torches, or any hint of movement along the roads or the patchwork of fields outside. Yet inside the city it sounded like the foe was already past the walls and ravaging the townsfolk.

At the garrisons, soldiers who had been off duty were frantically donning armour. Officers began rounding up men as reports filtered in – a formation of pistoliers came from the Black Towers with news. Rats and ratmen alike had risen from the sewers. They were attacking and burning the city. Much of the city's northern quarter was already filled with invaders. Captain Drechsler had formed up the Black Tower patrols and was marching north over the Great Bridge of Nuln – pressing guards and militia alike into his army as he marched.

It was then that the skaven brought forth their most diabolical weapon. A ramp had been hastily built so that the vast wheeled carriage could be heaved upwards out of the undertunnels. Built of warped wormwood and castoff scraps, the wooden platform held a crude scaffold frame. It was a mismatch of salvaged wood beams and stone architecture from fallen civilisations and sacked dwarfholds. Fetishes and talismans adorned the ramshackle tower, but it was what swung from atop this unholy altar that captured all attention. A great bell cast of bronze and warpstone alloy hung there, darkly shimmering. Upon its broad waist were runes of power scratched in balefire. They seemed to writhe of their own accord, their aura blistering the eyes and searing noisome images into the viewer's mind. Yet as disturbing as the sight was, it was as nothing compared to the sound...

Doooooooommmmmmmm!

The mighty toll sounded out across Nuln. To men it was nothing short of an aural assault – a tonal wave of ruin and doom. It was a discordant cacophony that, even from a distance, sent out splinters of sound that made defenders' ears and brains bleed. It was mind-screaming pain.

Conversely, to the skaven, the jarring and inharmonious sounds struck deep inside their black hearts. The noise stirred in them awe and devotion to their Great God of Ruin and Despair. Each peal inspired them to a greater pitch of chittering zeal. From around the city the skaven armies gathered to that siren call. A teeming horde of ratmen clustered at the base of the ruinous engine, pushing and heaving it forward. The bell and its huge gathering of followers headed north up Grand Strasse, the main avenue from the Great Bridge all the way to the inner fortresses of Altstadt, the old city district.

Doooooooommmmmmmm!

Again the bell sounded, this time louder still. Before it, wooden beams shivered and walls cracked. The resonations from the previous strike had not stopped, and this further ringing only added to the cacophony.

At the end of the Grand Strasse the royal guard formed across the street. They were the personal bodyguard of the Grand Countess Emmanuelle von Liebwitz. They were battle-proven troops who had faced orc invasions and worse, yet they stood unnerved. What was this enemy and where had they come from? What manner of weapon had they brought with them? Even miles away, the sound of the bell scratched upon their souls, disturbing their very sanity.

Despite the horror of the skaven invasion, morale instantly rose when the soldiers of Nuln heard the clarion call of the blackhorns to their rear. It could only mean Grand Marshal Erkstein was coming to join them.

Far to the city's south, across the Great Bridge that spanned the mighty Reik, a different sound joined the growing din. The clockwork timers set onto each of the drill-bombs reached the end of their settings. With a ping, each cylinder began to slowly vibrate until the warp-engines fully fired. With a green flash and a deafening backblast, each bomb rocketed downwards, the warpdrill chewing through everything beneath it. Some bored straight into the ground, others had to pass through foundations, layers of cobblestone, or stone-arched sewer tunnels.

Over a hundred bombs exploded. They had been placed in a scattered ring that stretched around the major foundry works of the southside. A quarter of the city – its most heavily industrialised section – shuddered. The earth groaned. Then, the mightiest forges, foundries and weapons manufacturers of the greatest nation in the world sank. The great chunk fell slowly at first, and then gained momentum until it disappeared far below the surface. It left behind only a rising plume of smoke and dust and a yawning gap many miles across.



THANQUOL'S UPRISING

Across the Empire, the skaven attacks seemed doomed to the same failures that brought low their previous invasions. With the aid of a summoned Verminlord, Thanquol sought to reverse that trend. The wily grey seer knew that if he did not succeed in this war, this would be the last clawpack he would ever command.



THANQUOL AND BONERIPPER

A powerful grey seer, Thanquol had masterminded a string of near-victories that stretched even longer than his list of former rat ogre bodyguards. He seized control of the attack on Nuln for one reason – to gain everlasting power for himself. Gifted with the most monumentally huge and vicious Boneripper yet, Thanquol would stop at nothing to regain his good standing with the Council of Thirteen, and coveted a place among their illustrious number. He had not yet questioned why the Verminlord Skreech Verminking was so eager to aid him.



SKREECH VERMINKING

Verminking was the most powerful of Verminlords and a member of their clandestine ruling council. It was rumoured that the wickedest of skavenkind were gift-granted immortality. Those same whispers also told a tale of an entire Council of Thirteen so honoured – now amalgamated in a single being. The very incarnation of corruption, deception and ruin – he was Skreech Verminking. Wherever he walked, he cast the shadow of the Great Horned Rat.



LEKTRIK COVEN

Sizzling and crackling as they advanced, the Lektrik Coven was a claw of thirteen-strong Clan Skryre warlock engineers. Being within a hundred tail-lengths of this formation was enough to stand a skaven's fur on end. Each of these engineers bore warpstone-fuelled generators, and they crackled with barely-restrained warp lightning that made them the firepower equivalent of at least an entire Empire artillery battery.

SLIMEBLADES

These clanrats were part of Clan Gristlecrack. It was not known that they had any association with Clan Pestilens until they drew forth their swords. The purplish-green glow that emanated from the cruelly serrated blades proved to be a coating of the deadly oozy-eye disease. Upon closer inspection, which wasn't recommended, the beady red eyes of the clanrats themselves dripped a congealed greenish substance. The Slimeblades marched to war with a doom-flayer beside them, its numerous blades also coated with the foul substance.





BLACKFIRE WARPACK

After their prototype debut in Tilea, this trio of stormfiends from Hell Pit was dubbed the Blackfire Warpack. They famously set alight half of the town of Beronna, striding down the street with arms outstretched, warpflame throwers blasting out on either side. The rabid killers did not wait until their warpfuel ran out before they started swinging their huge fist-claws. They waded into the foe, clubbing them down while spewing forth sweeping arcs of deadly warpflame.



RIPSHADES

The Ripshades were a gutter runner formation that had perfected the art of spying upon humans. Indeed, they knew the sewer system of Nuln better than any man-thing. Armed with grabblehooks and agile enough to scamper across the narrowest of tightropes, the Ripshades were equally adept at travelling across the city's rooftops as they were navigating the sewers. Only their leader, Deathrunner Skewit, suspected that amongst their number was an assassin. He was correct – Slittrek, a third-notch killer of the Black Ranks was part of the claw. The assassin carried Clan Skryre's upgraded infernal bombs.

THE RATS OF NULN

Vermin infestations were endemic to the civilizations of the world. Where there was food, there would always be rats. They were great survivors, able to adapt to any environment. Human cities proved to be rich breeding grounds, and the underground tunnels, sewers and drains of Nuln were no exception. Among the swarms summoned by Thanquol were varied species, mutations and even some giant rats – distant ancestors left over from previous skaven incursions.



Thanquol and Boneripper

Skreech Verminking

Gribikk the Horned
Grey Seer on Screaming Bell

Lektrik Coven
Thirteen Warlock Engineers

Grand Packmaster Manxrot
Master Moulder from Hell Pit

Slimeblades
Three claws of Clanrats

Blackfire Warpack
Three Stormfiends

Clan Vrrtkin
Warlord Trikstab Gribnode, seven claws of Clanrats, one claw of Stormvermin, three claws of Poisoned Wind Globadiers, five Poisoned Wind Mortar Teams, two claws of Rat Ogres, two Warplock Jezzail Teams, two legions of Skavenslaves, two batteries of Warp Lightning cannons, three Doomwheels and twenty-seven Weapon Teams

Clan Kryxx
Warlord Throttlespine, six claws of Clanrats, one claw of Giant Rats and one legion of Skavenslaves

Clan Gristlecrack
Warlord Gnawr, two claws of Clanrats, one claw of Plague Monks, one Plague Furnace, one claw of Plague Censer Bearers and one legion of Skavenslaves

Clan Carrion
Chieftain Nk Skalvage, two claws of Clanrats and one legion of Skavenslaves

Ripshades
Deathrunner Skewit, Assassin Slittrek and one claw of Gutter Runners

Clan Moulder
Four claws of Rat Ogres, three claws of Giant Rats, three Rat Swarms and one legion of Skavenslaves

The Rats of Nuln
Fifty Rat Swarms

DEFENDERS OF NULN

There was no better defended city in all of the Empire than that of Nuln. Its tall walls bristled with watchful men, and its ramparts boasted more ordnance and engines of war than any other two cities put together. Under heavy clouds of soot and pollution, the black-clad men of Nuln stood ready to protect their homes.



GRAND MARSHAL ERKSTEIN, THE LION OF NULN

With his polished armour and gleaming blade, Grand Marshal Erkstein looked every bit the proud military officer. He was not a noble, but had risen through the ranks thanks to hard campaigning on behalf of his beloved Nuln. Although advancing in years, the commander was still robust and claimed to be every bit as strong as he was in his glory days. Few knew how to set up and defend a gunline like that savvy veteran.



BERNDT ABERWOLD

A wizard lord from the mysterious Amber College of Magic, Berndt Aberwold lived somewhere in the wilds outside of Nuln, but regularly visited the city. He was an honoured member of Grand Marshal Erkstein's war cabinet, and had campaigned with the old commander in the days of their youth. Although he was discouraged from doing so in the city, Berndt rode a two-headed griffon named Quickclaw.



GRUNDEL'S DEFENDERS

These black-clad spearmen carried red shields bearing the crossed cannons symbol so common in Nuln. While the big guns got all the glory, those in Grundel's Defenders took great pride in their duty to keep enemies off the batteries so they could keep firing. Each man in the regiment knew the name and temperament of each artillery piece and its crew.



THE IRONSIDES

The Ironsides were drawn from the guards and apprentices of the renowned Imperial Gunnery School. Clad in heavy armour and armed with master-wrought firearms, the Nuln Ironsides were one of the most widely respected and well equipped handgunner regiments in the Empire.



BLACKCLAD SEWERJACKS

Typically paid to patrol the sewers, the Blackclad Sewerjacks found themselves in the frontlines against the skaven. Armed with clubs, rusty blades, and torches, the Blackclad Sewerjacks were a motley, but stout-hearted crew. Several members of the unit killed rats during their sojourn into the sewers, and they mounted these creatures upon a crude totem which they carried into battle as a standard.



DELIVERANCE

The steam tank *Deliverance* had fought all across the Empire in some of the nation's greatest victories. No matter how far afield the ironclad travelled, however, it traditionally returned to Nuln for refurbishment. Master Engineer Gunther Maybach had only recently finished tinkering with *Deliverance*'s steam engine and installing some innovative upgrades. The engineer insisted upon commanding the steam tank himself, for he feared others might steal the genius of his steam engine improvements before they could make him rich and famous.

Grand Marshal Erkstein
Grand Master upon Warhorse

Von Liebwitz Royal Guard
One regiment of Greatswords, one regiment of Demigryph Knights

Burndt Aberwold
Battle Wizard Lord upon Quickclaw the two-headed Imperial Griffon

The Ironsides
One regiment of Handgunners

Nuln Northside Garrison (the Sootmen)
Four regiments of Halberdiers, two regiments of Handgunners, two regiments of Spearmen and one Helblaster Volley Gun

Artillery Train
Eight Great Cannons, three Mortars and one Helblaster Volley Gun

Blackstorm Battery
Three Helstorm Rocket Batteries

Knights of the Blazing Sun
One Knightly Order

The Howlers
Four mobs of Flagellants

Uhmar's Men
Warrior Priest Uhmar and three regiments of Free Company Militia

Captain Drechsler
Captain of the Blacktower Guard

Blacktower Guard
Three regiments of Halberdiers, three regiments of Handgunners, two regiments of Spearmen and one regiment of Swordsmen

Grundel's Defenders
One regiment of Spearmen

Blackclad Sewerjacks
One regiment of Free Company Militia

Deliverance
Steam Tank commanded by Gunther Maybach

DEATH FROM BENEATH

The pride of Nuln, the city's industrialised munitions-works, was gone, sunken into a black abyss. It was a disaster on a massive scale. Walls tumbled and timber beams snapped like twigs. In some places the ground folded in upon itself, crushing everything in an avalanche of stone, rubble, and earth. A cloud of choking brick-dust rose. Thousands of labourers, watchmen, blacksmiths, and metal-workers died instantly in the great collapse. In a way, they were the lucky ones.

The last rocks had not yet settled and walls were still teetering when the skaven began to move. At the bottom of the great pit they had waited in adjoining tunnels. Some had waited perhaps a little too close, hungry for loot, and were crushed, but such tunnel collapses were expected. Those warp-grinder teams that survived cleared paths through the newly fallen rubble that blocked their passage. Within moments the hordes, plastered in brick dust themselves, swept into the fallen city quarter.

Those men who survived were pushing themselves out of the rubble, spluttering in the dust. They had no idea what had happened, supposing that an earthquake had toppled the city. Rocks still tumbled from the precipice's edge, and an impenetrable cloud of dust had settled over everything. Swarms of skaven flowed over the fallen rubble. They fell upon the survivors in a chittering flurry.

Guided by teams of goggle-wearing warlock engineers, hunting packs searched the ruins. With their keen sense of smell, the skaven could ferret out the injured, or those lying under many feet of fallen debris. It was not easy prey they sought, however, but black powder. The skaven knew this explosive material had been stored in blockhouses, protected from fire or explosion by thick stone walls. Much shifting of rock would need to take place before those rich caches could be withdrawn.

Although finding black powder was the top priority, the opportunity for rich pickings of a fleshier nature proved too tempting for many skaven. Those humans, broken and battered, that managed to crawl free from the wreckage were quickly snatched and consumed by the ratmen.

In a few places guards had time to draw their weapons, but what little defence they could muster was disparate and disorganised. Thanquol's plan of sinking the entire city sector ensured that no human reinforcements could reach the fallen. The ruthless scavenging went uninterrupted. Engineers in breathing masks found the great rubble piles that were once the Krupthof Foundries. With whips and shock-prods they got the slave legions shifting stone and scrambling down towards the precious black powder.

In the city above, pandemonium ruled the night. Half of the citizens of Nuln ran to their houses, bolted the shutters and barricaded the doors. They prayed to their gods that they would survive the night, that their foes would pass them by. The rest of the city's population took to the streets. They were aware that invaders were within the walls, and ran to find safety. Rumour and panic were rife; the din of battle and flames seemed to sprout from all quarters. In the dark disorder, the refugees were as likely to run toward trouble as away. They sought shelter, with many heading towards the keeps of the noble-district of Altestadt. Others hoped to find a measure of protection beneath the Black Towers.

Here and there, pockets of resistance formed. At the Last Hope tavern a group of sellswords blockaded themselves in, fending off the ratmen who swarmed around doors and windows. Before the statue of Magnus the Pious, along the Grand Strasse, a group of flagellants held their ground. That was the site where, day after day, the lunatic doomsayers had predicted the end of the world to passersby. Now, perhaps, the End Times had indeed come. If so, the bearded vagabonds had decided to meet it with clubs in hand, fighting for their lives, their city, and their race.

At the Temple of Sigmar, Warrior Priest Uhmar wielded his hammer with such deadly proficiency that broken skavenslaves lay piled in heaps at the bottom of the steps. Emboldened by the lone fighter, others took up arms behind him. Whether cobbler or baker, they now stood alongside the warrior priest, clutching cudgels and cleavers. Against the skaven's uncoordinated rabble – rabid slaves or rampaging rat swarms – the diverse assembly held their own. Again and again Uhmar called upon his god and relied upon his mighty hammer. However, when the warrior priest saw what was advancing down the street, he ushered everyone inside.

A living wall of ratmen was coming. These were not scrawny wretches in rags, but armoured warriors. Unlike the first wave of attackers, this foe did not arrive as scattered packs, foaming at the mouth and seeking an easy meal. Instead, these deep-ranked invaders were prepared to do battle. Before the skaven advance, the ragtag groups of defenders either fled further north or they died.

At the speartip of the skaven attack was Grand Warlord Trikstab Gribnode. When the usurper grey seer had spoken to Trikstab before the war council, he had done so with proper respect. Thanquol had uttered long-winded compliments about the grand warlord's prowess in war, his

matchless authority, his right to lead the battle, and the might of Clan Vrrtkin. All of this, he felt, was true. It had puffed him with pride and he sensed that the warlords of the other clans were bristling.

Marching at the head of his stormvermin, Trikstab had, at first, felt quite magnificent. The humans had run – as Thanquol had said they would. His guard had chopped down the few patrols that attempted to stay in their path. It was an important battle and the Council of Thirteen was sure to be watching. Even better, it was thus far a massacre. Yet Trikstab was a shrewd warlord and he was starting to have his doubts.

Although he was their leader, Trikstab noticed that many of his warriors were gravitating back down the road. They were headed towards the grey seer Gribikk, who rode upon the screaming bell. This was to be expected from the lesser clans but his own clanrats too were being swept into the furore. Three times the bell had tolled, its peals reverberating through the city streets. With each ringing, the bell's indescribable yet palpable power grew stronger. Each time, more of his own warriors drifted from his side to march alongside the carriage. Trikstab was just wondering if he hadn't been perhaps a little hasty when he agreed to lead the assault when a blur passed him and wetness splattered across his muzzle. The loud retort came after.

A cannonball ploughed through the stormvermin, only a few files away from Trikstab. Blood and gore splashed everywhere. Looking ahead, the grand warlord could see more muzzle flashes illuminating the darkness ahead. They had reached the end of the Grand Strasse, which spilled out into a wide parade ground plaza. Opposite them was a short wall that surrounded the Altestadt district. An army clad in black awaited them, the thunderous voices of their artillery opening a new phase of the battle.

'By now even such a fool-thing as Trikstab has realised his mistake,' said Skreech, the Verminlord's voice speaking inside Thanquol's mind. 'Warlords are easy to manipulate. They grab-claw at power – they cannot resist promotion, even if it kills them.'

Thanquol understood that the act of summoning a Verminlord was dangerous – usually as deadly to the summoner as to those around him. He had, as of yet, only benefitted from the rat-spirit. Thanquol suspected it was difficult to manipulate a being such as himself, one that possessed such extreme levels of innate shrewdness.

'How would you trick a grey seer, master?' asked Thanquol.

'Yes-yes, it can be done. Much more difficult. Have no musk-fear little horned one – we will not attempt such things on your personage,' said Verminking.

'But how?' asked Thanquol, thinking of the myriad mind defences he might employ.

'Generous gifts,' replied the Verminlord. 'Help with plans. Nothing so obvious you could put a claw on it.'

There was a pause, a growing stillness in the grey seer's mind. 'If Trikstab survives, he will angle to kill-kill,' warned Verminking. 'Keep Boneripper near you.'

As if it could read thoughts, the lumbering war beast knuckle-walked closer to Thanquol. It had been an excellent tribute given by the Verminlord. It was, by far, the best Boneripper yet.

When Thanquol awoke Boneripper still towered over him. How long the grey seer chewed warpstone in the dark cavern and spoke aloud to himself he did not know, for time passed slowly in such spell-trances. Yet now he was awake, and he knew what he must do...

The great bulk of Clan Vrrtkin had travelled along the wide avenue called the Grand Strasse. They now spilled out into the wide open Marktplatz, as did the hordes that advanced along the lesser parallel avenues. They began to fill up that wide open space.

In daytime, this section of Nuln was a bustling marketplace – all manner of vendors and stalls set up to do business. It was barren now, save for a few broken carts and a fountain. On the opposite side of the milling skaven, another army was spreading out before them. A few cannons – those already unlimbered and in position – were just beginning to fire. This was where Grand Marshal Erkstein had chosen to set his defensive line.

The site marked the beginning of Altestadt, the old quarter of the city. Directly behind the Empire forces was a stone wall – the foundations of the old city wall, some of which dated back more than a thousand years. In most places it stood seven feet tall, but it had no ramparts and many gaps. There had been no question about attempting to defend from behind it. However, the stone bulwark did have several gunports, which were still serviceable. These would serve as anchor points in Grand Marshal Erkstein's hastily arranged battle line. Beyond the wall, rose the hills of Nuln, leading back to the noble district and the palace of Emmanuelle von Liebwitz, the Countess of Nuln and absentee Elector Countess of Wissenland.

Grand Marshal Erkstein rode down the line upon his destrier, aligning troops and shouting encouraging words. His army consisted predominately of the Nuln Northside Garrison – the so-called Sootmen. Its numbers were buoyed by several militia warbands, and behind the wall Erkstein kept his knights in reserve. Master Pfiezmann of the Blazing Sun had ridden forth and put his lances at the service of the grand

marshal. Theirs was a thin black line against the oncoming verminous host. However, Erkstein had faith in the cannons of Nuln. More and more of these artillery pieces had been wheeled into position and were already opening fire. So large was the Marktplatz that these were long-ranged shots, yet for the well-trained cannoneers of Nuln it seemed no great distance.

Brilliant muzzle flashes began to light up the Empire line. They poured fire into the growing hordes of ratmen. The weather was cold and damp, but the war machine crews were already sweating as they moved to service, load, aim and fire their cannons. Further back, behind the wall on the hill, the mortars began to open up. It was desperate to be defending Nuln from within her own streets, but the men of Nuln cheered Grand Marshal Erkstein as he rode down the line. They cheered yet more when he dismounted and joined the defenders on foot. With infantry to the fore, cannons firing from behind, and mortars lobbing shells overhead, the armies of Nuln were well prepared for the next skaven assault.

Facing the defenders of Nuln, Grand Warlord Trikstab cursed his indecision. He had held up the advance, allowing his many claws to exit the streets and pour into a wide frontage. It had been his intention to wait for the grey seer behind him before launching the assault waves – yet this was proving disastrous. An ever-increasing storm of cannonballs and mortar shells was decimating the skaven. His troops were growing more agitated by the heartbeat.

Doooooooommmmmmmmm!

Again, the screaming bell tolled, its grating unmelodious sound washing over the skaven and filling them with battle fervour. Even though the great artefact was still some way down the Grand Strasse, its power was growing. With the last clanging strike still reverberating in their minds, Trikstab's command to hold could no longer restrain the skaven. They surged forward. Seeking both to appear in control and to hang back so as to avoid being caught up in the first wave, Trikstab stood in place, waving the clawpack forward, extolling them to kill the man-things.

From across the Marktplatz the men in the battle line could hear the shrill chitter. The sound and the half-seen size of the oncoming hordes were enough to break lesser men, but the warriors of Nuln held fast. The booming guns all around them, and the burning desire to put sword to the foes destroying their proud city, steadied their nerves.



Shell bursts lit the plaza as mortar strikes sent up clouds of ironshard and broken cobblestone. Cannonballs sparked as they ricocheted off the stone floor of the square, shattering the lines of oncoming skaven and skipping into the ensuing waves. Emboldened by their ravenous run through the city and the arcane might of the bell behind them the skaven did not break, but surged forward. Gunfire rippled down the Empire lines, as the crackling snap of the handgunners joined the heavy thuds of the thunderous artillery. The steady and concentrated fire was withering, and the light armour and wooden shields of the skaven offered no protection against such a bombardment. Despite massive losses, the ratmen hordes pressed forward, scrambling over their own dead. The cobblestones grew slick with blood.

Riddled with gaping, gun-blasted holes, the skaven frontage was no longer a solid line, but rather a staggered advance. This lessened the impact of their charge. Some Empire defenders were swarmed by attackers, but others remained unengaged. The gunline now fired in sporadic fashion. Some of the handgunners continued to fire and reload, while others were forced to use their sturdy weapons as clubs, fending off the snarling ratmen.

After their long scamper under fire, the skaven were anxious to sink blade, tooth and claw into the foe. The clanrats scurried towards those bearing rifles, eager to revenge the many volleys that they had endured. When the ratmen reached their foe, they wreaked a terrible toll upon the unarmoured warriors. To the skaven's surprise, however, a few of the enemy units proved more imposing. These were the Ironsides, armoured handgunners who wore heavy breastplates that easily turned barbed swords and speartips. Elsewhere, other Nuln defenders knew the drill. The spearmen of Grundel's Defenders countercharged – blocking the skaven from pressing home their attack. Instead of hacking into the thin ranks of unarmoured handgunners, the skaven now found themselves confronted by a wall of shields and a hedgerow of spears.

The skaven had hoped to break the defenders with an overwhelming surge. The firepower of the Nuln line, however, had sapped their charge of much of its impetus. Now the battle turned to a tense and close-packed melee. This was a fight that tested not only the combatants' skill with blade and spear, but also their will. The front ranks gradually ground each other down, each side desperate to fill the gaps left by the fallen. In this deadly proving ground, the pressing weight of the skaven's numbers began to tell. Slowly, the ratmen gained momentum, pushing the Empire troops step by step back towards the Altestadt wall.

At this critical juncture of the battle, Grand Marshall Erkstein threw in the reserves. Horn blasts announced the Knights of the Blazing Sun, while the royal guard of Emmanuelle von Liebwitz joined the counter-attack. So great were the skaven numbers that even against those formidable charges they continued to press their onslaught. But, as more and more of their verminous kind were spitted upon lances, ground beneath horse hoofs, or chopped in two by greatswords, the ratmen at last faltered and then broke altogether.

What followed was a brief and terrible slaughter. As the skaven turned-tail and fled, many were hacked down. Those ratmen that were quick enough avoided the fate of their massacred clanmates and scampered away from their pursuers. Once more the sounds of gunfire roared up and down the line of the Nuln defenders. Their volleys reaped a bloody toll on the fleeing skaven. A raucous cheer erupted from the powder-stained men.

Doooooooommmmmmmmmm!

At the head of a new horde of skaven, the screaming bell exited the Grand Strasse. Its wailing toll drowned out all sounds of the short-lived Empire victory. The noxious sound blasted across the Marktplatz. The ground shook. Several of the buildings nearest to the bell groaned, sagged, and then collapsed. As if summoned by its swarming rat-children, Morrslieb broke through the overcast skies above. Its sickly green light penetrated the smog, casting a fell light onto the battle below.

At the sound of the bell, many men fell to the ground, writhing and clutching their hands over their ears. Even those that held firm cringed, wincing at each agonising note. The effect upon the skaven was quite the opposite. The fleeing troops took heart once more, turning around in time to join the fresh wave sweeping towards the Nuln defenders.





In the moonlight the defenders of Nuln could see the skaven swarms returning. At last, they could also see the device responsible for the heinous noise. The screaming bell had entered the plaza. It seemed to both absorb and reflect the green moonbeams. To a man, the warriors of Nuln knew that they did not want the bell to come any closer, nor did they wish the abominable thing to sound again. Several engineers quickly recalculated distance, setting their sights anew. It was their intention to smash apart this unholy altar, to splinter it with the righteous iron of Nuln cannonballs.

Two of the three cannons aimed true. The first hit smashed a few planks from the bell carriage and tore loose some rigging. The second cannonball, however, smashed into the bell itself.

Doooooommmmmmmmmm!

Rung by the cannonball, the screaming bell tolled again. It suffered no harm, save for a round dent pounded into its side. However, the reverberations of that strike filled the skaven with a frenetic burst of manic energy. Frothing, the clanrats redoubled their speed, scurrying nearly as quickly as horses gallop. They had closed half the distance to the Empire line when newcomers joined the fray.

The steam tank *Deliverance* rumbled up to the western edge of the plaza. It poked its turret out from a narrow alley while Gunther Maybach threw open the hatch to take a closer look. His telescopic monocle could not see through smog like the gadgets of the skaven engineers, but the moon shed enough light that Maybach could align the steam tank's cannon. It sent steady blasts to smite the flanks of the skaven, killing dozens with each shot.

From the skies above further help for the Empire arrived on mighty pinions. The Amber wizard Berndt Aberwold circled the battlefield on his steed – a great two-headed griffon. Chanting spells older than humanity, he summoned to his hand a mystic bolt. He held the glowing shaft and swept low. Skaven fled in fear. Aberwold picked out the largest target – a warpack of rat ogres – and hurled the amber spear. It sped like a lightning bolt, felling the largest of the rat ogres. With a screech, the griffon pulled out of its dive to gain altitude before wheeling about for another attack run.

Captain Drechsler and his Blacktower Guard had caught up to the end of the skaven attack column. He could hear Nuln cannon firing in the Marktplatz ahead and assumed a larger defence was going on there. Seizing the opportunity to strike the foe's rear, the captain ordered his few artillery pieces unlimbered across Grand Strasse. While they prepared to fire, the other men formed up. They used fallen beams, wrecked carts and debris to form a crude barricade across the road. When the cannons began roaring, the ratmen squealed in panic. It took several moments for the chieftains to reform their scattered masses and face this new threat.

Everywhere the skaven wavered. The counter-attacks had stolen their momentum, and the sight of the steam tank and the spell caster upon his enormous griffon drained their courage. The musk of fear hung heavy. Like so many times in the past, the ratmen could feel victory slipping through their claws. Hesitation meant death, for every second they stood unmoving meant the guns of Nuln reaped a bloodier harvest.

Back on the southern side of Nuln, small groups of stragglers dared to investigate the yawning gap where the industrial might of their city once stood. Even with the green moonlight filtering through the clouds, the great pit was too wide to see across and too deep to see a bottom. Strange lights flickered below, but gave the viewers no hint as to the horrors going on. A merciless massacre was taking place.

Thanquol, riding atop his colossal new Boneripper, had overseen the finding of the black powder. It had already been dug out and streams of slaves were hauling it to waiting wooden carriages lining the tunnels beyond. Soon the last barrel would be loaded. Several steam engines, slightly damaged, lay amongst the spoils. Great columns of clanrats and slaves were making ready to begin the long journey south to Skavenblight.

Obtaining the gunpowder and steam engines had been the most important part of the mission. Now that he had overseen those aspects, Thanquol could join the battle. The grey seer closed his eyes, letting his mind drift through shadows of another plane. He stretched forth his consciousness, listening for the tolling bell of ruin. At last tracing its telltale vibrations back to its location, Thanquol summoned forth a circle of purest darkness. He goaded Boneripper into a growing ring of shadow. In that realm of nothingness, beaming red eyes met his, and then the blackness swallowed them and they were gone.

Back at the Marktplatz, the Nuln artillery pieces and handgunners were holding back the oncoming hordes. Entire batteries of cannons and mortars pummelled the ratmen. Some clanrats pressed on, closing the distance towards the line of black-clad defenders. A few weapon teams scuttled alongside, anxious to discharge their own death upon the Empire lines. Then the chugging of helblaster volley guns opened up and bursts of grapeshot swept the cobblestones.A mushroom cloud of green-black flame erupted – evidence of either a misfiring warpfire thrower or a direct hit upon a storage tank.

Within the span of a few heartbeats, nothing stood within two hundred paces of the defensive line. The only movement came from the ground, which was filled with a blood-stained carpet of the dead and the twitching of those mortally wounded.

Then came the seventh toll of the screaming bell, and a blackness manifested itself before the quavering skaven line. Thanquol had come. If the ringing of the great bell emboldened the ratmen, the sight of the grey seer atop his enormous rat ogre sent them into a frenzied rapture. Or so Thanquol thought.

Although its presence remained mysteriously shrouded, there was something else alongside Thanquol. It was something larger and more powerful still. Though mystically shielded from sight, the verminous majesty of its merest shadow was wild inspiration for the skaven. The army surged forward again.

Crunching down on a mouthful of warpstone, Thanquol let its power course through him. He spoke forbidden words and called upon the Great Horned Rat using one of his thirteen secret names. The grey seer reached forth his claw and seized black tendrils of arcane might, wielding them like a whip. The thongs snapped over the heads of the surrounding skaven, fracturing reality and spilling forth its energies.

Where each eldritch scourge cracked, the skaven beneath it were filled with a boundless ferocity. They frothed in their battle-rage, and some of the most overzealous began to tear themselves to pieces, such was their bloodlust. The men of the Nuln line saw this depravity approaching and were afraid.

Although the handgunners and defensive warriors had taken losses, all the artillery pieces were still in working order. Each maintained its rate of fire, blasting death into the foe as quickly as their hard-working crew could manage. A few of the war engines had suffered minor setbacks, but jams were quickly righted. Yet despite the fusillade of bullets, cannonballs and mortar blasts, the skaven came on. This time they would not be denied.

It was not a ragged battle line that met the Empire forces in dribs and drabs, but rather a solid wall of skaven. As the ratmen pressed into combat, the lines of handgunners could not bring their sweeping fire to bear. This allowed weapon teams to sidle out from the midst of the skaven units and line up their own shots.

Poisoned wind mortars sent globes filled with toxic gasses towards the war engines on the distant hill. Ratling guns mowed down cannon crews not protected behind the Altestadt walls. Such barriers did not stop warpfire throwers. Five teams scuttled forward. Two met grapeshot and went up in balls of flame, but the others advanced enough to press their nozzles through portholes. Two sent gouts of unnatural fire to wash over war machines and crews alike. The last team succumbed to the pressures of the firethrower and spun around, torching everything nearby.

Doooooooommmmmmmmmmm!
Doooooooommmmmmmmmmm!

In the centre of seething sea of skaven, the screaming bell tolled its ear-bleeding sonics. The altar to the Great Horned Rat had reached the middle of the Marktplatz, so now its sound waves rolled over the Empire line. As its unearthly vibrations rippled outwards, several cannons split, their bronze barrels cracking. The crews that noticed in time abandoned their beloved engines. The unobservant were consumed in the fireball explosions that ensued upon their next firing. The Altestadt wall shook before the bell's aural onslaught. Fissures appeared as the stones started to split apart. Great rents could be seen growing along the base of the ancient wall.

Despite the bell's deathly peals and the rampaging rats, the steadfast men of the Empire line held on. Like the wall behind them, however, cracks were starting to show.

Sensing the imminent collapse of his comrades, Gunther Maybach slammed shut the hatch of his tank and ordered full steam ahead. *Deliverance* lurched forward, steadily picking up momentum. The roar of the furnace and the bark of exhaust informed the engineer that they were travelling near maximum speed. The sturdy prow of the ironclad slashed through the skaven with the same ease as a ship with high sail cutting through water. The hissing steam was so loud, and the tank's hull so thick, that the incredibly visceral violence outside was little more than muffled thumps.

Thus far, the powerful engine Maybach had devised was delivering more steam than ever. Thus far, the only problem he had encountered had nothing to do with the steam power – rather, it was the growing difficultly of steering. *Deliverance* was ploughing forward at such a rate that splattered and broken bodies of skaven were thrown up like the bow waves before a ship. Bodies and limbs from the bloody churn often obscured the commander's vision slit.

Despite not being able to see where they were going, the steam tank was making good progress towards the Empire line, when something suddenly struck *Deliverance* hard. The clanging jolt knocked the crew off their feet. Electricity pulsed through the iron hull and Maybach's hair and beard stood on end.

After recovering, Maybach threw open the top hatch. He saw in an instant what had sent forth the bolt. A trio of enormous wheels were advancing through the hordes of skaven. Each of the war engines was a rattletrap construction of wood planks and metal sheeting. As the giant wheels churned closer, sometimes running over their own troops, bolts of black lightnings discharged. Maybach watched a nearby rat ogre charred by a sizzling arc. Quickly buttoning up the hatch, the engineer ordered *Deliverance* to fire its steam cannon.

The opening shot smashed apart the lead doomwheel – bits of wood and wire scattering wide. The second infernal machine put on burst of spinning speed and crashed into *Deliverance*. Out of that explosion of lightning and splinters only the ironclad tank emerged. It was scorched, crackles of unnatural energy dancing over the it's iron hull. Still, the machine chugged onwards.



The third warlock engineer thumbed his doomwheel's controls to maximum power and was rewarded with nothing but a fizzle spark. All lights on the conductor dimmed. The skaven pilot watched helplessly as the steam tank's turret swung towards him. A sudden thrumming let him know his gyroscopic engines were functioning again. This was followed by a trio of cracks as three super-charged bolts arced out from the doomwheel and ripped the steam tank apart in a rising column of fire. Screaming in elation, the warlock engineer didn't notice that the powerful bolts had fried his own control panels. Unable to steer, the doomwheel careened wildly until it smashed through a timberframe house and was lost to sight.

Back at the Marktplatz, the skaven were hacking down the Nuln defenders. Seeing that the battle had grown desperate, Berndt Aberwold swept his griffon down to join the fray. While Quickclaw mauled the ratmen with its twin beaks, Aberwold summoned aid from the skies. A cloud of crows, ravens, jabberbeaks and black birds came forth – stabbing at vermin eyes, pecking at their vulnerable flesh.

Once more Grand Marshal Erkstein called out his reserves. Again the Blazing Sun Knights charged from behind the Altestadt wall. Although dark, their polished mail reflected the red light of the flaming debris as they clove a path into the skaven. The clanrats had just hacked down a regiment of handgunners, the poisonous green substance on their blades proving deadly. Against the shiny blackplated knights, however, they proved useless. Those ratmen not skewered by lances were soon trampled under hooves.

As the knights reformed, a new foe moved towards them. Boneripper had reached the front lines. With a snarl that spilled drool from its fanged maw, the muscle-bound beast raised all four of its arms as the warp-braziers affixed to each lit in green flame. Atop the gargantuan creature, Thanquol realised his warbeast's intent and steadied himself for the charge.

Boneripper was a horrific beast, but to a man the Blazing Sun Knights bravely spurred their warhorses forward. The hunched rat ogre sped to meet them and the sound of that clash resounded across the battlefield. Lances impaled Boneripper, driving through the beast's thick hide and bulging muscle. Impervious to pain, the rat ogre monstrosity swung its metalclad arms, each one trailing flames like a meteor. No armour could withstand those pummelling blows. Each fist was a warpstone wrecking ball. Bits of shield, barding and flesh flew through the air while enormous clawed feet stomped on the wounded warriors, crushing their crawling forms until they no longer so much as wriggled. Heedless of the cries and furious blows of its master, the creature hunched down and began to feed, gulping down the mangled flesh.

Doooooooommmmmm!
Doooooooommmmmm!

The screaming bell had reached the defenders' line, its deafening peals knocking down the rest of the Altestadt wall, unseating cannons, and filling the skaven with unnatural vitality. As if feeding off the same fell energies, the Verminlord stepped forth, finally revealing its true, ruinous glory. With outstretched arms and hateful maledictions that burnt the ears of those that heard, Skreech called forth a plague storm.

The smog thickened, congealing into a sickly green. Lightning forked as the skies opened up with a rain of filth. Men burned beneath that corrosive deluge, their flesh running like necrotic slurry, sloughing off to reveal rancid bone beneath. To the Children of the Horned Rat, the rain was an unholy baptism. It healed their hurts and filled them with unnatural vitality.

Not done yet, Skreech disappeared into shadow, reappearing before the Amber wizard, fearsome weapon raised. Even as Quickclaw's twin griffon heads looked up from mauling clanrats, the doom glaive – a glowing warpstone-infused halberd – came down. It clove through Berndt Aberwold and drove deep into the monster's breast. The handscythe blow that followed swept both the griffon's heads off at once.

Thanquol, who had been able to do little more than cling on to Boneripper's back in the midst of the knights' charge, now prepared his magics once more. The man-things were close to breaking, and it would be he who shattered their will to fight. Chittering fell phrases, the grey seer called forth the sewer rats. Once again a vermin tide erupted from the gutters, charging downhill towards the rear of the human lines.

Doooooooommmmmmm!

On the twelfth stroke, the men of Nuln broke at last. In a few places, heroic defenders attempted to slow their pursuers. A volley gun spun its barrels, spitting out shells as it mowed down rabid clanrats. Behind the clanrats, however, strode a pair of stormfiends bearing their own gun configuration. They showed the Empire crew the true meaning of rapid fire, unleashing a hail of shot that tore man and machine apart, as well as the townhouse behind them. Grand Marshal Erkstein and the royal guard of greatswords did not flee, but bravely made a last stand. But the ratmen were too many.

Doooooooommmmmm!

And on the thirteenth stroke, verminous death held sway over all.

Across the city a few pockets of resistance held on. Some few nearly made it until dawn. Captain Drechsler, his Blacktower guard broken, led a small warband to escape through the southern gates. The main trail of refugees fled from the north gates. Amongst them was Countess Emmanuelle von Liebwitz. She led the survivors eastwards towards the province of Averland.

A thick blanket of green-tinted fug lay over the confluence of rivers that once boasted the pride of the southlands. Nuln was so utterly ravaged that even her native born sons would not recognise the smouldering ruins.

It was a ghastly scene. Corpses were strewn across ruined streets. Broken spear shafts still jutted from bloody flesh. Dead horses, their bellies ripped open, left long strands of intestines looping across the rubble. Puddles of blood formed in depressions amongst the cobblestones. The only noise was a faint gnawing and scurrying, as rats scuttled from feast to feast.

Amidst the rubble a Verminlord flitted through rising columns of smoke. Skreech Verminking basked in the ruin that fed his unnatural spirit.

Thanquol edged past a teetering wall. Following behind him, Boneripper ploughed it over. They approached the coiled shadow atop a nest of detritus. 'The man-city is ours. What next?' said Thanquol. 'Shall we chase-pursue the foe east?'

Rising up to his towering height, the Verminlord gazed upon Thanquol and then looked east. 'No-no, another doom awaits them. First we must skitterleap to Skavenblight, little horned one. Then to the lair of the lizard-things,' said Skreech. The Verminlord tittered, as if enjoying a private joke. 'Perhaps not long near the lizard-things' lair.'

Growing used to cryptic asides, Thanquol knew better than to ask further details. Amidst the ruins, the Verminlord had grown larger, his corporal form more solid. 'The skitterleap across the man-things' city was the longest I have done, oh Greatest of Verminlords,' said Thanquol.

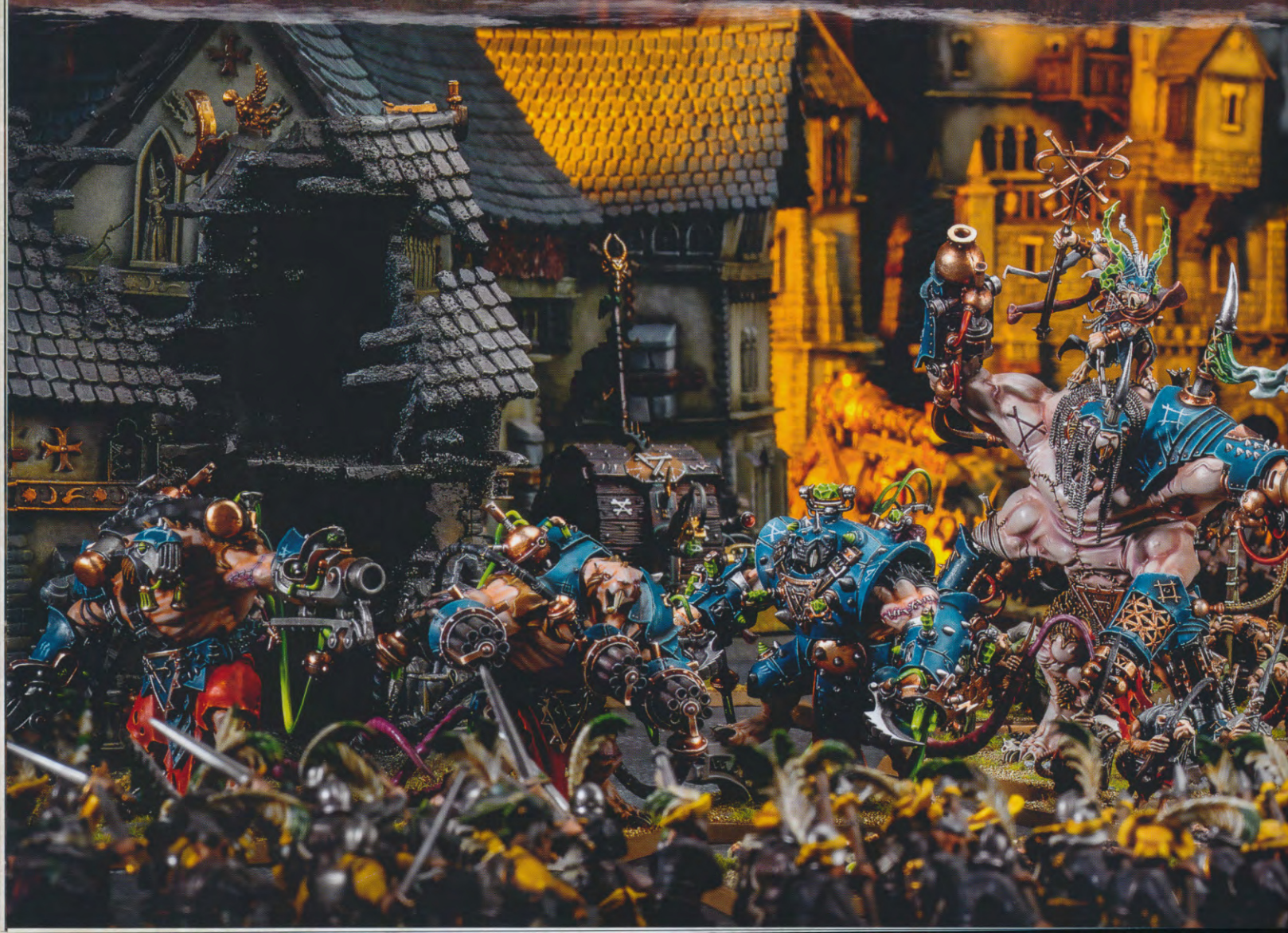
'We will show you,' said Verminking. The Verminlord drove down his doom glaive. Once again, Thanquol felt himself folded into willpower, moving in blackness.

When Thanquol opened his eyes he stood amidst the overcrowded and lopsided streets of Skavenblight. It had been a while since he had experienced that humid atmosphere and the smell of filth and musky overcrowding.

Beside him the Verminlord sniffed, breathing in the foetid airs. 'It is good to return home,' Verminking said. He headed towards the Temple of the Great Horned Rat. 'Now it is time we told the Council of our plans.'















CHAPTER 5

The Great Lustrian War

Spring 2525 – Autumn 2526

Throughout the continent of Lustria, war continued to be fought on many levels.

The skaven, commanded by Lord Skrolk, had risen from their subterranean lairs. They sent forth clawpack after clawpack to do battle. They wrecked ancient monuments and attacked the lizardmen cities, befouling spawning pools and targeting slann mage-priests. That which the ratmen could not destroy outright, they aimed to contaminate. To that purpose, the skaven had unleashed their most potent weaponised diseases.

At the beginning of the skaven onslaught, the lizardmen suffered many losses. The slann had been incapacitated by their great mental duel, as they fought the grey seers' sorcerous attempt to drag the warpmoon closer. During this time, several key cities fell to the foe, before the cold-blooded ones rallied beneath the leadership of Tehenhauin and Kroq-Gar. The skaven were driven back underground, but they soon rebuilt their clawpacks and re-emerged, this time in even greater numbers than before.

Thus was the great battle of Lustria begun anew. This was a crusade of annihilation. It was a total war, fought not just by mighty armies, but by the land itself.

Many ages ago, after the coming of Chaos into the world, the slann had ensorcelled their jungle continent, turning it into a deathtrap. In addition to the reptilian beasts that roamed the cold blooded kingdoms, Lustria was a realm guarded by carnivorous plants, living quicksand and swarms of insects capable of stripping a skaven to bones in moments. Now, however, the jungle itself was dying.

Using and improving the recipes of the Liber Bubonicus, the plague monks of Clan Pestilens had created a vast arsenal of vile poxes, maladies and diseases. These were unleashed in many places. The city of Itza was testament to their deadly virulence. The lizardmen, thanks to Tehenhauin's counter-attack, successfully drove off the skaven attackers. However, the bombardment of toxins employed by the skaven still forced the abandonment of the First City. Its matchless pyramid-temples now stood empty, the city itself protected by a ring of guardians that patrolled its perimeter.



Dispersed by the winds, the loathsome diseases spread. Soon foul contagions cropped up throughout Lustria – stegadon eggs blackened, creeper-vine withered, and sentient bogs turned to toxic sludge. A plague of rats had accompanied the skaven invasion, and now the scavenging creatures were everywhere. The most fearsome predators of the jungle returned from the hunt to find chisel-toothed invaders had cracked open their eggs and devoured their young. The vermin carried disease too – soon even the darkest and most forbidding depths of the jungle were full of rapidly reproducing ratspawn.

The skink priests were attuned to the natural world. They saw the flora and fauna of Lustria sicken, and they grew afraid. The skinks became more superstitious than ever, turning from the cold logic of their masters to follow instead the unfounded reason of strange fetishes and occult practices. The slann were now awake once more. Although they noticed their skink attendants were bedecked in false talismans and spoke of gibberish rituals, the mage-priests were too preoccupied with the world's woes to spend any time showing the skink leaders the error of their judgments in this matter.

Although not as attuned to the natural world as their skink attendants, the slann too felt the contaminations festering about them. They also perceived, with their mystic powers, that the world was sliding ever more into disorder and ruin. The mage-priests summoned winds to disperse the unnatural corruption, they commanded cleansing rains to fall from the skies. Lord Mazdamundi even magnified the light of the sun, bathing Lustria for three days in purest illumination. Despite all this, they could not stem the creeping malignancy spreading over the lands.

There was not much time to dwell upon such matters, for the slann needed their mental powers elsewhere. They were engaged in another aspect of the ongoing war.

From far away, the slann felt the jolt of the high elves of Ulthuan dismantling the Great Vortex. For thousands of years the slann mage-priests had secretly helped to sustain the great energy drain. For them, its construction had been a hasty patch over the surging tides of Chaos, but it had been the best solution available to the flawed and illogical warmbloods. The Great Vortex had always been, to slann minds, an inferior, temporary fix that merely granted them time to analyse what the Great Plan required of them.

Patchwork or not, the Great Vortex had stabilised the winds of magic for an age of the world. In that time, the slann's own logic had been befuddled. Doubtlessly this happened during their long war against the dark gods and their daemons. Although thousands of years had passed, the slann mage-priests were no nearer a longer term solution than they had ever been. In fact, over the millennia, they had lost more of the Great Plan than they remembered.

With the loss of the Great Vortex, the raw Chaos in the world increased tenfold. The winds of magic howled at hurricane force. There was no pattern to the flow of arcane powers, and attempts to understand their nature were often deadly. Two of the younger slann mage-priests who probed too deeply into the wind's nature toppled out of their palanquins, stone dead.

The slann sought to project further arcane barriers over Lustria. As they had done during the time of the Great Catastrophe, they attempted to stave off further collapse of reality around them. The slann stretched out their minds, beginning to gather the power they needed. It was at this point that a new emergency was discovered.

Much of the geomantic grid had been broken, but even so, it was now filling beyond capacity with energies. This was illogical, for the slann had drained the grid of its powers when they halted the grey seers' lunatic attempt to bring the moon closer. As many of the key nodes of the grid had been destroyed or knocked out of alignment, it did not make sense. Yet with their mystic sight the slann could see that the great reservoirs were somehow full to bursting.

The geomantic grid was made by the slann under the directions of the Old Ones. It was a way to turn the very planet itself into a reservoir of energy. The seeded leylines of power had been carefully aligned across the planet to ground but also harness its random elements. Since the disappearance of the Old Ones, it was the slann who controlled the geomantic grid. They had always been extremely cautious in how they tapped into and used the stored resource. It was in the backs of their minds that when such forces were unleashed, they were impossible to control. They knew well that which is born out of Chaos could never fully be trusted. That is not to suggest that the slann did not make use of the arcane reserves, for with that power the slann had redirected rivers, moved mountains, and tilted the rotation of the world. However, each of these feats was undertaken after long contemplation and deep-thinking from many of the eldest and wisest of their kind.

Via mental counsel, the slann debated their next step. Several of the younger mage-priests suggested that with such power at their fingertips, they should act quickly. Even as the remaining slann began to rebuke such haste, Lord Mazdamundi, the eldest and most powerful of their kind, weighed in from atop the temple-pyramid of Hexoatl. Wanting to contemplate the matter further, Lord Mazdamundi said he would decide on the morrow – as the star alignment would then be the most favourable.

Too impatient to watch his grey seer's long and elaborate greeting ceremony, Skreech Verminking pulled himself from the shadows around Thanquol and took over.

'Time grows short,' said Verminking. 'Too many frog-things remain.'

Lord Skrolk stood speechless. His sightless eyes could see in hues of contamination, and the Verminlord before him was majestic – a walking blight. While the plaguelord attempted to find his tongue, the towering shape behind him stepped forth.

'Many clawpacks have been sent north, as have the Black 13,' said Vermalanx, voice thick and nauseating.

Thanquol cringed, for the second Verminlord was a Corruptor, and disease bristled upon the ends of its beslimed fur. The air grew pungent with rot. Thanquol sized up the two Verminlords together. Vermalanx wielded great power, thought Thanquol, but of the two, Verminking was still the mightier. Also, the grey seer noted proudly, his own Verminlord had far more magnificent horns.

'They will fail,' said Skreech, addressing the opposing Verminlord. 'The frog-things will attempt to stop the ritual in Skavenblight. Lord Skrolk – you need-must attack and hold the great lizard-thing city. Vermalanx, do not fail us.'

'My orders come from Lord Nurglitch – from the Council of Thirteen,' said Vermalanx, defiantly.

At this, tendrils of black energy coalesced about Verminking, his horns glowing with a nimbus of power.

'*We* have the full backing of the Shadow Council.' His voice did not rise, but it was loaded with so much insinuation and threat that Lord Skrolk took a step back.

'If the large slann comes to the great city...' said Vermalanx, his voice trailing off.

Thanquol, his own hackles raised by the sudden drawing of magical energies, heard fear in the Verminlord Corruptor's thick voice. The grey seer's instincts were to flee. Yet he stayed, his agile mind already racing at the implications of a secret council who sat above the Council of Thirteen.



The skaven armies advanced northwards, passing the Scorpion Coast. Behind them, they left Tlanxla – the City of the Sky – in ruin. Clan Pestilens' goal was to push all the way up the isthmus to Hexoatl, the last of the great lizardmen cities that stood wholly uncontaminated. For this, Lord Skrolk had sent forth four of his remaining plaguelords, each at the head of a massive and formidable clawpack.

There marched Lord Blistrox, at the head of many thrall clans once again. Lord Gritch had been slain during the breaking of the siege of Itza, and it was Lord Seep that had risen to claim the title of Great Potentate of Pustulates. He carried with him the most potent of warpscrolls, and from his plague furnace pulpit he spouted long passages from the Liber Bubonicus. When Lord Kreegix the Ravener was destroyed by the comet that levelled Tlaxtlan, his coveted fourth position in the plaguelords' hierarchy was gift-granted to Grule. Finally, bringing up the rear of the spearhead was Lord Grilok, the Pontifex of Plagues. He brought with him his chanting Contagion Conclave, who pushed along carriages carrying vats of the vilest substances. In their wake, the jungle withered.

The skaven had hoped to travel at least part of the way underground, as was their wont. However, they found their ancient subterranean routes – tunnelled out during Clan Pestilens' first attempt to overthrow Lustria – were no longer viable. The slann mage-priests had bent their will upon them, crushing them one by one with earthquakes, or redirecting rivers to flow through them. There remained but one way to press forward to their destination – to march many miles through the deepest jungle.

Awaiting them, spread out in ambush formations, were the many cohorts commanded by Tehenhauin, the Prophet of Sotek.

A master of jungle warfare, the canny skink priest sought victory through surprise. Time and again the lead pickets of the skaven marched passed hidden elements of the lizardmen army. Only when the time was right, when the ratmen seemed most vulnerable, would the lizardmen attack. What looked like tree roots or a fallen log floating in the black bog would rise up to reveal itself as a deadly warrior. Skinks sent volleys of poisoned darts from behind giant fronds, while the salamanders' fiery breath ignited plague monk formations, their filthy robes lighting up like torches. The skaven continued, but they paid a steeper and steeper price as they advanced more deeply into the jungles.

Most often these ambuscades were short, sharp affairs. Skinks, especially the camouflaged chameleon kind, would launch a few volleys and then disappear. Their blood boiling, the plague monks charged into the thickets, wielding their swords like machetes to hack through the underbrush. Often enough, pit traps, quicksand lures or large saurian beasts awaited those that foolishly pursued. Alone, cut off from their vast numbers, these isolated skaven were mauled. Few ever returned.

Tehenhauin and his troops used cover and concealment, moving through the jungles at speed. Only when he had an advantage did the Prophet of Sotek risk open combat on a larger scale. This happened at prearranged battle sites of his choosing, where the lay of the land gave the lizardmen some natural advantage. In the green fields of the Lush Plains the high grass concealed encircling troops, and the lizardmen were able to fall upon the skaven van. In the Xloxlec Swamps, where the stagnant waters grew so deep that the ratmen had to build log rafts to float their war engines across, Tehenhauin counter-attacked in strength. While ripperdactyls plunged down to tear and rend, flights of terradon riders swooped overhead, dropping rocks to splinter the ramshackle fleet. The silt-choked waters hid other reptilian monsters that rose to feed upon the ratmen before they could swim or wade to solid ground.

Not all the ambushes worked. In the canyon valley of the Silent Watchers the skinks had prepared to charge forth out of hidden caves. The skaven, however, had sniffed out the damp underground caverns and sent troops to investigate. In the vicious tunnel fights that followed, it was the skaven that held the upper hand. They were masters of underground warfare, and the slaughter in those caverns was brutal and one-sided. The skaven also had new weapons that made their arsenal yet more deadly.

Although the more orthodox plague priests would not condone the use of Clan Skryre weaponry, Lord Skrolk had given his assent. Many flights of terradons began their dive-bombing runs only to be torn from the skies by a hail of ratling gun fire. Stormfiends burned out thick jungle ambush sites with warpfire throwers, and poisoned wind mortars proved adept at clearing foes out of dense undergrowth. The skaven watched as the rising gas fumes drifted into the upper canopies. To their wonder, out fell poisoned chameleon skinks. They had been hiding in plain sight, but now they were gassed – left to die choking and hacking out their own lungs in a bloody spatter. When the ambushes grew too many or too costly for the skaven, they called upon an even greater power.

Each of the plaguelords could call upon a Verminlord to aid them. Previously, pacts summoning the treacherous rat daemons from beyond had been an unholy act circumscribed by the grey seers. They alone had known the secret words of power, the elaborate rituals. Lord Skrolk and Vermalanx the Corrupt had changed all that.

As the winds of magic grew, so too did the boldness of the Verminlords. In the dank, disease-dripping caverns below Lustria, more of these beings of black shadow arrived. They had taught foul new practices and rituals. They were the heralds of this new era that was beginning, for an Age of Pestilence was come.

These were not just Verminlords that aided Clan Pestilens – they were Pestilent Reapers. They were as different from other Verminlords as the boil-ridden plague monks were from the other clans. For those not blessed with disease-thickened hides, simply to gaze upon the sickly malevolence of these rat daemons was enough to cause outbreaks of seeping pox or fill lungs with phlegmy fluids. The Verminlord Corruptors were the ultimate carriers of sickness and disease, walking epidemics. Defilement dripped from their claws. In their raspy voices could be heard a viscid bubbling, and their words seemed to have an infectious quality – they seeped into the brain, overwhelming it with feverish zeal.

When summoned, the Verminlords set alight the rampant fervour of Clan Pestilens. The sound of chanting plague monks accompanied these Cullers of Civilisations as they strode into the jungle. There was no difficulty a Verminlord could not handle. With uplifted arms, they brought down plaguestorms, raining filth upon the primeval forests. Others vomited forth geysers of impurities, or turned rivers to sludge with their touch.

With their befouled blessings, a Verminlord could grant great power to the plague monks that followed them, and although they showed a reluctance to close with the foes themselves, when roused to great wrath, the Corruptors were terrible to behold. They fought with handscythes, each of which trailed an unnatural shimmer – as if they infected the very air. A single slice from such a blade could turn a reptilian monster to a pitiable and withered thing. Many such cold-blooded beasts burst out of the forest, roaring their challenges, only to limp and drag themselves back into the undergrowth, leaving behind a trail of scales that sloughed off their besickened bodies.

When Lord Blistrox was ambushed upon the Trail of Bones, he called forth a Verminlord. Hemmed in by the thick jungle, the skaven had found themselves subjected to hit and run attacks from all angles. When the hunched form of the Verminlord arose from its summoning triangles, it heard the plaguelord's pleas. In answer to the ambushing skinks, the Verminlord sent forth clouds of corruption – roiling masses of death. Before that miasma, the verdant sea of jungle blackened and collapsed for as far as the eye could see. With their covering canopy gone, it was possible to see the skinks that had lain in wait – now fallen to the ground, twitching out their painful ends.

So the skaven advanced. As all four different clawpacks converged on their march to Hexoatl, their outrunners returned with news. Their route was blocked, as a lizardmen army had arrayed for battle directly across their paths. At last, thought the plaguelords, the cowardly foe will confront us openly.

Tired of giving ground, Tehenhauin had decided to make his stand amidst the ruins of Pahuax. Before the crumbling Temple of the Rising Serpent, the Prophet of Sotek aligned his forces.

When the red dawn pierced the rising morning mists, it found a lizardmen army stretched across the horizon. From up and down the battle line came the roar of reptilian beasts. Some sounded this challenge to greet the morning sun, others because the scent of vermin was on the air. Soon the skaven armies could be seen gathering in the distance, their scouts filtering out onto the ruined plains.





Once the city of Pahuax had been great, but it had been destroyed during the Great Catastrophe. Its inhabitants and the greater portion of the city were reduced to ash in a cataclysmic instant. Those few that survived the spontaneous destruction did so only because they suffered a worse fate. They were transported to the Realm of Chaos. Of those lizardmen, only the great hunter Oxyotl ever returned, and it took him some 6,000 years to do so.

Since that time, the city had changed little. It was an eerie and barren place where the superstitious skinks did not willingly venture. There was no wind, just a stifling silence. The ash still lay thick like a silent shroud of snow. In the desert of ash a few of the pyramid-temples and monuments still stood – testament to the almighty power of the Old Ones.

Tehenhauin was a master strategist, adept at choosing terrain advantageous to his mode of ambushing attack. That he chose to stand and fight at this battlefield, however, spoke more of desperation. The Prophet of Sotek was well aware that his traps had inflicted a great many casualties on the ratmen, but they had not halted the multitudinous foe. The great host came on, ravaging the land. The skink priest was keenly aware that while his forces shrank in size, the foes seemed to be gathering strength. More and more of the foul ratspawn emerged to join the battle. In the end, Tehenhauin chose Pahuax not because it offered him tactical gain. Instead, the zealous skink priest chose the site because upon the ruin of their old civilisation, the lizardmen could clearly see what they were fighting for. They could see what would happen should they fail to stop the skaven.

Behind Tehenhauin's Army of Sotek, further up the isthmus of Pahuax, stood the only one of their great cities that remained untouched by plague and ruin. Hexoatl stood alone. Amidst the broken temples of Pahuax, Tehenhauin told of the atrocities of the ratmen. Such was the fiery oratory and channelled aggression of Tehenhauin, that the skinks rose up, filled with hate. Even the saurus, normally cold and unemotional, grew agitated – their savage bloodlust stoked by their smaller kin.

Although it was not an ambush like the majority of Tehenhauin's attacks, that is not to say that the Prophet of Sotek was not without some trickery or guile. Pit traps had been excavated, lined with spikes and then covered by reed matting hidden under layers of ash. Settled beneath the fine grist were many skink skirmishers. They breathed through their blowpipes, which barely poked through the ash layer. It was their intent to lay in wait until the foe had passed them by, before rising up to harass their vulnerable flanks and rear with poisoned darts. Ash snakes had heeded Tehenhauin's call. They were great grey serpents with diamond shaped heads the size of a rat ogre skull. They lay coiled in wait amidst the leaden landscape, only evident when their movements caused slight ripples to run along the dust piles, like something moving under a sand dune.

The fleet-footed night runners led the ratmen armies. It was they who first came sniffing around the perimeters, and it was they who engaged the skink pickets. These were carefully aligned, so as not to reveal any of Tehenhauin's surprises until they could inflict maximum damage. As the lightly armed skirmishers from both sides duelled upon the ash plain, the clawpacks advanced.

Three of the plaguelords were overeager for battle. After all, there had been little chance to prove themselves in the hit and run attacks and ambushes in the deep jungle. Lord Blistrox wished to redeem himself for the loss of Xlanhaupec.

Lord Seep was the most ambitious of them all – zealous even for the rigid fundamentalists of Clan Pestilen. Lord Grule had been a disciple of the comet-stricken Lord Kreegix the Ravener, and wished to establish not only his right to the title, but to gain revenge for his predecessor's death. Only Lord Grilok, the Pontifex of Plagues, was content to bring up the rear. Although the Contagion Conclave was formidable in battle, their true calling was in the creation and distribution of disease. They clung to their vats and cauldrons, and nightly performed chanting rituals that sent wafting clouds of ruination into the winds. Behind them lay hundreds of miles of wasteland.

Unable to come to terms over which of the three should attack first, the plaguelords at last agreed that all three clawpacks would advance together. They would smash the army before them and then march upon Hexoatl in force.

Ahead of the main skaven host a tide of rats burst from the forest. This was soon followed by the skaven armies themselves, as they left the jungle and advanced onto the dust plain. Clouds of ash were kicked up, layering the skaven's fur with dust and ash. The lizardmen cohorts had been standing motionless, but now they began to march out to meet the foe. Scintillating beams of brilliant light stabbed outwards. Upon Tehenhauin's command, the bastiladons synchronised so that the magical gem atop each of the reptilian beast's back fired into the one in front of it. This magnified the power and range, so that the final shaft of light struck out a great distance, its beam smashing apart a plague furnace with a single shot.

In the beginning, it was the lizardmen who held the upper hand. There was fire in their cold-blooded hearts, and their initial onslaught broke the skaven line in many places. A massed stegadon charge sent impacts thundering across the battlefield. They crushed the plague monks, driving them back and stomping hundreds to death. So much ratmen blood was squished out that the ash turned to a swampy grey and crimson paste.

Against the avalanche of reptilian monsters, even the ever-fervent furore of the plague monks began to waver. With perfect timing, dozens of skink skirmisher squads rose up from concealment and sent hails of darts into the beleaguered foe. Ripperdactyl formations began their attack runs. Such was their voracity that the apex predator-flocks of the skies often simply targeted the nearest enemy, although some skinks on the ground had ensured that their attacks caused the most impact by secreting blot toads amongst vulnerable skaven units. Great batteries of poisoned wind mortars – both weapon teams and stormfiends – had the toads' secretions upon them. Given the irrational hatred ripperdactyls had towards the toads, it was those formations that received the creatures' plummeting charge.

As the day wore on, however, fortunes began to turn. Tehenhauin's army was largely composed of skinks and reptilian beasts. The skinks – their fury soon spent – did not have the stamina or lasting strength of the saurus cohorts. Against the grinding attacks of the maniacal plague monks, they found themselves losing ground. The skinks were gradually being worn down, and where the vicious poisoned blades of the plague monks struck they fell much faster. Entire skink cohorts ceased to be in a flurry of hacks and slashes, as even slight scratches caused agonising wounds.

The stegadons and bastiladons had proven unstoppable on the charge, but as the day lengthened, even limbs the size of tree trunks grew weary and fatigued. The attritional effect of dozens of minor wounds slowed the beasts. The iron-hard scales of the mighty creatures eventually cracked after a full day of turning blades, bites, and ratling gun bullets. One by one they were pulled down and overcome. Swarms of rats and ratmen alike climbed atop their bleeding bodies, chanting chittering calls of verminous victory.

As nightfall descended, a desperate counter-attack by Tehenhauin and his red-crested skinks drove back the lead skaven elements. Even so, the ratmen soon reformed and came on again. The Prophet of Sotek realised that there was only one inevitable outcome should the fight continue. He did not have the numbers to confront the reckless hate of the ratmen. Calling upon his fork-tailed god, and offering the still-beating heart from a plague monk he had just cut down, Tehenhauin summoned forth a sea of deadly snakes.

During the writhing snake storm that made the ash wastes move with a life of its own, Tehenhauin ordered his army to retreat. The Prophet of Sotek could do no more alone, and sent desperate messages to Hexoatl.

Within his sacred pool Lord Mazdamundi had been attempting contemplations. Skink scribes in the surrounding chambers chattered and clicked excitedly, and their voices carried through the pillared porticos. He felt like he had been on the very cusp of realising something momentous when once again he had been pulled out of his mental reveries. The news from Tehenhauin was bad – as the slann mage-priest had known it would be.

The most powerful of the living slann bestirred himself. He called for his attendants, bidding them to make ready his stegadon mount. Beyond the ceiling he felt the leering cursed moon blocking the star alignment he wished to draw upon. Come the dawn, it would be time to march out of Hexoatl. Lord Mazdamundi declared that he himself would guide the attack.

A dark shape flitted from shadow to shadow along the streets of Hexoatl. It scampered into the gloom, sniffing cautiously before wrapping itself within a black cloak. It blended with the darkness. Seconds later, a patrol of saurus passed by, marching within a spear's length of the cloak-covered assassin. The patrol stalked the empty avenues between monumental temple-pyramids. They saw nothing but mooncast shadows, and so kept moving. In a few moments, the smallest patch of shadow detached itself from the corner and crept towards its destination.

His name was a secret, an unspoken word known to few. He was one of the Black 13, the top assassins of the mysterious Clan Eshin. They too were a secret – for most, nothing but a whispered legend.

It had taken the assassin much time and effort to enter Hexoatl. The city was mystically sealed with powerful spells. His own magical amulet, a hunk of rune-scratched warpstone, had allowed him to pass undetected through the arcane wards. For this mission, each of the Black 13 had been supplied with magical protection. In addition to the warpstone charms, all of their members bore talismans of great potency – spellshedders, unplacers and shadow-makers.

The old tunnels and underpassages the assassin used to enter the city had been forgotten by the skinks over the long years. The traps, however, remained intact. It had not been the amulet that helped him pass these obstacles, but instead his incomparable agility. He had ducked poisoned darts, sidestepped scything blades and rolled under a series of spring-loaded metal spears that jutted into the passageway. Not since the practice rooms in the Caverns of Unyielding Shadow beneath Skavenblight had the assassin been so tested. That training had served the him well.

As he entered the city, he left a trail of bodies. Most Clan Eshin assassins do not kill any, save for their designated mark. Finding a patrol with their throats slit, or guards crumpled over from poisoned throwing stars would only alert the foe that an assassin was in their midst. This one, however, did not care. Arrogant beyond measure, this killer wanted to be found. He tired of being one of a group, and was ready to make a name for himself.



In all of Clan Eshin there were only two who could legitimately claim to be above the Black 13. One of those was Lord Sneek – the Nightlord and ruler of Clan Eshin. The other was Sneek's right claw – Deathmaster Snikch. As a member of the most elite of Clan Eshin's units, the assassin had met both individuals once. The memory was a fearful one, and the assassin had a hunk of ear missing and a long scar down his muzzle to show for that encounter. Snikch had impressed him – he had been lightning fast and had quickly proven that no matter how skilled the Black 13 were, they were no match for the incomparable masters of Clan Eshin. That had been years ago, but now he vied for the highest position in the Black 13. Even that would not fulfil his ambitions, for the assassin had greater aspirations.

After much training, extensive use of hyper-stimulants purchased from Clan Moulder, and years of perfecting his technique, the assassin knew he was ready. His extra sense – the ability to detect danger with his wiry muzzle whiskers – was heightened beyond reason. If he paused and concentrated, the assassin could sense that high above him an air patrol was riding upon thermals. He knew the winged monsters the skinks rode upon had vision that could pick out a tail twitch even from that height. The assassin could even gauge the scattered cloud and how its movements would both aid and hinder his own visibility.

It had been Lord Skrolk himself who had assigned the assassin group their target, but beyond that, they all sensed the orders came from the Council of Thirteen.

They had been assigned to kill the frog-creature named Mazdamundi. The Black 13 had never failed in executing its duty, although this time the lone assassin wanted to reap the glory himself. This was why he had forged ahead of his claw. He wanted to claim the kill himself, he wanted his personal prestige to exceed even that of Snikch – whose name always garnered fear and respect.

Up ahead was the tallest structure in Hexoatl – the pyramid-temple of Towering Will. It was reported that the frog-things basked in the uppermost chamber. The assassin would begin his hunt there. It was Deathmaster Snikch's contention that the higher up in a tower or building you could ambush something, the less they would be expecting it. With visions of his success before him, the assassin began to climb. The stone was old – very old. Its pitted surface was easy to grip, and the assassin had no need for his steel claws or grabblehooks.

Up, up, up the assassin crawled, spiderlike. He was careful to pause in shadow when the scudding clouds and bright moonshine were unfavourable. He had climbed roughly three quarters of the distance up the steep sided pyramid when he paused, pulling himself into a crevice of cracked stone. Despite the strenuous climb, the assassin was not tired, not yet. However, as he did not know what he would find at the top, he wanted to ensure he was in peak form. Taking from a small pouch a pinch of greenish powder,

the assassin dissolved it slowly upon his tongue. Within heartbeats, an unnatural invigoration coursed through his system.

And then the twitch happened. The assassin's whiskers twinged in a way that let him know danger was near. He could neither hear, smell or see anything that might espy him. He glanced at his talismans, yet none gave any hint that he was under magical scry or arcane observation. Yet the twitch persisted.

The assassin's instincts had saved his life repeatedly, and he had learned never to question them. He silently slid his blade out. All the Black 13 had their swords blessed by Lord Skrolk and his Lord of Contagion. The poisons must be deadly indeed, for simply unsheathing the weapon made the assassin's whiskers twitch. He needed no warning about this – the assassin knew well that the slightest scratch from that blade meant death. The other twitch he could still not identify, but it grew stronger. The assassin pulled back further into the crevice, wrapping his black cloak around him. He was a shadow in a crack, invisible even to one who knew he was there.

But the black-clad assassin had not reckoned with the eyes of Oxyotl.

The most skilled of all chameleon skinks, Oxyotl began to move. Ever so deliberately he lifted one limb and then the other as he climbed down the pyramid-temple of Towering Will. After a few feet of movement, the chameleon skink paused. One of his independent eyes telescoped outwards so that it protruded alarmingly. The other eye blink-swished, a clear-membrane sliding over it. He could see a wide-spectrum, and the heat signature of the rat-assassin made the creature stand out clearly against the stone that was long cooled from the day's baking sun.

Oxyotl's skin took not just the colour of the ancient stone, but also the texture – it grew pitted and worn. If his slow moving hand crossed a rock join, the chameleon's skin mimicked the dark shadow perfectly. Even Oxyotl's irises had changed colour to match. He was nearly in range.

In his tiny crevice, the assassin knew he had been spotted. He did not know how or by what – but the twitch had increased into a maddening buzz. He knew that he must move quickly, or die. He had the vague sense that the trouble was above him – was it a flying-something?

Securing a line on grabblehooks, the assassin dropped out of the crevice. After free falling some thirty feet, he pulled taut and gracefully bounded back to the wall. He held on with one hand, the other raised to hurl throwing stars at anything that moved. But there was nothing there. Nothing – unless...

It happened all at once. The assassin's whiskers gave their greatest twitch just as the ratman's eyes at last caught a glimpse of something. A strangely shaped bit of rock seemed to be rapidly sliding down the pyramid – it was little more than a blur. Even as the assassin whipped his arm to release the throwing stars he heard the soft but unmistakable sound of air rushing through a blowpipe. He felt an icy pain strike his neck, and instantly his muscles froze as poisons surged through his veins. His lifeless claws let go of the Pyramid of Towering Will, and the assassin began his long fall. Oxyotl did not watch his enemy break on the stones below, for he had already begun his long climb down.

Somewhere a gong announced the hour before dawn. All the cohorts of Hexoatl began to form before the great temple-pyramid, awaiting their mighty leader. Oxyotl would not be with them, for his hunt went on.



Before the lizardmen host could march out from the gates of Hexoatl, Lord Mazdamundi declared that he would guide them to victory, but it was not his duty to lead the battle. Suffused with the geomantic power siphoned by Hexoatl itself, the mage-priest croaked out words of power. Folding space with his thoughts alone, the mage-priest bridged a great distance. In a shimmering of lights, he summoned forth Kroq-Gar.

The war leader of the lizardmen had been, once more, standing guard over the daemon-haunted ruins of Xahutec – awaiting the final attack from their most ancient of foes. Then, in an instant, he stood before Lord Mazdamundi. Recognising its master – or perhaps just sensing the extreme power that stood before it – Kroq-Gar's carnosaur mount halted its roar of challenge. Instead, the lumbering beast lowered its head in tribute.

Without a spoken word, Kroq-Gar assumed command of the cohorts of Hexoatl, and led them south from the city. His mundane duties dispensed with, Lord Mazdamundi slumped into his palanquin. It was more difficult to meditate mounted atop a marching stegadon, but with effort, the ancient mage-priest entered a trance. Something important was being hidden from him. The sooner they could wipe out the blightful army that approached Hexoatl, the better. Something about their presence was clouding his foresight.

Meanwhile, the clawpacks of the plaguelords had not been idle. After destroying the snake swarms of Pahuax, the skaven forces headed north. They marched on the trail of Tehenhauin, for they had all but broken his army, and its remnants fled for Hexoatl. That city was the ultimate destination of the verminous host, also. They planned on releasing diseases upon Hexoatl and befouling its spawning pools. The fog of death hung upon the army, billowing from the Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes.

Three days later, at dawn, the opposing armies met at the monument known as the Obsidian Column. It was along a leyline, part of the geomantic grid that still drew down the raging winds of magic. There stood many monuments, all of which were dwarfed by the colossal column of purest black stone. The lizardmen entered the clearing, the hulking monoliths towering before them. The flagstones were now partially overgrown, cracked and tilted in places by the encroaching jungle. Even as Kroq-Gar arranged the cohorts to his satisfaction, the skaven could be seen emerging from the fringes of the jungle.



Three of the four plaguelords – Lords Blistrox, Seep, and Grule – pushed their clawpacks, each vying to be the tip of the skaven spearhead. After their success against Tehenhauin, they had grown more confident. When scouts reported an even larger lizardmen army ahead, there was no thought of stratagems, or attempting to surround the enemy battle line. Instead, it was each plaguelord driving his troops forward, bent on reaching the foe first.

Not stopping to form a battle line, the skaven burst from the jungle in a ragged horde. They outnumbered the lizardmen by more than thirty to one. On they came, swarming past the vine-covered monuments. Their chanted war cries and the chittering of tens of thousands of chisel-edged teeth would have unnerved any living army, save only the lizardmen. They stood placid and unmoved.

Lord Mazdamundi opened a single eye from his meditations. He had nearly worked through the interference and was perturbed by the inconvenient timing. The slann saw the would-be usurpers of the world scampering towards him, felt their anarchic disharmony clashing with the natural order. He felt the surging powers stored within the Obsidian Column. While his mind unlocked the proper sequence of thoughts, his hand traced the patterns taught to him by Lord Kroak when the world was young. With a single belching word and a flick of his wrist, the Master Geomancer sent forth a ripple through the ground. It rose like a wave running outward from Mazdamundi, growing as it pushed up the ground before it.

The ground buckled, flagstones cracked and a tidal wave of earth loomed up to crash upon the oncoming hordes. In an instant, thousands of skaven perished, crushed beneath the rolling mound that ploughed off southwards. A stinging cloud of dust and debris washed over them, howling as it consumed them.

The duststorm did not touch Lord Mazdamundi or his mount, for a spherical force dome surrounded the slann. With the contaminating Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes buried beneath miles of rock and earth, a sudden clarity reached the mage-priest. He halted, his bulging eyes opening wide in alarm. Mazdamundi's mind reeled as an epiphany washed over him.

The reckless, foolish, twisted ratmen were about to unleash forces beyond their control.

Even at a great distance, the mightiest of living slann mage-priests perceived much of what was about to happen.

Mazdamundi felt many forces at work. He saw that the skaven played only a part in the larger scheme. Unknowingly, the ratmen were pawns manipulated into fighting, and dying. Above the multitudinous ratmen were the verminous daemon-spirits and beyond was the eternally greedy, grasping form of their foul rat god. Each of those levels was pulling strings and moving pieces in the great game being played out upon the mortal realm. The skaven did not know it, arrogant in their rising superiority, but beyond them Lord Mazdamundi felt a power greater still.

Behind the ratmen's schemes and invasions, the slann recognised the taint of his most ancient of foes: Chaos. Looming over the ratmen, Lord Mazdamundi perceived the shadow of the entropic forces against which he had striven his whole life. Indeed, it was the enemy that the slann had been purposefully created to contest. Chaos – enemy of order, the antithesis of civilisation. In their eagerness to conquer, the ratmen were but doing the bidding of the dark gods.

Yet the forces of Chaos had made a mistake. They had underestimated the damage the ratmen could do. Goaded by greed, and driven by a lust for power, the skaven had proven wayward. They were about to unleash forces far beyond their comprehension, forces that would destroy... everything.



To stop the mad skaven plan, Mazdamundi knew he would need more power. Much more than the still overflowing Obsidian Column could provide. A vague notion occurred to him that he had been blinded and kept busy on purpose. To gain access to the full reservoirs within what was left of the geomantic grid, Lord Mazdamundi would have to enter the great Temple of Itza. That lay many thousands of miles to the south. He sensed forces already en route to stop him. While the slann mage-priest wove the incantations that would open the causeway between realities, another portion of his powerful mind contacted his remaining kindred. There was no time for explanation or questions. Hundreds of commands were issued simultaneously.

A shimmering gateway of purest light opened before Mazdamundi's stegadon. Unfazed, the massive quadraped lumbered straight into the glittering lights. Unquestioningly, half of his army followed suit, never missing a stride. So it was that they left the ongoing battle around the Obsidian Column.

A brilliant light appeared within the disease-ridden jungle that marked the perimeter of Itza. In a blink, the light was gone, but in its place stood an army of lizardmen, Lord Mazdamundi at its head. Before the skinks that guarded the empty city could lift their arms in protest, their minds filled with visions of the oncoming skaven. Each made haste to join the ranks of Mazdamundi's force as it advanced back into Itza. Filling the horizon on the opposite side of the sprawling city was the largest skaven army yet seen in Lustria, Lord Skrolk at its head.

Thus began the last battle of Itza, the First City.

Thanquol looked out over the blackened wasteland, his fur on end from the raw power leaking through the world-rift. 'Why-tell are we here, master? What place is this?'

Skreech Verminking stalked through the broken stone, cautiously approaching the remains of an enormous arch. Its twisted and unnatural architecture was unlike the rest of the ruins. 'The lizard-things call it Xahutec. Many battles were fought here...' said the Verminlord, his voice trailing off.

'These rune-markings – I recognise these,' said Thanquol, his claw pointed at, but not touching the icons seared into the twisted rockface. 'The gods of the north, yes-yes? But where are the clawpacks we sent?'

Movement within the archway caught their eyes. A blackness was there that stirred like water, ripples incongruously flowing. Both Verminking and Thanquol had sudden visions – the vast armies they had sent to scout out the area beset by a tide of daemons, dragged screeching back within this arch, or others like it.

With his warp-attuned eye, Verminking looked beyond the veil. He involuntarily stepped backwards, exuding the scent of fear.

'What did you see, master? What waits beyond?' said Thanquol, his voicing breaking. He did not want to see anything that could frighten the Verminlord.

As if still in a trance, Verminking wavered. His voice a whisper, the Verminlord recounted. 'Armies beyond count, rage beyond understanding. They wait for us, watching us.'

For a moment, it seemed as if the mesmerised Verminlord might teeter into the archway, but Thanquol pulled upon his enormous claw.

The spell broken, Verminking looked down upon his grey seer. 'We cannot match that power. Not yet,' he said, more to himself than to Thanquol.

THE HOST OF HEXOATL

The army that Lord Mazdamundi led out of Hexoatl was not the largest that ever marched from that city, but it was amongst the most powerful. Within its serried ranks were legends of great power, each one more than the equal of many entire cohorts.

LORD MAZDAMUNDI

There were no lizardmen more revered than the Lord of the Solar City, the mighty Mazdamundi. He was the eldest and most powerful of the remaining mage-priests. At the Dawn of Creation Mazdamundi was instructed by the first generation of slann, and he attended Lord Kroak when that great master was at the peak of his prodigious powers. When stirred to war, Mazdamundi placed his palanquin atop a colossal stegadon and rode forth. He held the power to level cities with but a word or a flick of his wrist.





KROQ-GAR

In personal combat there were none more dangerous than Kroq-Gar. He was armed with the Hand of the Gods and the Spear of Tlanxla, and rode atop an especially ferocious carnosaur. It was not Kroq-Gar's battle prowess however, that made him the unquestioned choice as warleader for the race of lizardmen. Lord Mazdamundi appointed Kroq-Gar to that post as the ancient saurus was unsurpassed in tactical acumen. Over the ages this appointment had, like all of Mazdamundi's decisions, proven wise.

SKY COHORT

The Sky Cohort was led by Tiktaq'to, Hexoatl's Master of Skies. It was comprised of three wings of terradon riders and a wing of fierce ripperdactyls. For his steed, and those of his formation, Tiktaq'to chose terradons from the Blacksun Cliffs. Those lime green beasts were known to be especially vicious and were trained to carry heavy weights which they would always drop perfectly on target.





HONOUR GUARD OF HEXOATL

It was only fitting for the most ancient of all living slann mage-priests to be guarded by the eldest spawnings of temple guard. Dark scaled with light blue crests, the richly bedecked Honour Guard of Hexoatl were always the most stalwart of their tenacious kind. To them was entrusted the task of safeguarding Lord Mazdamundi – a sacred duty made more difficult by the mage-priest's insistence upon riding his stegadon into battle.



COHORT OF THE COPPER SUN

With the threat of enemy armies looming over Hexoatl, the spawning pools bubbled and frothed. Out of those sacred waters strode a new cohort of saurus. They were marked by crests of orange-tipped scales that shimmered beneath the noonday sun. As battle neared, it would soon be time to see what properties these new warriors would manifest – what gifts the wisdom of the Old Ones had bestowed upon them.



YELLOW-CRESTED COHORT

The skinks and kroxigor of the Yellow-Crested Cohorts were not from Hexoatl, but instead from the Aureate Monument of the Rising Sun. Located in the deep jungles of the Isthmus of Pahuax, the monument had been destroyed by the invading skaven. Those troops not slain escaped northwards – coming just in time to join the marching host of Hexoatl. Marked by brilliant yellow faces and crests, the cohort bore a burning hatred towards plague monks.

Lord Mazdamundi
Lord of the Solar-City

Kroq-Gar
Last Defender of Xhotl

Honour Guard of Hexoatl
One spawning of Temple Guard

Sky Cohort
Tiktaq'to, Master of Skies, three wings of Terradon Riders and one wing of Ripperdactyls

Yellow-Crested Cohort
Two Skink Cohorts and three clubs of Kroxigor

Gharax
Saurus Scar-Veteran

Tortak, Bearer of the Great Slate of Hexoatl
Saurus Scar-Veteran Battle Standard Bearer

Xotex
Skink Priest, Attendant of the Sacred Plaque

Lobec
Skink Oracle Rider atop Troglodon

Hexoatl Outliers
Two spawnings of Skink Skirmishers

Cohort of the City of the Sun
Five spawnings of Saurus Warriors

Cohort of Black Onyx
Two spawnings of Saurus Warriors

Cohort of the Rays Divine
Two spawnings of Saurus Warriors

Bearer of the Golden Device
Ancient Stegadon bearing an Engine of the Gods

Herd of Hexoatl
Twelve Stegadons

Cohort of the Copper Sun
One spawning of Saurus

LORD SKROLK'S PLAGUE ARMY

Lord Skrolk led the bulk of Clan Pestilens' strength to Itza, determined to see the destruction of the lizardmen's First City and the desecration of all within. Amongst those following him were many of the clan's most feared troops, held back in the earlier invasion and baying to bring their fervour to bear on their cold-blooded enemy.

LORD SKROLK

The most ancient, evil and powerful of all the plaguelords, Lord Skrolk was the right claw to Arch-plaguelord Nurglitch himself. Where Skrolk walked, disease followed. Unlike many other skaven leaders, when Lord Skrolk went to battle, he preferred to do so in the front ranks of the first wave. From there, he could slaughter his enemy and watch as the waft of his fumes corrupted the flesh of his foes.





VERMALANX THE CORRUPT

Vermalanx was a Corruptor, a Verminlord steeped in disease. He bore an aura of rot and decay so potent that his very presence could cause an epidemic. At his command, Vermalanx could summon a plague storm, send forth winds of contamination, or cause a host of foes to waste away. His gaze alone could wither a healthy body to nothing before his foes' very eyes. In battle, Vermalanx fought with deadly diseased handscythes.

PLAGUEVERMIN

The elite warriors of Clan Septik were the Plaguevermin. These were stormvermin who bore plague-blessed halberds of rusted iron. Even a scratch from such a weapon had been known to fell foes. Like all their clan, their light coloured robes were stained and encrusted with the filth of ages.





PESTILENS GUARD

These plague monks gained the reputation of being the most rabid of their overzealous kind. In battle they chanted the Liber Bubonicus, frothing over themselves in their eagerness to hack at their foes. The Pestilens Guard typically served Lord Nurglitch, the Lord of Decay who ruled Clan Pestilens, but he detached a portion of them to act as bodyguard for Lord Skrolk.

THE BEARER OF THE PLAGUE PROCESSIONAL

There was no clan more fervent or more feverish in their devotion to their foul rat god than Clan Pestilens. At the head of their verminous host they rose the Sacred Banner of the Horned Rat. Swathed in tattered robes, its bearer was a plague monk whose cowl could only partially obscure the cankerous bulges of purest disease. It was said that so long as that banner were raised, the skaven would be triumphant. Gaze into the Eye of the Warp and Despair...





BEARERS OF CREEPING DEATH

In debased rituals, the disease known as Creeping Death was perfected within the Cauldrons of a Thousand Poxes. At its peak, the disease was ladled over hot coals so that it made a deadly fume. Not even the most disease-gnarled of plague monks could long withstand its virulence. Before each battle, doomed plague monk volunteers took vows and lifted up those censers, swinging them so that contrails of death were left in their wake. Those not slain in combat would succumb soon afterwards to the Creeping Death.

Lord Skrolk

Vermalanx the Corrupt
Verminlord Corruptor

The Bearer of the Plague Processional
Plague Monk Standard Bearer

Pestilens Guard
One claw of Plague Monks

Plaguevermin
One claw of Stormvermin

Bearers of Creeping Death
One claw of Plague Censer Bearers

Grik Gribblefang
Plague Priest

Plagueclaw Batteries
Battery of three Plagueclaw Catapults

Brotherhood of the Haze
Three claws of Plague Monks

Clan Pestilens
Plague Priest Srruk Scribeye
Eight claws of Plague Monks, three claws of Plague Censer Bearers and three legions of Skavenslaves

Clan Septik
Warlord Siknit, two claws of Clanrats, two claws of Plague Monks, two legions of Skavenslaves, three claws of Poisoned Wind Globadiers and two Ratling Gun Teams

Clan Dribskut
Warlord Ezik, Chieftain Rritclaw, four claws of Clanrats, two claws of Stormvermin, three claws of Rat Ogres, two Warpfire Throwers and two Poisoned Wind Mortars

Clan Moulder
Master Moulder Gruk Whipklaw, two Stormfiends, two claws of Giant Rats and two Hell Pit Abominations

Clan Fekulus
Warlord Zrik Gribfang and six claws of Clanrats

Grink's Sharpshooters
Warlock Engineer Grink and six Warplock Jezzail Teams

FINAL BATTLE OF THE FIRST CITY

With brief commands, Kroq-Gar sent skirmishing patrols out before the main host. Even with Lord Mazdamundi's protections, the lizardmen felt the contamination that lay heavy over Itza, and it caused their scales to crack and ooze. Heedless of the lasting harm they did themselves, the lizardmen pressed forward. Skinks loped down eerily empty avenues towards the towering pyramid-temples arrayed around the central plaza. Behind them came the saurus legions, and behind those lumbered Lord Mazdamundi upon his vast stegadon. Flying cohorts reported the skaven had already infiltrated the city. The sharp crack of jezzail teams could be heard in the distance.

Even while the battle of Itza began, the final countdown had begun deep below Skavenblight.

Everything thrummed with the sound of vast machinery. Wheels the size of great sailing ships drove gears that, in turn, moved dozens of different apparatus. Bubbling and hissing steam engines ran non-stop, fuelled by great wooden vats full of strangely percolating greenish liquid. Wheezing bellows kept unsteady time, and the air was filled with crackling energy.

Zingetail, the Clan Skryre warlock engineer who bore the title of Great Skreeductor, was everywhere. He scampered up scaffold ladders, checked gauges, and above all, screeched at his underlings. Slaves and teams of engineers scurried in all directions in their haste to do the Skreedutor's bidding.

The moment was almost at hand. Switches had been thrown, the build-up was irreversible. Warp condensers that towered hundreds of feet above the surface groaned under the increasing strain as they collected the winds of magic. Thick cables, tubes and wires grounded the harvested powers, sending them coursing miles underground to the warpforges. There, raw energy was fused so that it could be alchemically mixed with warpstone and blackpowder. This created the super-charged slurry that would fuel the weapon.

The fool Ikit Claw had tried to build a rocket, but the device Zingetail had constructed was beyond anything the skaven had previously attempted. This was actually saying quite a bit, as over the years, the skaven had attempted no few doomsday devices of colossal, continent-cracking proportions. The device probably needed a few more repairs, but time was running out.

Zingetail always referred to his great creation as 'the device'. He realised this was belligerence, but could not help himself. The leader of Clan Skryre himself had rejected the proposed title of Zingecannon. Thus was born the Morskittar Engine.

Zingetail saw the readings, felt the thumping machinery, and heard the barely contained power reaching overload capacity within heartbeats. If he waited too long, the machine would explode, if he did not wait long enough, its shot would not reach its distant target, and he would suffer unimaginable suffering as a consequence. It was decisions like these that had left the Great Skreeductor in the shape he was in – Zingetail had clawed patches of fur bald with his incessant scratching, his left eye fluttered uncontrollably, and his tail lashed with a mind of its own. He had daily dealt with delays, misfiring machinery, sabotage, and assassination attempts. One way or the other, this would be the end...

Zingetail gave the signal. This was relayed to the coven of grey seers, whose ritual magic would further empower the device. Then, with some hesitation, he threw the final switch. All of Skavenblight shook. With a surge of energy that caused the fur of every skaven within leagues to stand on end, the enormous barrel of the Morskittar Engine glowed.

None of this was known half a world away, yet Lord Mazdamundi felt a great disturbance within the world's harmonics. He sent his warleader a single thought: faster.

The skaven forces filled the central plaza and were spilling up the wide avenues. The lead elements of the lizardmen army were already engaged: skink skirmishers throwing javelins or sending volleys of blowgun darts out before retreating. The agile skinks harassed the foe, then scattered. Their plan was to retreat back to the oncoming saurus cohorts, although some few instead chose to branch off and scale the lower levels of the great ziggurats. As they were quick-footed, the skinks assumed they could outrace any foe, save cavalry. As the ratmen employed no mounted formations, they thought this manoeuvre would be easily accomplished. It was not so.

The skaven pursuit was quick. Within the vanguard of their forces were a few claws of black-clad Clan Eshin troops. These were especially light on their feet, and scurried after the fleeing skinks, pulling them down and slaughtering many. Something about the foetid air seemed to slow the lizardmen down, making the cold-blooded creatures sluggish and lead-footed. The opposite was true for the ratmen – they were invigorated by the unnatural air – none more so than the plague monks.

Lord Skrolk himself led a swarming stream of Pestilens Guard. Made rabid by the fumes in the air and the noxious presence of their plaguelord, the plague monks filled the wide

lanes between the monolithic ziggurats. It was a living tide of skaven, punctuated with standards and totems held aloft on wooden poles. The foul runes scratched upon the hide-stitched banners had been rendered from pigments distilled with warpstone, potent symbols that emboldened every skaven.

Inspired by Lord Skrolk and his readings from the Liber Bubonicus, the plague monks foamed at the mouth and gnawed at their own tails, screeching insensibly in their bloodlust. They scurried forward – racing to close with the foe, eager to sink their blades, fangs and claws into the hated enemy.

The cohorts of saurus maintained self-control better than their foes, yet they were no less determined. With scale-shields raised, they strode forward at double-time. With great springing strides, Kroq-Gar's carnosaur mount loped to the front in time for the collision. The impact of those battle lines meeting echoed down the avenues.

From out of the midday sun came the air cohorts of Tiktaq'to, Hexoatl's Master of Skies. They had soared on thermals, but now folded their great wings and hurtled downwards. The terradons pulled out of their dive, stretching out their long wings to fly along the stone canyons made by the mountainous pyramid-temples. As one, the Sky Cohort dropped their heavy stone weights before veering upwards once again. The skaven were packed into the avenues below and the stones crashed amongst them, sending up showers of stone splinters, broken flagstones, and bits of splattered ratmen. The flights of ripperdactyls simply dove into the foe, matching their razor-sharp claws and beaks against the poisoned blades and iron-tipped staves of the plague monks.

Roaring and stomping its way into the thick of the fighting came the fiercest of all carnosaurs. Its powerful jaws tore into the skaven ranks like they were the flesh of some primeval beast. Atop its back was Kroq-Gar – a searing ball of light in one hand, the Revered Spear of Tlanxla in the other. No plague monk was a match for such an onslaught, and the warleader of the lizardmen drove deep into their midst. Lord Mazdamundi had commanded Kroq-Gar to cleave a path through to the Great Temple of Itza, and he would do so.

To this end, Kroq-Gar pushed ahead, heedless of his exposed flanks, uncaring of the frothing masses that surged against him. The Honour Guard of Hexoatl – a cohort of temple guard bearing heavy bladed halberds – did their best to follow in his bloody wake. In the middle of the Honour Guard stomped Lord Mazdamundi's stegadon. The slann unlocked the secrets of his sun-standard and the unearthly radiance of that golden icon cut through the diseased airs and half-blinded the surrounding skaven, seering their contaminated minds with pain.

To reach their destination, the lizardmen would have to fight through a raging sea of skaven. Lord Mazdamundi was at least a mile from the entrance to the Great Temple. The structure itself was the hub of the geomantic grid – the centremost point of power. From atop its apex, Mazdamundi would be able to smash asunder his foes with but a sweep of his hand. However, the slann needed to gain access to the mystically sealed pyramid-temple – a feat he could only achieve at its main entrance. And the mage-priest could feel his time running out.

The lizardmen pressed onwards, but their progress was marked by others. Directed by senses other than sight, Lord Skrolk veered to intersect Kroq-Gar atop his towering reptilian monster. From beyond reality, another was watching – awaiting the right time to materialise.

Far away in Skavenblight, the moment had come. The barrel of the Morskittar Engine, pointing straight upwards and standing many hundreds of feet tall, sent forth a pulse. And then another. The discharges soon formed into a steady beam. It was an incandescent ray of black-green, about which were wreathed chains of lightnings. It pierced the sky – a hellishly blazing beacon that could be seen by those all across the hemisphere. From savage beasts to the civilised races, all looked upon the unnatural pillar of black light with growing dread. Around the beam reality began to crack and burn.

Up, up, up went the column of fell light, passing beyond the margins of the world.





Kroq-Gar was a master strategist. As such, driving headlong into a foe's overwhelming numbers was not the plan the lizardmen warleader would have chosen under other circumstances. Yet when Kroq-Gar's mind filled with Lord Mazdamundi's thought projections – to get to the Great Temple of Itza as quickly as possible – the saurus commander seized upon the best way to do so.

Within heartbeats, the ancient saurian had organised the thrust – leading the headlong plunge into the plague monk masses. He was counting on the onslaught of his best warriors, and the protective quality of the iron-hard scales that covered both saurus and his own reptilian steed. Kroq-Gar was cold and calculating, for he was created to make war, and he did so as savagely and as efficiently as possible. Such was his duty. If the Great Slann needed Kroq-Gar to lay down his life, he would do so unquestioningly.

Thus far, Kroq-Gar and his ferocious mount had carved deep into the masses. They had powered a trail of carnage halfway to their goal. Kroq-Gar glanced back, and saw trouble on all sides. The lizardmen had made a narrow thrust into the enemy's forces, and that wedge was now completely surrounded on both flanks by vengeful ratmen. To stop was to lose momentum and be overwhelmed – they must fight their way through to the Temple of Itza, or die in the attempt. As the warleader turned forward, driving his spear through a half-dozen skaven, he saw further difficulties. To the fore, pushing through the rabble, came Lord Skrolk and his Pestilens Guard.

Kroq-Gar's savage mount also recognised that one of the skaven leaders was angling through the packed plaza to meet them. Rearing to its towering height, the carnosaur issued a bellowing challenge that filled the vast plaza, echoing off the mountainous pyramid-temples.

Before that roar had faded, Lord Mazdamundi sensed something momentous was happening. Something was very wrong with the world – the world the Old Ones had entrusted to him and his kind.

Despite the mayhem around him, Mazdamundi needed immediate answers. He left behind his mortal shell. Poisoned wind globes shattered nearby, while chanting hordes of zealous plague monks hurled themselves in endless waves upon the temple guard that surrounded his war beast. Lord Mazdamundi entered a deep trance.

The infinite cosmos swirled before Mazdamundi's closed eyes. He unfettered his mind and returned to the heavens, drifting outwards into the pall. The slann's spirit self soon found the energy beam that stretched upwards into the firmament. Even at a distance, he felt its unnatural power. Mazdamundi approached as close to the column of incandescence as he was able, and followed it upwards, although he already knew its target. The slann did not dare approach the cursed moon too closely, for its essence – that of raw Chaos – was anathema to him, and all slann.

The lightning column shooting out from the Morskittar Engine had smashed into the moon, penetrating its crust. Lord Mazdamundi watched the cursed moon's superheated surface begin to heave and break. Then, with a terrible swiftness, the deed was done. With a rending shatter that shook his soul, the moon's mantle convulsed and broke asunder. Tidal waves of entropic energy washed outwards.

The slann lost all sight or feeling of the celestial objects beyond, as enormous fragments of the broken moon blotted the stars. Mazdamundi's spirit self gazed upward at utter ruin. The floating tumble of continent-sized chunks sped outwards, but many of them were drawn towards the planet.

The mage-priest felt the molten core of the cursed moon, now exposed and pulsating – like the black heart of a living nightmare. It radiated corruption, blasting out waves of foul energy. Against its pure Chaos, not even the prodigious strength of Lord Mazdamundi's mind could stay focussed. As he contemplated it, he felt his spirit self dissolve, blown apart by the resonance.

When his consciousness returned to his body, Lord Mazdamundi found he was bleeding – rivulets of blood seeping from his nostrils and tympanic membranes. He was still atop his great-horned stegadon, which was now being besieged. A host of ratmen had beaten down his temple guard, and were swarming all around. Roaring, the stegadon tossed its armoured head as the skaven slashed at it with poisoned blades.

With a small portion of his colossal intellect, Mazdamundi summoned forth sweeping scythes of flame to clear his path. Simultaneously, the slann ran calculations, trajectories, and multiple impact theories with another aspect of his mind. Within seconds, the mage-priest had freed his stegadon from assault and also concluded that the end of the world was nigh.

The eldest living mage-priest had been alive for thousands upon thousands of years. Mazdamundi had spent centuries resolving mental minutiae. The merest contemplations of his vast brain could span many dimensions and last for decades. Now, the bloated amphibian reckoned he had two hours before the impact, with a variance of a few seconds either side – there were variables beyond even his ability to predict.

Lord Mazdamundi was too late to stop the madness of the ratmen, but if he could reach the Great Temple of Itza he could perhaps salvage something of his planet. He looked across a raging sea of battle, with many thousands of foes between himself and the entrance to the temple. Given the state of the magical flux and the thinning of the veil between realms, Mazdamundi had been loath to walk between worlds, but there was little choice. His mind unlocked the sacred path, and the slann disappeared.

Passing beyond temporal concerns, Lord Mazdamundi entered the shadow place – the space between realities. Immediately, the slann felt a watchfulness follow him. Faintly, as if from behind the veil, he heard the sound of mocking laughter. Although his journey was brief, the mage-priest was pleased to return to the earthly realm, fearing what lurked beyond. Lord Mazdamundi now sat upon his palanquin before the entrance arch – the sounds of battle were behind him. A distant roar let him know that his faithful steed of so many years was being overwhelmed and pulled down. There was not time to aid the poor beast – indeed, they were all doomed now, unless he could get inside and tap into the vast reservoirs of the geomantic grid.

Setting his mind in motion, Lord Mazdamundi completed the elaborate mind-trap puzzle that was the key to the mystic gates of the Temple of Itza. With a flash of light, the mage-priest was gone, now inside the long, cool hallways of that most ancient of pyramid-temples.

Back outside the mountainous temple, the battle of Itza had expanded. It dominated the central district, and the fighting had spread outwards, down many of the avenues. The great plaza heaved with combatants, and the fighting started to reach up into the city's heights also, as night runners and skinks scaled various levels of the Pyramid of Chotec. They hurled volleys of throwing stars or javelins at each other, or met in short, sharp clashes. Higher and higher they went, until they were above the soaring flights of terradons.

Elsewhere, a back and forth contest had developed over the spawning pools that stood within the Floating Garden of Bountiful Harmony. Each side strove to drive the other off, with the victorious faction soon finding itself counter-attacked and driven back again by the foe's reinforcements. The life-waters of the lizardmen had been sealed via arcane means before the city was abandoned. Domes of invisible force, harder than stone, had been placed over each of the deep pools. The plague monks, aided by warp-grinder-wielding stormfiends, sought to smash open these mystic seals and expose the waters to the diseased airs that hung above Itza. The lizardmen, aware that future generations must emerge out of these sacred waters, would willingly sacrifice themselves to prevent any further attempts to defile the spawning pools. Like everywhere in Itza, no quarter was asked or given, and countless dead bore witness.

Back in the plaza, Kroq-Gar stepped out from the ruined and withered husk of his carnosaur steed. Lord Skrolk – the hunched and blind rat grotesque – had slain the beast, causing it to decay instantly. There was great power in the contaminated staff wielded by the plaguelord. It was a stout rod, its iron-capped end connected by thick chain to a ponderously heavy censer. Once more, Skrolk began to whirl it overhead. Cloying fug filled the air, and Kroq-Gar could taste his own blood and bile as he breathed in the vile vapours.

Kroq-Gar realised that the longer the fight wore on, the more the toxic clouds would drain him of life. With that thought, the warleader of the lizardmen stalked forward, encircling his foe. With an unholy speed and vitality for such a diseased and tumour-filled creature, Lord Skrolk moved more quickly. The heavy, spiked censer crashed down. Few things that breathed could survive its fatal touch.

Yet Skrolk had reckoned without the Hand of the Gods. Reaching up with his metallic gauntlet, Kroq-Gar caught and crushed the censer, flattening the orb. The poisonous fumes inside would have slain a full-grown thunderlizard, yet the searing light from within that ancient construct of the Old Ones purified the air. Even in his blindness, Skrolk was struck by the purity of the light – a pain that was nothing compared to the feeling of the Revered Spear of Tlanxla being driven through him.

Lifting the impaled plaguelord above him, Kroq-Gar roared to the heavens. As he did so, Vermalanx the Corrupt manifested before the warleader.

Incensed at the sight of his favoured one skewered upon Kroq-Gar's spear, Vermalanx screeched out pure hatred. The Verminlord's maw stretched wide, yawning like a dark pit before it shot vomitous streams of contamination. The entire temple guard cohort behind Kroq-Gar was engulfed, shrivelling instantly, leaving behind only wrinkled hides bubbling amidst puddles of foul-smelling effluent. The vileness washed over Kroq-Gar too, he stumbled to his knee, dropping his spear and its impaled victim.

The Verminlord did not finish off the lizardmen warleader, but sprang to Lord Skrolk's side. Vermalanx ripped out the shaft, his hands burning at the touch of the honoured weapon. Chanting words from the Liber Bubonicus that he had written himself long ago, Vermalanx kneaded the gaping slash in Skrolk's chest. Already the wound filled with malignant new growth, new tumours sealing the hole. The Verminlord lifted up the Clan Pestilens lord and disappeared in a cloud of blackness.

None – not even plague monks – dared step through the puddled remnants of Vermalanx's bile. The noisome liquid melted flagstones, and sent up fumes that could stun a stegadon. Slowly, inexorably, Kroq-Gar rose. The light of purity – shining from his metallic gauntlet – had at last burnt off the contaminants, leaving Kroq-Gar wreathed with a faint nimbus. Once more, the warleader hefted his spear, but it was not back into the fray that the saurus strode. Even as he had slain Skrolk, a new message had reached Kroq-Gar. He was needed at the Obelisk of the Silver Stars within the hour.

Most skaven fled before Kroq-Gar, not daring to face the shimmering saurus. Those ratmen that attempted to block his path were slaughtered. Even so, the warleader realised he could never traverse the distance quickly enough. In answer to his blood-curdling roar, a carnosaur strode through the carnage of the plaza, crushing skaven beneath each clawed foot. Bulling its way through the press of combat, the blood-splattered beast bowed before Kroq-Gar, allowing him to mount its scaled back. In haste, they sped towards the distant monument.

Though none of the swirling combatants around them knew it, the meteorites' impact was an hour away. Already the world was buffeted by moonquakes – the bow wave of loosed eddies of the winds of magic.

Meanwhile, within the Great Temple of Itza, Lord Mazdamundi's palanquin floated along empty stone corridors, drifted down ramps and ascended through vertical passages. While travelling, the mage-priest sent out the most fearful of telepathic commands – the Exodus was to be undertaken immediately. That task done, he unlocked the mindgates and entered the solar chambers. Here, Mazdamundi could grasp and wield the full power of the overflowing geomantic grid. As he rose to the plinth of power and began to prepare for the trial he knew must come next, the mage-priest noted that Lord Kroak was not in the chamber. He had expected to find that most venerable relic here... yet there was no time to ponder the other's absence.

The greatest living mind now began a task that it alone could fathom. By drawing in the great reserves of arcane energies stored within the geomantic grid, Mazdamundi hoped to deflect or smash apart the enormous moon slabs before they could plunge down to destroy the world. His attempt would doubtlessly burn out what was left of the geomantic grid, causing the monuments and cities that marked its nodes to topple. Yet if he failed, it would hardly matter.

Across the jungle continent of Lustria, every slann mage-priest had received Lord Mazdamundi's telepathic message. Without debate it was determined which of their remaining kind would stay to aid Mazdamundi. As those slann immediately began the mind amalgamation which would lend their might to the most venerated of their kin, the remainder began the long-prepared Exodus in earnest.

At dozens of sites all around Lustria, massive stone blocks that had not moved in ten thousand years were shifted. Words of command were spoken that had not been uttered since the days before the first elves, dwarfs or men walked the world. Strange lights ran within the stonework pyramid-temple of Hexoatl, and a hitherto unknown ramp lowered from the Great Ziggurat of Tepok. Rumbling shook all around the Obelisk of Silver Stars in Itza. In the lonely jungle outposts of Chicxulubta, stone stairs opened amidst the overgrown ruins, leading to a long-buried structure.

Excitable skinks squawked and clicked, not knowing what to make of the situation. Certain of their kind – high priests or key attendants – were summoned to enter such edifices along with the slann mage-priests. The majority of the lizardmen, however, were left behind, the skinks' questions unanswered. All watched in amazement at what happened next.

First the stone monoliths spoke in voices of thunder. Then the bulky edifices rose, like great mountains pulling free of the ground. They would have blocked the sun, if it were not already covered by ominous overcast skies. The great pyramid-temples and stone ziggurats hovered for a moment, their true size revealed – for the majority of the vast structures had been hidden below the world's surface. Great clumps of earth fell from their underbellies. The roaring blast as they lifted off the ground flattened the surrounding jungle, sending onlookers scrambling for cover. Then, moving more quickly than any could have imagined, the stone monoliths flew up into the heavy clouds and were lost to sight.

For the slann, it was time to return to the stars.

Back in Itza, the battle raged on across the plazas, buildings and avenues. They did not know that the only contest that truly mattered any more was being waged by one alone. In the topmost chamber of the Great Temple of Itza, Lord Mazdamundi strove against that which his mind loathed most – pure, unadulterated Chaos. It was as if the blackhearted core of the cursed moon was sentient, for it strove against his will.

Wielding the energies of the geomantic grid, Mazdamundi battered at the vast chunks of moon. Again and again he smashed at them. Fragments as large as the continent of Lustria were splintered into mountain-sized pieces. These, in turn, were pummelled, hammered by the mental powers of Mazdamundi. Dozens of other slann mage-priests aided the eldest of their kind, lending their mental might to the ongoing fray.

The strain of wielding such power was beyond the ken of mortal minds. It proved too much as the conciousnesses of the slann exploded under the incredible arcane pressures. One by one they fell, slumping off their palanquins to drop unceremoniously to the ground. By himself, Mazdamundi bludgeoned the falling moon into smaller fragments, obliterating some altogether.

None of the mortal races knew of that epic struggle. Alone and unaided, Mazdamundi's mind strove against the falling moon. It was a noble battle. In his desperation, the mage-priest surpassed feats his logical mind would have deemed impossible. And still he strove on. Blood ran freely from his panting mouth and leaked from his bulging eyes. Every ounce of his being was strained beyond breaking point.

It was almost enough.



Lord Mazdamundi awoke on the cold stone floor. He tried to rise, but to his shame, could not. Weak, he stretched out his mind and felt meteors still coming. He had destroyed or diverted most of the cursed moon, but enough large fragments remained to destroy the world many times over.

With nothing left to give, Mazdamundi crawled up the stairs, wishing to sit once more atop the pyramid-temple – hoping to feel one last time his skin breathing the free air. He nearly made it.

Venerable Lord Kroak – the first of the slann mage-priests created to serve the enigmatic Old Ones – felt his ancient pupil expire upon the stairs. Alone, the mummified relic priest sat upon the pinnacle of the highest monument in Lustria. Kroak had observed the making of the races, the nascent beginnings of the world. Now, hidden behind the serene visage of his golden death mask, he was fated to see its end.

From atop the pinnacle of the mountainous pyramid-temple of Itza, hollow eye sockets tracked descending doom. Trailing green fire, fragments of the broken moon began to rain down. Blazing mountains plummeted into the seas around Lustria, boiling the ocean. Multiple meteors crashed upon Lustria itself. The force of those impacts should have washed the world with apocalyptic fire, burning off its atmosphere and leaving behind a scoured orb, naked to the coldness of the void.

So would the world have ended, covered in fire and ruin. So it would have been, were it not for Lord Kroak.

Slowly, indomitably, impossibly, the mummified hand lifted in defiance. From behind the golden mask came a single word. His was the power cosmic, and energies from beyond the stars were his to command one final time. He could not halt the destruction, but Lord Kroak contained it. Lustria and the Southlands were smashed asunder, yet the firestorms were dissipated. The tidal waves that should have washed over the tallest mountains, wrecking the world in their fury, were instead becalmed.

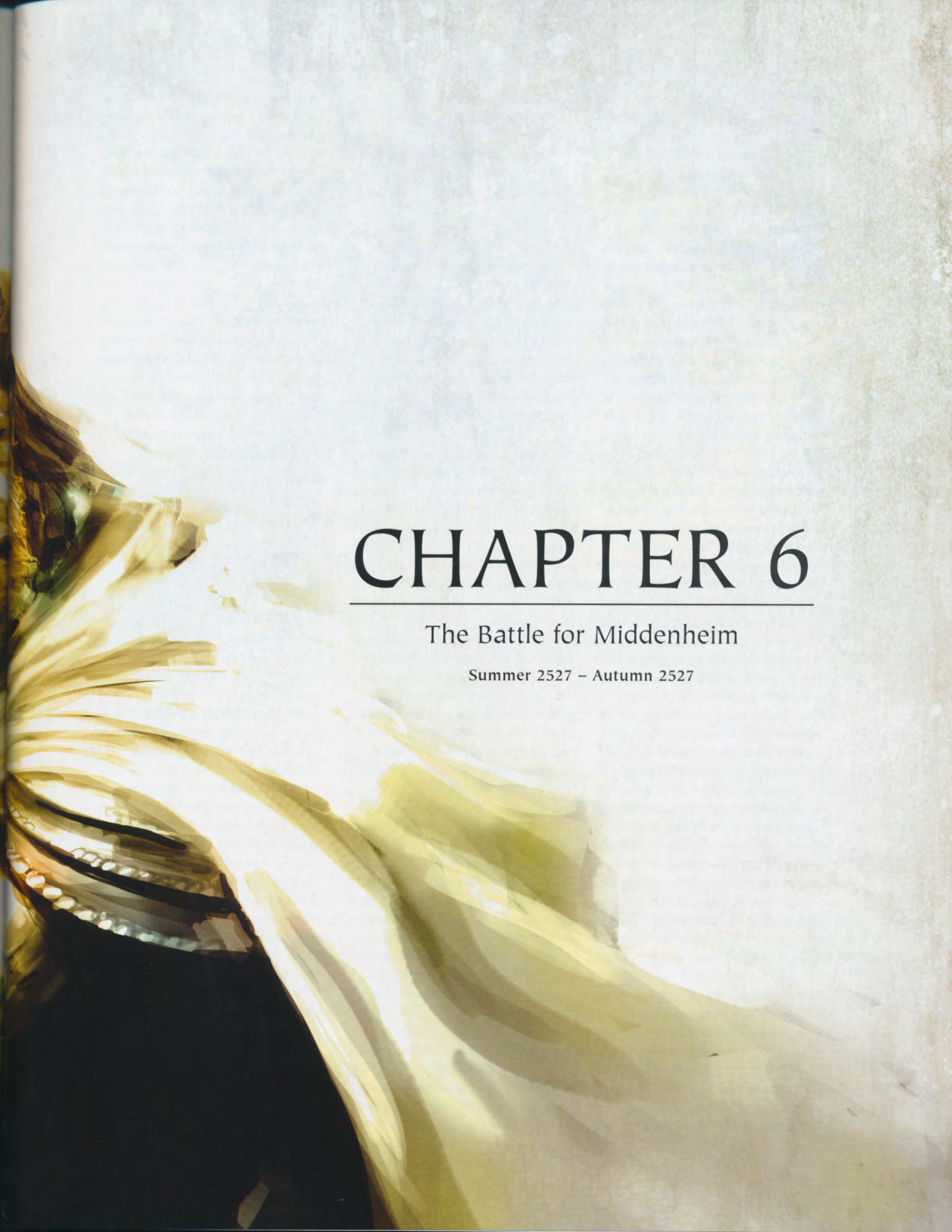
Protected by his Shield of the Old Ones – an orb of serenity amidst the inferno – Lord Kroak ingurgitated the energies, using them to produce several protective force domes. Incongruously, the chunks of earth and jungle under each dome floated through the cataclysm, as Lord Kroak sent them up and beyond the horizon of the world. It was a last selfless act before he was consumed in the conflagration that raged over the sunken lands of Lustria.











CHAPTER 6

The Battle for Middenheim

Summer 2527 – Autumn 2527



Archaon Everchosen, the Three-Eyed King, was on the march. In his wake came a million blades and more, and upon him were the eyes of his ascendant gods.

When Archaon's mighty fleet of longships made landfall in the straits of Kislev, they did so unopposed but not unobserved. Beady red eyes watched from the shadows, widening in fear as tribe after tribe of northmen waded ashore. Soon the old Nordland coast road was thick for miles with horn-helmed warriors, rumbling chariots, roaring beasts and snorting, stamping steeds. Still the warriors of the north flooded ashore, a living tide that overrode that of the ocean as day turned to night. The air flickered with sorcery above forests of waving banners as the countless warbands formed around their champions. Manifold eight-pointed stars fluttered and snapped in the howling wind that drove off the straits of Kislev, mingling with the bloody sigils of Khorne and the twisted glyphs of Tzeentch. High above them, a great band of sickly luminescence marred the dark skies. The shatter-blasted remnants of Morrslieb now formed a greenish-black halo, visible even by day. In the otherwordly halflight it cast, daemons capered and cackled on the cusp of reality, spilling around the flanks of the Everchosen's host in a gleeful tide. Lumbering monsters splashed through the surf and up the beach, mutant giants and slavering slaughterbrutes ploughing into the treeline beyond. Trunks were uprooted and branches smashed aside as Archaon's monstrous pets began the work of clearing a path, a miles-wide corridor down which the horde would march.

So vast and anarchic an army should have taken weeks to bring to order, if they could be ordered at all. Yet all felt the iron will of the Everchosen as an oppressive weight, and bent to it without question. Still, though Archaon marshalled his host with impressive speed, several days passed before it was ready to march. In that brief window of time, skitterfoot skaven messengers fled south. They ran before the storm, bearing warning of the Everchosen's coming to the Council of Thirteen.

Debate raged amongst the Lords of Decay upon receipt of the news. Some advocated a preemptive attack, seeking to mask their weakness with a display of strength. Others argued that the skaven should flee underground once more to replenish their numbers. Accusations and recrimination flew, and the Council of Thirteen was paralysed by panicked indecision.

Not so the true envoys of the Horned Rat. Skreech Verminking, greatest of the Verminlords, had peered beyond the veil and knew the true might of the Chaos gods. Once, the plan had been to devour the peoples of the civilised world, achieving such power that the scions of Chaos would be forced to accept the skaven as equals, if not masters. But plans change. Even the Skaven needed time to recoup the kind of losses they had suffered in the past months, and that time had run out. Now, said Verminking, the ratmen must go on bended knee to the king of the north-things, and offer him and his gods treaty-pledge as servants. Otherwise, everything they had fought for would be lost.

Upon marshalling his strength, Archaon made straight for the northern fastness of Middenheim. His horde darkened the landscape as they marched, crushing the forest before them and spreading across the horizon like a bloody stain. Villages and towns were swept aside, columns of refugees fleeing before the tide of armoured northmen that engulfed their homes.

Riding with his Swords of Chaos at the very heart of the horde, Archaon drove his followers at a punishing pace. So long had he waited to walk this road; now, at last, the chance to humble the cowards and liars of the Empire was near at hand, and Archaon was eager to be about his business. Those bands of Imperial soldiery who stood before the horde were slaughtered with contemptuous ease. The flame of their defiance was snuffed out like candles before a hurricane, even as their bodies were crushed into the ground by millions of marching feet.

Nature itself rebelled at the coming of this army of annihilation. A towering storm front of crackling, magic-laden clouds rolled south above the host, darkening the skies. As this shadow rolled across the land, birds and beasts alike fled before it in terror. Skirling cyclones of wild magic and rains of sizzling hail were the omens of Archaon's coming, their touch warping the natural order into monstrous new shapes. Borne south upon the howling winds, the boom of drums and the blare of brazen horns could be heard for many miles.

So it was that the envoys of Skavendom had little difficulty locating the Everchosen, coming before him one night as his army made camp. Only three beings made up the small delegation– a grey seer, his lumbering rat ogre bodyguard, and something altogether greater. To bring an honour guard might have risked giving offence, and no amount of stormvermin would be able to protect the envoys from the consequences should their offer be taken ill.

Verminking transported himself and his seer ally directly to their destination, appearing upon the very edge of the city-sized northlander camp. The Verminlord had come veiled in shadow, a fell presence that lurked, not quite visible, behind a shifting shield of darkness. This left the grey seer to cower in Boneripper's massive shadow as northlander sentries bellowed their challenges. Yet still the looming threat of the Verminlord's presence was enough to cow the northmen, preventing

them from simply killing the strange intruders out of hand. This in turn allowed Thanquol time to gather his resolve and demand in shrill tones that he be brought before Archaon himself. All the same, as he scurried through the northlander camp with Boneripper lumbering in his wake, Thanquol could barely contain his tremulous fear. Only the comforting presence of Verminking kept the grey seer from skitterleaping away to safety as he witnessed one bellowing horror or frenzied sacrificial ritual after another.



Finally, after a walk of over an hour through the vast encampment, Thanquol came before Archaon. The Lord of the End Times received his visitors whilst sat astride Dorghar, staring imperiously down from the saddle as his daemon steed snorted sparks and champed its jagged teeth. Around him knelt his Swords of Chaos, their black armoured ranks carefully arrayed to emphasise the looming presence of their master. At the Everchosen's side hunched Kairos Fateweaver, staff clutched tight and robes fluttering lazily in a breeze that did not exist. The two-headed Lord of Change watched keenly as the envoys came forward – grey seer, rat ogre and veiled Verminlord. Thanquol prostrated himself before the Everchosen and his entourage, snout and tail lowered deferentially as he began his address.

'Oh mighty Archaon, lord-king of the north, most honoured by the gods,' began Thanquol, his voice quavering despite his best efforts. The grey seer was interrupted by a harsh caw of laughter, an awful sound like brittle glass shattering.

'Two stand before your throne, Everchosen. Two shall you see yet three shall there be! Behind the veil, there are truths your mortal eyes cannot perceive.'

The seer raised his snout and realised it was the daemon speaking. Its staff clacked against the ground, tapping like that of a blind man. Yet its heads both stared accusingly at the envoys, darting between Thanquol and Boneripper, and the shadow-wreathed being that lurked in their wake.

The bird daemon croaked a guttural syllable. There was a searing flash, and Verminking was revealed as his shadow glamour tattered away. The towering Verminlord froze, motionless as a statue while both the Lord of Change's heads cackled once again. Already the Swords of Chaos were rising, drawing their blades at the sight of the many-horned rat daemon.

'Hold.' The single word echoed from Archaon's helm, resonating like a clap of thunder. The Swords stopped immediately, frozen in place by the will of their lord. For a long moment, Thanquol contemplated flight.

Calmly, Verminking moved to stand alongside Thanquol. Then, to the amazement of all save perhaps Archaon himself, the Verminlord dropped to one knee, laying its doom glaive upon the ground before it.

'Continue, little seer,' intoned Verminking, head carefully bowed. Quivering with terror and desperately craving warpstone, Thanquol cleared his throat.

'Oh mighty Archaon, lord-king of the north...'

As is the manner of skaven, Thanquol talked long and said little. Yet the open deference of the Verminlord did much to lend sincerity to the grey seer's offer of allegiance. Archaon listened in silence, though Thanquol was interrupted repeatedly by Kairos Fateweaver. The daemon's questions were sometimes pointed, sometimes strange. One moment the feathered daemon asked what strength the skaven might bring to the cause of Chaos, in the next it questioned what words were inscribed upon Queek Headtaker's favoured weapons. Thanquol answered each enquiry with a cunning mixture of half-truth and guesswork. Eventually the daemon fell silent, its twinned gaze inscrutable.

Finally, as the pallid light of dawn pierced the murk, Archaon stirred. Imperiously, the Everchosen accepted the offer of allegiance. The Under-Empire would be permitted to serve. They were, after all, true children of Chaos, as were the beastmen of the wilds, and their particular talents would be useful in the days to come.

The night's business dealt with, the Everchosen ordered his army readied to march. Thanquol, meanwhile, was tasked with bearing word of the new alliance to the Council of Thirteen. With Verminking at his back, this was a task Thanquol openly relished. After all, to his knowledge Lord Kritislik's seat on the Council still sat unoccupied; it seemed only right that, as virtual saviour of his entire race, Thanquol finally take up that position himself. Yes, he reflected as he prepared to depart, it was high time his brilliance finally got the recognition it deserved.

As Verminlord, seer and rat ogre leapt into the shadowy channels of the ether, Archaon's will drove his followers forth once more. Middenheim lay ahead, the city's highest towers silhouetted against the horizon. Soon those towers would be toppled – Archaon swore to his gods that it would be so.

Long before Archaon's horde began their march towards Middenheim, the Empire and its satellite states were aflame. Like parchment thrown into a hearth, the realms of men blackened and fell to ash. In the west, the plague-ravaged ruins of Marienburg crawled with maggots and rot, the city's once-bustling harbour choked with blackened hulks. To the south, Nuln was little more than a vast pit, surrounded by rat-gnawed ruins. Talabheim – that once mighty crater-fortress – was a stinking shell, its fate so foul that even the invading armies that roamed the wilderness shunned its pus-crusted ruins. Worst of all, the shell of once-proud Altdorf, capital city of the Empire, had fallen at last.

Valten had reached Altdorf only days before the city's fall. In the years since Luthor Huss had proclaimed him the mortal herald of Sigmar, the young blacksmith had grown into his mantle of power. Gone was the callow youth, replaced by a bearded and careworn warrior in whose eyes burned the light of absolute belief. At his back came a rag-tag army of refugee soldiers, dispossessed warriors and howling flagellants gathered, from amid the fires of half a dozen provinces. Many were hollow-eyed from exhaustion, and from traumas beyond telling. Yet they had cut their way through the seething masses of skaven that besieged Altdorf, the element of surprise allowing them to break through the disorganised hordes. The Sigmarite faith of Valten and his men waxed strong in these dark times, and was redoubled in its intensity upon witnessing their Emperor. Valten dropped to one knee before his lord and master, Ghal Maraz slammed head down upon the cobbles before him. Surely, said the Emperor's herald, here was Sigmar come again to save his people.

Despite the arrival of Valten's forces, it was clear that Altdorf could hold out no longer. In truth, the city had been dying since the invasion of the Glöttkin. When the skaven rose, a mighty horde of ratmen had surrounded the Empire's capital. Hundreds of thousands of skaven poured from subterranean lairs, ringing the city in a moat of bodies and blades. They wheeled batteries of terrifying weapons into place, beginning a sporadic bombardment of gas shells and lightning blasts that had raged ever since. Yet the Emperor himself still defended Altdorf, supported by the potent magics of the Supreme Patriarch, Gregor Martak, and the stern valour of Ludwig Schwarzhelm. These heroes had led an inspired defence, one that soon saw the skaven commanders pull their forces back in fear.



The ratmen had since been content to quarrel over the spoils of a victory not yet won, squabbling amid the ruined outer districts. This had bought time for the Emperor's people, but lasting victory had remained outside their grasp. Food reserves had dwindled, disease had spread unchecked, and the end seemed nigh.

The arrival of Valten's army had changed matters. Their additional strength made a breakout possible, and with his subjects' lives in his hands, the Emperor had no choice but to take the chance. Yet there were still many civilians in Altdorf. The Emperor was loath to risk their lives amid the madness of open battle. So it was that Valten proposed a diversionary sortie. He and Gregor Martak would lead a force of volunteers northward out of the city, making as much noise and causing as much destruction as possible. Once this attack had drawn the attention of the skaven, the Emperor and all who followed him would break out to the south. They would take advantage of the mayhem to make good their escape. It was a measure of how dark the times had become that the Emperor did not even argue with this dangerous scheme, though the risk to the diversionary force was terrible indeed. The only concession he had demanded was Valten and Martak's oaths that they would do their best to break free of the foe, and rejoin his column north of Kemperbad. Their plans laid, the Empire commanders had marshalled their forces and prepared to do battle.

The breakout went better than Valten and the Emperor could possibly have hoped. The skaven lines to the north of the city were already in anarchy, caught up in the dying stages of a bloody internecine battle. Valten, Martak and their volunteer army hurled themselves into the midst of the battle-worn skaven with drums thundering and blades swinging. The verminous hordes did their best to disentangle from each other's lines, turning frantically to face this new threat. However, already wearied from fighting themselves, the skaven lines collapsed into wild panic and scattered before the Empire host. Valten led his followers to freedom, with Martak conjuring howling nature spirits and cawing storms of crows to sweep away the shrieking ratmen that remained in their path.

As the sounds of battle intensified to the north, the Emperor and Deathclaw had led an armoured sledgehammer of cavalrymen south. Riding hard with their banners snapping in the breeze, the Reiksguard, Knights Griffon and the last of their proud Bretonnian allies smashed a path to freedom through the ragged siege lines. Behind them came the greatswords of the

Emperor's personal guard and the last proud state troops of Altdorf, herding a great column of ragged refugees in their midst. With all skaven eyes turned towards Valten and Martak's breakout to the north, the Emperor's followers escaped their dying city, leaving the ruins of Altdorf to burn in their wake. Their road would lead them south, pushing through fire and foes to eventual refuge in the fortress-city of Averheim.

In the meantime, however, Valten and Martak faced a quandary. Though they had broken out of besieged Altdorf, still they were beset by foes. Beastmen and skaven roamed the wilds in their thousands, bands of them descending upon the rag-tag Empire force every day. Valten's hammer and Martak's magics were kept busy in one bloody skirmish after another. Every attempted footstep south only took the army further north and west, their foes harrying them until any design on rejoining the Emperor's column of march became hopeless. Worse, Valten's followers could not remain in the wilds indefinitely; their casualties were slowly mounting, and there was precious little forage to be had in the wartorn wasteland that the Empire had become.

It was Gregor Martak who provided an answer. An Amber wizard of great power even before he had donned the mantle of Supreme Patriarch, Martak had many familiars scattered throughout the wilds. One of these, a hunched black raven, had brought him word that the city of Middenheim still held out beneath Ulric's watchful gaze. Martak was a Middenlander by birth, and the news that his home city still stood strong fired his desire to join its defence. Thus, Valten and Martak resolved to press north, skirting the Howling Hills and coming thence to Middenheim from the south. After all, committing their strength to Middenheim's walls was surely preferable to frittering it away in the wilds.

It was long weeks later that Valten and Martak's forces arrived at Middenheim. They had fought many bitter battles en route, and had suffered much loss. However, with every garrisoned village or militia they saved, the army's numbers had grown. Thus it was with a sizeable force at their backs that Valten and Martak finally came within sight of Middenheim.

The City of the White Wolf was built upon a towering, flat-topped mountain that men had named the Fauschlag, or Ulricsberg. It rose above the arboreal wilds of the Drakwald like an island amid an ocean, its dwarf-built walls nigh unassailable by all but the most determined foe. Four mighty viaducts stretched up from the forest floor to the mountaintop, doubling as wide roadways that met the walls in fortified gatehouses to the north, south, east and west. The Fauschlag was riddled with ancient tunnels, presenting perhaps the city's only real weakness. Yet these were monster-haunted, labyrinthine and perilous in the extreme. In their higher reaches, the tunnels were also guarded by determined Middenheim soldiery, constantly vigilant for any threat from below.

It was these defences that had held the skaven at bay for long months. Thousands of ratmen ringed the city. Their zigzag trench lines and burrowed encampments festered with the filth and detritus of long occupation. All four viaducts bore craters and scorch marks, evidence of repeated attempts by the ratmen to overrun Middenheim. The Drakwald had been felled and burned for almost a mile in every direction, the besieging army using the lumber to build ramshackle siege towers or else as fuel for their infernal engines. Still, they had not set one footclaw within the city's bounds.

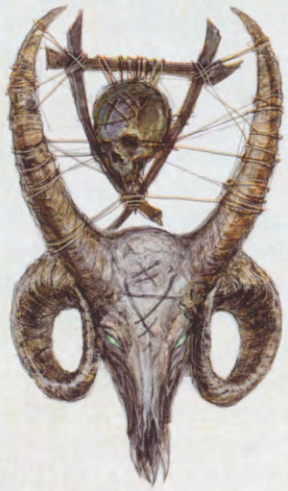
So it was that Valten's army emerged from the ragged edge of the Drakwald to find a dispirited and lacklustre foe barring their path. Making the most of the element of surprise, Valten led his followers in a headlong charge against the skaven rear-lines. His men scattered the immediate enemy, toppling several of their rickety weapons-towers in the process. Yet even as Valten and Martak led their followers deeper into the skaven encampment it began to come alive around them, stirred to fury like some vast wounded beast.

The skaven rallied their strength, screeching chieftains driving great masses of verminous footsoldiers into battle. Ratling guns clattered and poison wind mortars thumped as the skaven directed a steadily intensifying barrage against their attackers. Valten's army began to lose momentum, becoming mired amid hordes of the foe. For several minutes it looked as though the march to Middenheim would prove nothing more than a long walk to the headsman's axe.

Suddenly, horns rang out from atop the Fauschlag, their sound like the mournful howling of wolves. The great drawbridge gate of Middenheim's east viaduct yawned wide, and from its depths came a host of knights. Voices raised in keening war cries, the Knights of the White Wolf thundered down the viaduct. Boris Todbringer, the Elector Count of Middenland, rode hard at their head. The knights hit the skaven lines like a battering ram of red and silver, hammers swinging as they cleared a path towards Valten and his embattled followers. It was Todbringer who reached the newcomers first. He bellowed a warrior's greeting as he hacked his way through a last rank of stormvermin and clasped gauntlets with Valten at the battle's heart.

A great cheer went up at this meeting of leaders, and the united Empire army surged forwards, the Knights of the White Wolf wheeling to plough back down the corridor they had opened in the enemy lines. The

skaven fell back in disarray before their fury, and with a final surge Valten, Martak and their followers broke through to the City of the White Wolf. The irony of having fought his way into a second besieged city in as many months was not lost of Valten. The victorious Herald of Sigmar laughed aloud with exhilaration as his horse bore him up the viaduct toward hard-won safety.



Valten's followers were welcomed with open arms by the people of Middenheim. Cheers were raised and flags waved as they marched across the eastern drawbridge and into the city beyond. Drums thumped and horns blared, hooves clattered upon cobblestones, and the wolf-horns of the Ulricsberg howled once again as the army made its way into Middenheim. Amongst the crowds that thronged the streets were a few old men who muttered imprecations about the newcomers into their beards, but their hearts were not in it. In these terrible days all men were brothers in the fight against the dark, and any distrust there might once have been between Ulricans and Sigmarites was set aside.

The newcomers found Middenheim to be holding out remarkably well, its unmarred streets and hot meals a welcome contrast to the hardship of Altdorf's final days. The cityfolk and their guardians were sombre, certainly, for they were not blind to the Empire's plight. Daring bands of militia and huntsmen had been departing for months, slipping away in the dark of night to brave the skaven lines. Those who returned had told dark tales indeed. Yet the people were defiant still, protected from plague and famine by their isolation and well-stocked larders. The priests of Ulric moved amongst the populace with words of comfort and strength, reminding them that while the flame of Ulric still burned, the City of the White Wolf would never fall. Valten's followers saw something in this surviving enclave of the Empire. Middenheim would be a place to take a stand against the darkness, a seed of hope from which greater things might grow.

Despite all the hardships they had suffered, Boris Todbringer allowed Valten and Martak only a brief rest before demanding their presence at a council of war, held in an echoing chamber within the Temple of Ulric. Upon arrival, Valten and Martak found that the vast space played host to but a small group of tired, uncomfortable looking officers of Middenheim, seated around a huge stone table. Pacing around the table, still girded in the blood-spattered plate mail he had worn during his sally some hours earlier, was Boris Todbringer. The moment Valten and Martak seated themselves, the Elector Count launched into an immediate diatribe.

'Gentlemen, the time has come to address the matter of Khazrak One-Eye!'

Graf Todbringer's announcement drew awkward shuffling and several dark mutters from his men. Gregor Martak frowned at this reaction. His disquiet deepened as he realised that Todbringer appeared to be unaware of his men's dissent. The Graf was pacing around the table, a wild light in his eye and a taut, feverish quality to his movements.

'You all know,' Todbringer continued, 'that Khazrak is the most cunning of all his beastman kin. Yet I know his evil better than any! I have been Khazrak's nemesis for long years now, just as he has been mine. I tell you, that it is One-Eye who is to blame for these troubled times.'

At this, Martak was moved to speak up.

'Graf Todbringer, with the greatest respect, you have to know that it is Archaon, not Khazrak, who is to blame for this mess. He, and these damnable skaven...'

Martak got no further before Todbringer's armoured gauntlet slammed down upon the table. The loud bang shocked the wizard to silence.

'The Three-Eyed King languishes far in the north, yet enemies stand at our very gates!' shouted Todbringer angrily. 'As for these ratmen, what are they but a twisted new form of beastkin? No! You speak of the terrors from children's tales, while I see the true foe clearer than any. Every week my huntsmen bring tales of beastmen on the rampage like never before. I have been trapped atop this rock for too long, compelled by duty to stay my hand. But no longer!'

Valten had remained silent throughout the count's outburst, his expression stony and unreadable. Todbringer now rounded upon him, stabbing a finger toward his chest.

'You. Herald of Sigmar. You will shoulder my burden now. You will free me to do what must be done. I depart before dawn's first light, and shall return only once I have Khazrak's severed head impaled upon my standard. In my place I name Valten as Castellan of Middenheim. The city is yours to defend as you see fit.'

With that, Todbringer swept from the room, deaf to the tumult of shock and outrage that he left in his wake.

True to his word, Todbringer departed before first light the next morning. Gregor Martak watched from atop the eastern ramparts as the Knights of the White Wolf flowed down the eastern viaduct once again. They rode hard, howling as they went, and fell like a hammer-blow upon the section of the skaven lines weakened by the fighting of the day before. Ratmen scattered before them, remembering all too well the punishment they had suffered at the hands of these ferocious horsemen. Before the skaven could gather reinforcements, a small party broke away from the Middenheimer charge, the Graf with three-score huntsmen and knights riding hard for the distant eaves of the Drakwald.

As the distant figures of Todbringer and his retinue vanished into the gloom of the tree line, the remaining Knights of the White Wolf fell back to the city once again. It was a blessing, supposed Supreme Patriarch Martak, that Todbringer had taken only a small force with him. Yet still every one of them was an elite soldier, and would be missed on Middenheim's walls. With a heavy heart, Martak turned from the battlements as the first light of dawn crept across the Drakwald. He and Valten had a city full of frightened people and outraged dignitaries to take in hand, for Todbringer's sudden departure had been a shock to all. Middenheim was a city of unique complexities, from its extensive tunnel networks to the numerous companies of refugee soldiery who needed to be integrated into its standing army. The two outsiders had many names to learn, and much to familiarise themselves with if they were to defend the city whose safekeeping they had inherited.

None of this mattered to Todbringer. Out under the boughs of the Drakwald, a steed beneath him and his soldiers at his back, the Elector felt alive for the first time in months. At long last he was free to pursue the only goal that truly mattered, and soon enough they'd all see that he had been right. Khazrak was the key to all of this, Todbringer was sure of it. The beastlord's death would break the will of the warherds, restore order to the northern Empire and turn the tide in this damnable war. Besides, thought the Graf with relish, that bloody goat owed him an eye.

Todbringer was following the reports of the latest huntsmen to return alive from the forest. Those men had told of a great stirring of beastmen off to the east across the Hochland border. If Khazrak was to be found then Todbringer had no doubt it would be there. Thus he rode on with hope swelling in his breast, ignoring the worried glances that his followers gave one another. Let them think him mad – he needed neither their pity nor their concern. Todbringer knew his business, and was certain that what he did was for the greater good of the Empire itself.

As the hunting party rode on, hate-filled eyes watched them from the shadows – cold, dark orbs that marked their passing. Word soon spread throughout the Drakwald's depths, borne upon the wind by feathered wings and dark magic. Within the day, Khazrak learned that his foe was abroad in the forest. The beastlord's furious braying was horrible to hear. Their game of cat and mouse had been enjoyable these long years, but the world was changing, and now was not the time for games. Khazrak resolved to grind Todbringer beneath his hoof, ending their long-standing grudge once and for all.





Days passed and Todbringer's party rode on with no sign of the foe. The still silence of the forest was stifling, as though the Drakwald held its breath in anticipation and left no air for others to breathe. Todbringer's good humour was replaced by vexation and impatience. He became surly and withdrawn, snapping at his men. A small, but increasingly insistent part of his mind was whispering that he should never have left the care of his city in the hands of outsiders. The forest was vast, it muttered, and Khazrak could be anywhere. Riding out to finally slay the beast had seemed a pure, just cause, a release from growing feelings of frustration and hopelessness. Now, days later and many miles deep into the tangled Drakwald, Todbringer's certainties had been overcome by gnawing doubt.

Thus, when a band of ungor trampled out of the undergrowth and right into the path of Todbringer's party, the old Elector's eye widened with delight. Boris' runefang hissed free of its scabbard, and, deaf to the alarmed yells of his entourage, the Graf spurred his horse straight at the beastmen. Bound by duty to protect their liege, Todbringer's men kicked their own steeds forward, giving chase as their master thundered away down the muddy track.

The ungor turned, scattering away from the ragged charge. Some fled back into the undergrowth while others broke into a lurching, hunchbacked run along the track. Todbringer galloped after them, giving a laugh of satisfaction as his runefang whistled down to slice the head from the rearmost beast. He was amongst the ungor now, hacking and slashing as his steed ploughed its way over the ugly creatures. Several twisted bodies already lay broken in Todbringer's wake, and the few that remained would never outpace him. He would leave one alive, he told himself gleefully, one to reveal the whereabouts of its one-eyed master.

And then, with an awful finality that shocked the Graf out of his savage glee, the brayhorns rang out.

Todbringer sawed the reins as he brought his lathered steed rearing to a halt. Behind him, the Graf saw for the first time the ruin he had wrought, the broken column of wild-eyed knights and huntsmen now reining in their own steeds as they sought the foe. Terrible groaning notes rose from all around, the brayhorns winding once more. With the surreal suddenness of a nightmare, the woods came alive with monsters. They came at a run, hundreds of twisted beast-kin bursting from the trees. Todbringer knew in that instant that he had led his men to their deaths. The track was narrow, a muddy, root-gnarled strip barely wide enough for three men to stand abreast. There was no space to form lines, no room for his cavalry to mount a charge, no chance to marshal any kind of plan at all. There was only swift, horrible death.

With a cry of sorrow and rage, Todbringer spurred his steed once more and thundered into the press. He rode hard into the beastmen, his runefang cutting down to sever a hairy, muscular arm. The impact of his heavy steed flattened two more of the foe, and then he was in the midst of a sea of snarling faces, jagged tusks and rusted blades. Todbringer hewed left and right, screaming incoherently as he killed. Yet there were hundreds of the things, maybe thousands. Rusted, notched blades rose and fell. Blood slicked the mud as brave men were reduced to meat. Todbringer cursed as the blade of a minotaur's axe struck his steed in the neck, all but severing the poor creature's head. With a sickening lurch, he was spilled from his saddle, rolling clear as his horse thrashed its last.

Hooves slammed down all around. The Graf surged to his feet, desperate to avoid being trampled, to keep fighting just a few moments longer. And then the loudest horn of all

rang out. Upon hearing it, the beasts around Todbringer back away, shields raised. The Graf hacked and lunged, yet he found himself in a suddenly clearing space. His heart ached as he heard the sounds of the last of his men being put to the sword, but he had eyes only for the figure that stepped from the tree line before him. At last, Khazrak One-Eye was here to claim his life.

Todbringer spat into the mud, the gobbet red from the blood trickling around a broken tooth. There were no words between the two foes. Their hatred had run too long, and the desire in each to butcher the other was overwhelming. A long, hard stare was dialogue enough for both of them. With a bellowing bray, Khazrak lunged forward and the fight began.

Furiously, the two old rivals hacked and slashed at one another. Khazrak swung his heavy iron sword with all the fury of a wild animal. Todbringer was scarcely less ferocious, his sword-arm lent strength by a potent mix of anger, hatred and sorrow. The Graf's runefang should have given him the edge, yet the foul enchantments upon Khazrak's dark mail robbed the magic sword of its normal potency. The runefang and the beast-forged blade clashed a half-dozen times in quick succession, clanging against one another like the harsh peal of a plague doctor's bell.

Neither able to swiftly end the other, the two warriors disengaged. They circled, surrounded by a bellowing wall of monstrous faces and stinking, hairy bodies. Khazrak's whip lashed out, attempting to ensnare the Graf's shins. It was an old trick, one Todbringer had seen before, and he did not fall for it. The Graf stamped down upon the whip's barbed tip, his next steps a lurching charge that put impetus behind a beheading swing. His runefang met the blade of Khazrak's sword once more, the dull clang accompanied by a shower of bright sparks.

Todbringer fell back a pace, and cursed as the lash cracked out once more, cutting bloody furrows in his cheek. The next moment saw him parrying frantically as Khazrak's sword hammered down against his guard once, twice, three times. On the third blow, Todbringer was driven to one knee, the thick mud squelching beneath his armour. Excited brays rang out around the circle as the beastmen scented blood, but the Graf was not done yet. With the faces of his slaughtered men swimming before him, Todbringer roared his fury and scythed his blade low, hacking through Khazrak's right shin in a spray of gore.

The beastlord fell, roaring in pain, and Todbringer was on him in a moment. As the Graf straddled his prone foe, Khazrak tried to club Todbringer with his sword pommel. The beastlord's clumsy blow clanged from Todbringer's shield, the blunt edge of which hammered into Khazrak's teeth a second later. The blow slammed the beastlord's head back against the muddy ground, filling his mouth with shattered teeth and blood. Khazrak's head rolled drunkenly, his brawny arms slumping back. The moment of incapacitation was all Todbringer needed. His runefang stabbed downwards to plunge through Khazrak's one good eye. The blade punched through gristle, bone and brains. It burst from the back of One-Eye's skull, embedding its tip deep in the mud below. Todbringer spat full in Khazrak's face, seconds before the howling beasts fell upon him in a tide and tore him limb from bloody limb.

So passed the Elector Count of Middenland, the lord of Middenheim, torn to shreds by an army of vengeful beasts. Behind him he left the twitching corpse of his most hated foe, and an obsession finally fulfilled. Yet he left also a blood-soaked mound of his own dead men, and a weakened city that soon would face the full fury of the Everchosen himself...





The very same day that Boris Todbringer met his death, Archaon's horde reached Middenheim. For many hours, the city's defenders had been able to hear the pounding of drums upon the wind, mingled with guttural roars and the screams of the damned. The skaven, it seemed, had also become aware of the onset of this new foe. Lookouts on the walls reported frantic movement throughout the night as the ratmen abandoned their siege lines, some of the hateful creatures scurrying into the tunnels at the Fauschlag's base while others fled south. In other circumstances such news might have brought relief. Now, however, it was horribly ominous – scavengers fleeing before the arrival of a greater predator.

The City of the White Wolf knew no dawn that day, for rolling banks of black cloud swept in from the north, drowning Middenheim in shadow. Torches were lit and braziers stoked throughout the city, their guttering light striving to hold back the unnatural gloom. Sorcerous lightning rent the clouds, crackling sheets of lurid energy illuminating Middenheim's streets with the kaleidoscopic colours of madness.

Below, emerging from the forest to the city's north, came the front-runners of Archaon's horde. Trees fell with a series of groans and cracks, battered aside by hulking monsters. Behind these tireless behemoths came rank upon rank of feral tribesmen, armoured warriors and betentacled mutants who tramped out of the forest's shadows. An endless black tide, they swept out to the east and west, marching on to encircle the city in a living noose of armoured bodies.

Chariots rumbled through the masses, flanked by bands of hulking Chaos knights. Packs of hounds bayed at the boiling skies, their howls jarring with the gibbering and shrieking of caged spawn. Warshrines lurched into the sickly half-light, borne upon the shoulders of hulking mutants. Dragon ogres stamped and roared, shaking their axes in challenge at the imposing bulk of the Fauschlag that reared above them. As the day wore on, more and more northlanders marched into view. And still their numbers swelled, beastmen drawn from all around by the sounds and smells of the ruinous host. At their head came Malagor, the Crowfather emerging from the shadows at last to join the monstrous horde.

Even the most fiery-tempered Ulrican priest found his spirits doused by the chill realisation that this would be a battle not for glory, but for simple survival. This was no

marauding band of raiders, come to burn and pillage. The full strength of the north appeared to march beneath the banner of the Everchosen. Here was an army of annihilation, a never-ending tide of foes against which there seemed little hope.

The people of Middenheim were a tough breed, tempered by harsh winters and long wars. Yet Valten, Martak and their advisors could feel the panic bubbling through the streets; the defenders of Middenheim had never seen an enemy arrayed in numbers such as these, while those refugee soldiers from other provinces had already seen entirely too much. Determined to quell the city's fears, Valten delivered a rousing speech from the steps of the Temple of Ulric.

His voice swelled above the hellish cacophony that came from without the walls, reassuring the defenders that the foe could still be beaten. Middenheim's walls were high and thick, dwarf made in ages past and virtually unconquered to this day. The Fauschlag itself stood tall and mighty, and its tunnels were well defended. Middenheim's soldiers numbered many thousands, brave men from all across the realm. Together, Valten assured his rapt audience, the sons of the Empire would repel the barbarians of the north once more. So it had always been. While the flame of Ulric still burned, the city would never fall.

As he rode through the press of his followers to gaze up at Middenheim, Archaon was approached by a fawning delegation of skaven. At their head was a representative of Clan Skryre who humbly introduced himself as Grand Warlord Skrazslik. The grovelling ratman explained that he was the third warleader to be charged with conquering Middenheim. Unlike his predecessors, this shivering ratman assured Archaon, his failure to take the city was not at all his fault. He had been sent too few warriors, and his force were supported by inferior weapons. His idiot minions had not understood the brilliance of his plans. Worst of all, more men had come from the south, led by a hammer-wielding warlord.

Archaon had listened impassively, but at this last revelation he raised a armoured hand for silence. The Everchosen demanded to know everything the ratman could tell him about the warrior with the hammer. This proved to be little; Skrazslik had absented himself at the first sign of danger when the men from the south attacked. However, what details the warlord could recount made it clear that this was not the Emperor himself. Most likely, then, it must be the Herald of Sigmar that was penned within the city above. For a moment, Grand Warlord Skrazslik flinched in terror as a grating sound came from within Archaon's helm. Yet he raised his snout in bewilderment as he realised that the Lord of the End Times was not cursing in anger, but laughing in cruel amusement.

Archaon despatched Skrazslik shortly afterwards, the warlord puffed up with importance at his orders. He was to gather his remaining forces from their hiding places within the tunnels of the Ulricsberg, and prepare his weapons of war. The gatehouses of the city's viaducts were key to Middenheim's conquest. Archaon had a plan to seize them swiftly, a plan in which the skaven would have a pivotal role. At this news, Skrazslik preened gleefully. When orders had arrived to ally his forces to those of the north-king, the warlord had initially been terrified that this was some elaborate death sentence. However, it seemed that Skrazslik now had the chance to win victory in the eyes of the Everchosen.

Another being watched over the warlord's shoulder as these exchanges took place. It was a thing that clung to the shadows beyond the sight of all, that had trailed Valten and his army all the way from Altdorf. Skrazslik's failures had cost it precious time, yet it seemed as though its moment was finally at hand.

By the next morning, hundreds of skaven had massed in the lowest tunnels, working themselves into a frenzy before surging up toward the city's underbelly. Hundreds of feet above them, the state troops of a half-dozen provinces stood at key tunnel junctions, ready for any attack from below. Hedges of spears jutted through barred metal gates. Crossbows were aimed down torchlit corridors, while barricades were dragged into position atop winding stairs. Gregor Martak coordinated the tunnels' defence while Valten readied the regiments on the streets above, both men allowing the Middenheimer captains to advise them on how best to array the city's protectors for war.

Somewhere between these two factions, slipping as a shadow through long forgotten tunnels, came a thief. Secret ways bore him toward his prize, just as they had allowed him to escape what his kin had believed to be his certain death. Yet he felt no triumph or satisfaction. His heart was heavy with grief, though the theft he planned was a matter of necessity, not greed. His actions might cost thousands their lives, and so he knew no sense of victory as he neared his destination, only sorrow.

Teclis emerged from near darkness and into sudden light. The cavern was vast, the stalactites and stalagmites ancient. They arced like the jaws of a wolf, closing about the eight crudely-wrought pillars at the cavern's centre. Between the pillars stood an altar, carved from ancient black stone. The bones of wolves lay in drifts about the altar, and upon it billowed a brilliant white flame many times taller than Teclis.

It had taken months of study to find this chamber, hidden deep within the rock of Middenheim. Its location had been forgotten by the humans, the labyrinth of tunnels sealed against all intruders. Even the skaven had not managed to breach its bounds, but Teclis had. Guided by knowledge from the now-vanished Tower of Hoeth, and the memories of his own explorations during the time of Magnus the Pious, the mage had passed through the ice-locked tunnels to find his prize. This was the true flame of Ulric, of which the spark in the temple far above was but an echo.

Teclis felt the temperature drop. Across the chamber, ice formed on the wolf skeletons. As he watched, the crystals grew in mimicry of muscles, and flexed as the creatures lurched to their feet.

'Who dares enter the presence of the flame?' The voice was deep and strong. It echoed through the chamber like a physical force, and it took all of Teclis' willpower to stand firm before it.

'My name is Teclis,' the mage replied. 'We were allies once, when the hordes of the Dark Gods swept from the north.'

The wolves slowly began to converge on Teclis, strange growls rumbling in their icy throats. The mage took a step towards the fire in the centre of the chamber, and the wolves followed.

'I remember you, elf,' said the voice. 'Allies we were, but you cannot conceal your purpose this day. You come as a thief.'

The wolves drew closer, teeth bared and icy breath clouding the air.

'I come offering hope for your people,' Teclis rejoined, taking another step towards the altar.

'Lies. What hope can there be without me?'

'The world needs a champion far more than it needs an old and selfish god. Your chance to defeat the Dark Gods has passed. Others must now take up that burden.'

A bellow of rage echoed through the shrine. The wolves leapt, fangs straining to reach Teclis' flesh. The mage was faster still, and slammed the butt of his staff against the cavern floor. Light rippled through the air, brushing the wolves aside and slamming them against the walls. Ice and bone shattered, scattering amongst the stalagmites. Momentarily fatigued, Teclis leant forward onto his staff.

'Impressive,' rumbled the voice, 'but can you do it again?'

Already the wolves were rebinding themselves.

'I do not have to,' the mage replied. Taking the last few steps towards the altar, he thrust his staff deep into the sacred fire.

'No!'

The flame shrank away as the head of Teclis' staff touched it. The wolves howled as one, then collapsed, their icy flesh melting as if in sudden thaw. A moment later, the chamber lay in pitch darkness.

The voice came again as Teclis turned to leave, its tones more bitter than the deepest winter.

'You have destroyed me, and all those who dwell in the city above.'

'I am truly sorry,' Teclis replied. When he at last left the Cavern of the Winterflame, the mage's staff felt heavier than when he had entered – the weight of another necessary betrayal added to those he already had to bear.

In the moment that Teclis stole the true fire of Ulric, its facsimile in the temple far above guttered, flickered, and died. Many of the city's folk had clustered around the warmth of that beacon of hope, believing they would find safety beneath the watchful eye of their god. Thus, as the fire suddenly died, a great wailing of fear and despair rose to the vaulted ceiling high above. It echoed out onto the streets of Middenheim, bringing panic with it. Most believed, with good cause, that it was only through the sheltering power of Ulric that their city had endured so long. Now, with the enemy at Middenheim's very gates, the flame had died. The timing of this dire omen could not have been worse, and the city's defenders felt their courage ebb as the news spread.

Those of a more magically attuned nature felt a sudden absence. It was as though a sound had been silenced, some background noise so familiar that it had been barely noticeable until it was gone. What this sudden lack might mean they could not say, but all felt an ominous sense of doom settle like a shroud.

Below, perched like some grotesque vulture upon a warpwood skaven weapon tower, Kairos Fateweaver gave a croak of triumph. Rising to its full height, the daemon wove its hands in strange patterns, polychromatic light gathering about its staff as the ritual of summoning grew in strength.

Kairos had felt the power of the winter god tattering away upon the breeze, and knew that now was the time to strike. Above Kairos' head, great yawning rents tore the air apart, and reality screamed as it was sundered. Howling gales of mutating magic billowed outward, legions of Tzeentchian daemons cackling and capering amongst them. The host of change gathered before their master, their numbers ever-growing as they awaited Kairos' signal to attack the Imperial city.









In the tunnels of the Fauschlag, the soldiers of the Empire gripped their weapons tight and tried to fight down their sudden, inexplicable fear. Ominous sounds were swelling from the tunnels below, a skittering and scrabbling that grew louder by the moment. Amid the gloom of half a dozen tunnels, the soldiers' flickering torchlight suddenly reflected in hundreds of red, beady eyes. The skaven poured from the darkness, a chittering, squealing mass of mangy fur, rusted armour and jagged blades. Men recoiled in instinctive horror from the stinking tide that rushed toward them.

The voices of Imperial sergeants rang out, loud in the confines of the tunnels. Crossbows clattered angrily, sending volleys of bolts into the darkness. At close range, in such tight confines, it was near impossible to miss. Verminous blood sprayed the walls as the front ranks of Skaven were punched from their feet. Yet their bodies vanished beneath the pounding foot-claws of those that followed, and the waves swept on toward the defenders.

A few lucky soldiers found time to get off another volley. In the tunnels beneath the northern gatehouse, concentrated fire actually drove the enemy back into the depths. Elsewhere, however, the fight would be decided at close quarters. Screaming ratmen crashed into locked walls of Empire shields, snouts mashed bloody by the impact, bodies impaled on outthrust spears or hacked by heavy halberds. In places they scrambled bodily up the state troops' shields, desperation lending their claws strength as they lunged at the faces of the men beyond. Everywhere the story was the same. Men and skaven strove, cursed and spat in the cold, bloody confines of the tunnels. Gore slicked the stone floors, and the press of battle swayed back and forth, but the ratmen could gain no real purchase. Cheers and yells of defiance began to echo down

the tunnels as unbloodied state troops flooded in from reserve to bolster the lines. Victory in this first battle of the siege seemed certain.

Martak was not so sure, however. He had marked the absence of the strange weapons that the ratmen had used to such devastating effect on the streets of Altdorf. As reports filtered in, he realised that these forces were but chaff before the scythe, the dregs of the skaven strength. Yet he was the outsider here, despite being a Middenheimer by birth. The officers around him did not know it, but as Ulric's power had fallen away, so had the stubbornness and courage their god inspired in his people. Now they were desperate for a victory to bolster their spirits. Thus, Martak wasted long minutes arguing with stiff-necked officers who took his concerns as a sleight upon their men. All the while the fighting escalated, drawing in ever more of the Empire soldiery.

Even as the battles in the main tunnels raged, the true attack was about to fall elsewhere. Slipping through darkened side tunnels like a poisoned breeze came teams of gutter runners. One team had been assigned to each gatehouse, the Clan Eshin elite ordered to avoid contact with the enemy at all costs. Carried by each team, swaddled beneath their black cloaks, were Clan Skryre gas bombs of terrible potency. The murderfume they contained had been pioneered by Ikit Claw himself and deployed against Karak Kadrin to great effect. Yet such knowledge had a habit of wriggling from its owner's claws, and half the warlocks of Clan Skryre now knew the Chief Warlock's recipe.

As the fighting in the undertunnels raged, and the upper city reeled in the grip of panic, the gutter runners slipped stealthily up through trapdoors and tunnel entrances into the four gatehouses. There they swiftly silenced those few sentries who detected their presence, poisoned knives flashing in the dark. One by one, the gutter runner teams planted their cruel weapons, slipped on heavy, hissing gas masks, and retreated to a safe distance.

Skaven technology was nothing if not unreliable, however. The device planted in the bowels of the southern gatehouse failed to trigger, sputtering sparks into the gloom before falling silent. The bomb beneath the western viaduct also malfunctioned, its explosive charge triggering out of sequence. The blast rocked the gatehouse above, throwing the garrison off their feet. Yet it also burned away the lethal gas that should have spelled the humans' doom. However, to the north and east the bombs worked perfectly. Explosive charges fired, shattering the heavy crystal spheres that ringed each bomb and sending their contents billowing upward into the stairwells and chambers above. Men of the Empire shouted in alarm as the evil green fog boiled up from below, their yells turning to gargled choking as lungs filled with sizzling pus. So lethal was the poisoned wind that the slightest contact killed without fail. The stairwells of the gatehouses filled with corpses as men rushed to confront the source of the commotion, only to trap those desperately trying to flee upward from below.

Into this bedlam scurried the gutter runners, hurling throwing stars at those few soldiers who had avoided the gas. The masked killers ghosted through the green fumes to trigger the drawbridge controls. Yells of alarm echoed along the ramparts as the northern and eastern drawbridges crashed down one after the other. The terrific boom of each impact sounded like a death-knell to the horrified defenders, while from below the sounds drew howling war cries and the thunder of drums. Green fumes billowed from the windows and doors of the two stricken gatehouses, the gas gradually dissipating. Yet even as Middenlanders stormed into the charnel fortifications, they were far too late. They found only the wreckage of the gatehouse controls, the gutter runners having fled into the tunnels to escape capture.

With the gates yawning wide before them, Archaon's horde swept up the northern and eastern viaducts. Waves of chanting, bellowing cavalry led the charge to the north, preceding a bellowing tide of mad-eyed murderers. Meanwhile, to the east the daemons of Tzeentch flowed up toward the city in a multicoloured flood, the fires of Chaos belching and roaring around them. In their midst strode Kairos Fateweaver, the possibilities of past and future whirling before his glittering eyes.

Frantic defenders rushed to block the gatehouse arches, ranks of state troops forming a thin line at the inner end of each stone tunnel. Along the ramparts, crossbows and handguns were levelled, while hatches banged open on cannon embrasures to reveal the hollow muzzles of guns ready to fire. To the north and east, Middenheim's walls came alive with blossoms of fire as the defenders let fly into the foe. Bolts, bullets, cannonballs and mortar shells pelted the attackers pouring along the viaducts. Chaos knights tumbled from slain steeds, plunging from the viaducts to crunch into the bedrock far below. Tight packed northlanders died violent deaths as cannonballs slammed through their midst and mortar shells burst amongst them. Blood and torn flesh fountained into the air, and roars of defiance mingled with screams of pain.

Yet the defenders had been caught off guard; with the gatehouse garrisons slaughtered, the barrage of fire was far thinner than it should have been, and it was taking time to rush troops from elsewhere to re-man the walls. Meanwhile, Archaon's hordes were driven to insane heights of courage by the knowledge that their gods were watching. On they came, through the fire and the fury, axes clutched tight,

eyes burning with maniacal rage, and the names of their gods spilling from their lips.

To the east the situation was even worse, for the otherworldly servants of Tzeentch capered through the bombardment without a care. Many a cackling pink horror was split by sword or spear, while here and there screamers were knocked from the sky or flamers blown apart in showers of sparks. Yet the daemon horde came on, whooping and shrieking their glee as they gathered their magics.

Valten reached the northern defence line just as the first Chaos worshippers plunged across the drawbridge. Spurring his steed forward, the Herald of Sigmar bellowed encouragement to the men around him. The warcries of the charging Chaos knights echoed weirdly along the high arched tunnel of the gatehouse, mingling with the thunder of their steeds' hooves. Yet Valten's voice was louder, surer. More soldiers were en route, he promised. They would be here any minute now.

A new steel entered the defenders' eyes as they locked their shields and stood firm. A moment later, the knights of Chaos crashed home, their armoured steeds smashing men aside and their sorcerous blades hacking through flesh and armour. The Empire line shuddered at the impact of the charge, bowing backward but holding on. Sergeants bellowed encouragement at their men, urging them to hold the line and fight back. Spears thrust and jabbed, clanging against baroque Chaos armour, here and there finding chinks and punching through into the flesh beneath.

For a moment the fight hung in the balance. Then, amid a thunder of black wings, a bestial figure alighted upon the battlements above the gatehouse. Syllables of the Dark Tongue crackling from his malformed lips, Malagor loosed the unbound power of the wild upon the terrified soldiers around him. Men collapsed, writhing in agony as their flesh twisted into perverse new shapes. Moments later, where once had stood proud men of the Empire, now there lay only twisted, grunting beasts.

As the barrage of the viaduct slackened, more Chaos worshippers poured across the drawbridge and surged into the fight. Valten urged his steed forward, Ghal Maraz swinging, but it was no good. Outmatched and outnumbered, with despair weighing heavy upon them, the state troops broke and fled. In an instant, the fight became a slaughter, terrified screams rebounding from the tunnel walls as the Chaos forces butchered their foes. Still Valten stood firm, every hammerblow hurling foes through the air to rebound, broken, from the tunnel walls. Chaos knights urged their steeds toward him, blades held ready. Valten smashed each northlander from the saddle, slaughtering every foe that came against him. Ghal Maraz slammed home again and again, a punishing golden comet that shattered skulls and crushed armour. As he slew, a golden light seemed to swell around him, driving the Chaos worshippers back and blinding them. Seeing the last of his fleeing soldiers making good their escape, Valten stole that moment to break away himself, reluctantly ceding the northern gatehouse to the foe.

To the east things went even worse. Daemonfire swept through the defenders, leaving drifts of glowing ash and twisted sculptures of altered flesh in their wake. Soon the battle was running street to street, the defenders frantically attempting to rally their strength and establish a new line of battle. Valten was everywhere at once, charging down the foe here, rallying broken men there. Wherever the Herald of Sigmar appeared, the defenders' determination was restored. Knights of the White Wolf galloped down cobbled streets, hammers swinging to smash apart tribes of rampaging northlanders. Cannons boomed and helblasters thundered as they swept courtyards and junctions clear time and again. Middenheimer captains barked orders at Talabheim spearmen and Reikland halberdiers, old differences forgotten as the men of the Empire fought tooth and nail to survive. Still the foe came on.

His worst suspicions confirmed, Gregor Martak had rushed up onto the surface. As he went, the Supreme Patriarch stripped reserves of state troops from their staging points in arched underground chambers. These men would do little good fighting the diversionary forces of the skaven, he reasoned, when the true foe was already overrunning the city.

At first, Martak's decision seemed both courageous and inspired. Led by the wild figure of the Supreme Patriarch, the soldiers burst up into the streets to hurl back the Chaos vanguard. Spears of sorcerous amber struck skullcrushers from their steeds with the force of a bolt thrower. Halberds and crossbow bolts butchered dozens of oncoming northlander tribesmen.

Unfortunately for the defenders, only token forces thus remained when a fresh wave of skaven poured up through the tunnels. Grand Warlord Skrazslik now unleashed his elites. Waves of stormvermin and armoured rat ogres with belching fire throwers for arms swept the tunnel garrisons aside and laid siege to the remaining gatehouses from below. Hundreds of ratmen followed Martak's forces into the streets, falling upon them from behind and butchering many.

By the time Martak realised his error, it was far too late. Cursing himself for a fool, the Supreme Patriarch was forced to salvage what men he could, trying to form new lines of defence closer to the heart of the city. Cut off, the garrisons of the remaining gatehouses fought on in desperation.

Yet with javelins, hand axes and dark sorcery arcing up from without, and roaring blasts of warpfire jetting from within, they could not hold out forever. Soon, the remaining drawbridges crashed down, admitting surging hordes of northmen to the City of the White Wolf.

Backing steadily away amid his threadbare forces, Martak watched the hordes pour towards him down the Mandredstrasse. Guns boomed around him, banners fluttered bravely overhead, and his own magics saw spears of sorcerous amber punch through the enemy ranks. Yet still the ranks of the foe ground forward, black armoured figures chanting the praises of the Dark Gods as they poured toward the Empire lines. For a moment Martak closed his eyes in sorrow. Yet in that dark inner gulf he saw a sudden motion, a cold light blossoming behind his eyelids to fill his mind with whiteness. Distantly, he heard the howling of hungry wolves, and before him he saw an old, stooped man. Eyes glinting like ice from beneath his heavy cowl, white beard rimed with frost, the last flicker of the being that had once been Ulric placed a hand upon Gregor Martak's shoulder.

Wordlessly, the god poured the last of his strength into the mortal wizard's frame. In that instant, Martak knew all that Ulric knew. The god sought one last chance to vanquish his foes, and saw in Martak a wildness and bitterness that matched his own. Here was an outsider, a warrior of the wilds, a son of Middenheim whose powers Ulric could use. Here was a weapon fit for a god.

The soldiers around Martak cried out in alarm as the temperature dropped sharply. Frost crackled across the cobbles beneath their feet, and their breath billowed forth in frozen clouds. Martak opened his eyes, revealing the eerie yellow irises of a wolf. As the Chaos worshippers charged toward him, the wizard raised his hands, the hungry smile of a predator spreading across his features. He snarled a string of syllables, and suddenly a howling blizzard exploded before him. It engulfed the front-runners of the horde, flash-freezing them into ice-bound statues. A thunderous clap of Martak's hands, and his victims shattered into a storm of razor-sharp shards. Hundreds died in that icy maelstrom; beastmen, skaven and Chaos warriors alike torn to ribbons in the blast. The Manndredstrasse was instantly blocked by a vast wall of jagged ice, more of the foe perishing as they were pressed screaming into its serrated mass by those behind.

Yet miraculous though Ulric's intervention was, it was a reprieve, not a victory. Martak, the power and confidence of a god swirling through him, turned to his awestruck troops and ordered a retreat. They would reunite with Valten and the rest of the city's defenders before the Temple of Ulric. There, he swore, they would drive these invaders from the City of the White Wolf once and for all.



THE DEFENDERS OF MIDDENHEIM

The army that stood in defence of Middenheim comprised not only the city's standing garrison but also dispossessed state troops from all across the Empire. During the bloody retreat from the walls, their numbers had been whittled down. Yet still they were a powerful force, a united army for whom provincial origins had ceased to matter.

VALTEN, HERALD OF SIGMAR

Years of war had transformed Valten. The simple blacksmith who fought at the Auric Bastion was gone, replaced by a solemn and inspiring leader of men. Valten had not chosen his role as the Herald of Sigmar, it had been thrust upon him. However, he had risen to the challenge that fate had flung in his path. Now, wielding Ghal Maraz with the Emperor's blessing, and commanding an army of devoted followers, the Herald of Sigmar shone as a beacon of hope against the darkness of the hour. Valten had promised that he would defend Middenheim from the Everchosen's horde. In truth, he hoped to slay the Three-Eyed King outright, and drive his host all the way back to the Chaos wastes.





GREGOR MARTAK, SUPREME PATRIARCH OF THE COLLEGES OF MAGIC

Gregor Martak had fought long and hard in defence of the Empire. Years of loss and hardship had worn his spirit. Yet now the last flickering power of a god flowed through his veins. Martak burned with a cold fire, his thoughts echoing with the defiant howl of winter's wolves. He knew only that he would fight to the last breath in defence of Middenheim, and would make the foe pay in blood for the ruin they had brought to the Empire.

AXEL WEISSBERG, GRAND MASTER OF THE KNIGHTS OF THE WHITE WOLF

A fiery tempered warrior and veteran campaigner, Axel Weissberg did not suffer fools lightly. Thus, when Graf Todbringer announced his intent to hunt down Khazrak One-Eye, Weissberg had challenged his master in the most strident terms. His lack of tact earned him a fierce reprimand, and a curt order to remain in the city and follow Valten's orders to the letter. This Weissberg did, though with all the good grace of a wounded boar.





THE FELLWOLF BROTHERHOOD

Boris Todbringer had taken many Knights of the White Wolf with him upon his doomed hunt for Khazrak. However, the Fellwolf Brotherhood remained, and their determination to defend their city burned white hot. As the fighting had raged through Middenheim's streets, the Fellwolf Brotherhood performed one devastating charge after another. Often considered the most ill-disciplined of Middenheim's knights, the brotherhood's howling savagery now became their biggest asset, allowing them to match the reckless ferocity of the northlanders blow for blow.



THE WINTERBITE BRIGADE

The City of the White Wolf was renowned for breeding hardy, stubborn fighting men. Though their god's power had faltered and their courage had been shaken, still the state troops that garrisoned Middenheim would give their all for their city. The Winterbite Brigade were typical of the rugged fighting men who defended Middenheim against Archaon's horde. Favouring dependable, traditional weapons of war, they bore halberds into battle, while their detachment troops carried bulky crossbows. Both weapons combined reliable simplicity with brutal killing power to drop a beastman with a single blow.



THE WARRIORS OF ULRIC

Throughout the dark days of the End Times, bands of citizen militia known as the Warriors of Ulric swelled Middenheim's ranks. These militia units fought under their own hand-stitched banners, behind leaders they had selected for themselves. Though they had little formal military training, the Wulfenplatz Irregulars and the Drakwald Defenders were determined to hurl the worshippers of Chaos back into the wilds from whence they came.

THE VENGEFUL BLADES

Originally called the Swords of the Sun, this company of swordsmen were refugees from the sack of Talabheim. They renamed themselves the Vengeful Blades in honour of their only remaining cause. By the time they fought their way across the dying Empire to reach Middenheim, this company had joined forces with refugees from several provinces. Old rivalries had been forgotten in the face of such dark times. Now they, and other companies like them, were dedicated to exacting revenge upon the foe that had taken their homes, families, and hope.



Valten, Herald of Sigmar

Gregor Martak, Supreme Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic
Battle Wizard Lord

Axel Weissberg, Grand Master of the Knights of the White Wolf
Grand Master

The Fellwolf Brotherhood
Three regiments of Knights of the White Wolf, including one regiment of the Inner Circle

The Middenheim Muster
Three regiments of Halberdiers (the Ironarms, Peltzer's Polearms, and the Winterbite Brigade), each supported by a detachment of Crossbowmen

The Warriors of Ulric
Two regiments of Free Company Militia (the Wulfenplatz Irregulars and the Drakwald Defenders)

The Dispossessed
Averland Spearmen company (the Lucky 33rd)
Averland Halberdier company (Griff's Heroes)
Reikland Swordsmen company (the Sorrowswords)
Ostermark Handgunner company, (Nordberg's Revenge), supported by a detachment of Crossbowmen
Stirlander Huntsmen Company (the Deathjacks)
Talabheimer Swordsmen company (the Vengeful Blades)
Talabheimer Spearmen company (the Cratercrag Brigade)
Altdorf Swordsmen company (the Greygate Guard)

The Guns of Defiance
Three batteries of Great Cannons, two batteries of Mortars, one battery of Helblaster Volley Guns and one battery of Helstorm Rocket Launchers

The Last Faithful Men
One huge warband of Flagellants.

The Middenheim Faithful
Twelve regiments of State Troops

THE ARMY OF ANNIHILATION

The true scale of Archaon's force was overwhelming. It was an army that blackened the land with its numbers. Indeed, so vast was this horde that but a portion of its might was needed to bring Middenheim to its knees. Above all stood the Everchosen himself, whose will of iron drove his minions remorselessly onward.

ARCHAON THE EVERCHOSEN, THE THREE-EYED KING, LORD OF THE END TIMES

Archaon had dedicated his life to destroying the weakling Empire. He had struck fell bargains with daemonic entities of incalculable might, crushed lesser warlords beyond counting, and completed one dark quest after another to become the Everchosen of the gods themselves. Now, at last, his bloody crusade had brought the world to the brink of oblivion, and the Everchosen was determined to strike the deathblow with his own hand. Archaon had spent the lives of many thousands of his followers already, and would gladly spend countless more to achieve his ends. He would sweep the defenders of Middenheim aside in a tide of fire and blood, slaughter all who stood in his path, and crush the Empire of Sigmar beneath his booted heel.





KAIROS FATEWEAVER

An arch-manipulator of the strands of destiny itself, Kairos Fateweaver sought to inveigle his own schemes into those of the Everchosen. The Lord of Change understood this city's significance better than most, for he could glimpse all possible futures flickering within the kaleidoscope of time. The daemon knew that victory at Middenheim was vital to the schemes of the gods themselves, and was keen to be instrumental in how it was won. Kairos would aid the Everchosen's conquest, but only because it served his own aims to do so.

MALAGOR, THE DARK OMEN

Malagor had spent long years in the shadows, tirelessly working to bring about the ruination of the Empire. Now, with the onset of the End Times, he felt a surging madness in his blood that swept away all rational thought. The time for slinking in the shadows was done. Too many times had the armies of Middenheim swept out into the Drakwald to slaughter Malagor's beastherds and foul his plans. Now the Crowfather could finally turn his fury upon Middenheim, that looming bastion of order that had stood too long against the chaos of the wild woods.





GRAND WARLORD SKRAZSLIK

When he had been assigned command of the siege of Middenheim, Grand Warlord Skrazslik had sensed another plot against him. However, he had been unable to sidestep the dubious honour as it had come from Lord Morskittar himself. Every day since his unwanted promotion, Skrazslik had lived in fear for his life. However, if his rivals had been planning anything they had left it too late; now the preening warlord considered himself the right claw of the Everchosen himself.



DARKH'DWEL

Unbeknownst to Grand Warlord Skrazslik, his recent good fortune had not been all of his own making. A shrouded presence followed his every footstep – a Verminlord Deceiver that possessed its own dark designs. Having flitted ahead of its true quarry, it had attached itself to Skrazslik and preemptively ended several attempts upon his life. The Verminlord did this because it hoped that the warlord presented the best chance of reducing the city above to blazing anarchy. Now, however, Archaon had come, the gates of Middenheim yawned wide, and warriors clashed in the blazing streets. Darkh'dwel no longer had need of Skrazslik, and so had abandoned him to pursue its true agenda.



THE SWORDS OF CHAOS

This mighty gathering of Chaos knights had been Archaon's loyal warband since long before the reign of Karl Franz. Each possessed their own dark saga, for they had been powerful champions of the gods even before they threw in their lot with the Everchosen. Yet Archaon's authority over the Swords of Chaos was absolute; even the greatest of them now did their master's bidding with an unquestioning instinct that went deeper than words. Indeed, some had stood so long before the open furnace of the Everchosen's will that they had lost their own altogether, becoming little more than automata. These lost warriors were no less deadly for all their mindlessness, still capable of reaping a bloody tally with sword and lance.

Archaon the Everchosen, Three-Eyed King, Lord of the End Times

Kairos Fateweaver

Malagor, the Dark Omen

Grand Warlord Skrazslik
Skaven Warlord

Darkh'dwel
Verminlord Deceiver

The Swords of Chaos
A mighty warband of Chaos Knights

The Fists of the Gods
One warband of Chosen (the Glorysworn)
Three warbands of Chaos Warriors (Halfgir's Headsmen, the Sons of Slaughter and Tchar's Devoted)
One warband of Dragon Ogres

The Northland Tribes
Two warbands of Chaos Marauders (Aenar's Blooded and the Skullfists)
One warband of Marauder Horsemen (Oleg's Thunderhooves)
One pack of Chaos Warhounds

The Beasts of the Drakwald
Minotaur Herd (the Bloodfeasters)
Bestigor Herd (the Kine of Ruin)
Two Gor Herds (the Hornskulls and the Savagers)
One Ungor Herd (the Unworthy)
One Centigor Herd (the Red Revel)

The Changebringers of Tzeentch
Two convocations of Pink Horrors, three packs of Screamers and two packs of Flamers

The Monstrous Horde
One Slaughterbrute, one Ghorgon and a mass of Chaos spawn

Skrazslik's Clawpack
One claw of Stormvermin, two claws of Clanrats, one claw of Stormfiends, two teams of Gutter Runners and two legions of Skavenslaves

MIDDENHEIM'S LAST STAND

The Temple of Ulric was a towering edifice of granite and pale winterstone, graven with countless images of wolves and winter. The building was further decorated with carvings and statues depicting Ulric's defeat of the bloodwyrm, his breach of the stormvault and countless other mythical deeds.

Looming over the surrounding districts, the temple made for an easily located and inspirational rallying point. Certainly the men who followed Martak into the temple's shadow seemed to draw strength from the building's size and calm solidity, a fact for which the wizard was thankful. The temple's central structure bore a lofty stone dome upon its broad shoulders, while its east and west wings swept out to either side of a wide cobbled square. Valten had secured these structures against the foe, garrisoning the cloisters and processionals with bands of state troops. The building was no fortress, but Martak could see that by defending the temple in this manner, Valten had ensured that his army had their flanks and rear well protected.

A flight of broad stone steps led up to the temple's great arched front entrance, and before these were massed the main strength of Middenheim's surviving defenders. Deep ranks of state troops stretched across the northern edge of the square, their line anchored by the building's wings. To the east stood men of Averland, Ostermark and the Reikland. To the west, Talabheimers stood shoulder to shoulder with men of Altdorf and Stirland. Meanwhile, the centre was defended by the companies of Middenheim itself, halberds and crossbows held ready for battle. Behind them waited the surviving Knights of the White Wolf, their belligerent Grand Master Axel Weissberg proudly at their head.

Further back, deployed atop the steps of the temple itself, Martak could see the last guns of Middenheim's grand battery. As the soldiers he had brought with him hurried to join the Empire lines, Martak himself took his place alongside Valten, at the heart of the Middenheim companies. The Herald of Sigmar regarded his ally askance, aware of a change in him, but did not enquire further. Instead, he hurried to impart his battle plan, a scheme that turned out to be as simple as it was desperate.

The defenders had counted upon their position high atop the Ulricsberg, coupled with their mighty walls and gatehouses, to deny the foe for weeks or even months. Such a delay for Archaon might have given the Emperor and his allies time to rally their forces at Averheim and attempt once more to go on the offensive. Perhaps they might even have been able to relieve the siege of Middenheim. Yet the foe had breached the walls faster than even the most pessimistic officer could have guessed. Now, surrounded, outnumbered, and with little chance of escape, the defence of Middenheim had become an altogether more desperate proposition.

Yet Valten believed absolutely in the strength of Sigmar and Ulric to aid their people. If Archaon himself could be brought to battle beneath the gaze of the Empire's greatest gods then Valten was sure that he, as the Herald of Sigmar, could meet the Everchosen and strike him down. Such a victory would shatter the Chaos horde, leaving them a leaderless rabble that would quickly tear itself apart. Even if Valten, Martak and every last one of their followers fell this day, the death of Archaon would justify their sacrifice and give the Emperor a fighting chance to reclaim his realm. And so, drawn up in a determined battle line with the Temple of Ulric rising behind them, the defenders of Middenheim stood and waited for their enemies to come to them.

The foe did not take long to oblige. First in piecemeal warbands, then in a flood, Archaon's horde began to gather along the square's southern edge. Black armoured northlanders chanted and bellowed, beating their weapons against their shields to raise a terrible clangour. Drums boomed. Daemons gabbled gleeful threats in unnatural tongues. Beastmen threw back their heads and uttered bloodthirsty warcries. Still, although their numbers grew greater by the moment, Archaon's followers did not attack.

Runners pushed through the Empire lines, bringing Valten word from within the temple. Ratmen were scurrying in the streets beyond, feinting and retreating once again. The sergeants commanding the temple's improvised garrison were confident they could handle this foe, yet Valten's suspicions deepened. It was as though the enemy were holding back, waiting for something.

Suddenly, a deeper black against the darkling sky, a fractured presence, swirled over the Chaos battle line. The beating of many wings heralded the arrival of Malagor. Swept up in the madness of the moment, the Crowfather dived toward the Empire lines. All along the front of the Chaos horde, beastmen broke ranks and charged in his wake. They brayed wildly and brandished their axes as they charged, in a scattered mass, toward the Empire army.

It was as though a spell had been broken. Orders rang out along the Empire battle line. Drums rattled and horns blared. With a roar, the artillery opened fire, drowning out the clatter of the Middenheimer crossbows.

The beastmen made for a mighty warherd, yet they had charged alone. Behind them, the rest of the horde held their place, bound by a will greater than their own. Unsupported, and caught in the open, the beastman charge was cut to ribbons. Volleys of crossbow bolts struck the beasts at the forefront of the charge, sending twisted half-men spinning from their feet with howls of pain. Mortar shells and rockets burst amongst the disordered mass, ferocious blasts hurling broken corpses through the air. A whistling cannonball arced down to tear the head from a looming ghorgon. The four-armed horror stumbled on for several steps, blood gushing from its neck in a dirty fountain. Finally, its body crashed to the ground, squashing several hapless ungor as it fell.

Malagor was dimly aware that his kin were being slaughtered by the foe, but cared little. The Dark Omen had wasted too much time planning and scheming. Now he wished only to kill, for the swirling energies that roiled above Middenheim had driven his basest nature to the fore. Still, he could not fight an army by himself. Malagor cast his gaze across the foe, his attention swiftly captured by the Empire artillery. There was a worthy target for his ire.

The shaman poured himself from the skies in the form of a swirling murder of crows, all sharp talons and blood-red eyes. The gunners cried out in fear as Malagor swept among them, plucking eyes and raking flesh. A clap of thunder filled the heavens, and the Crowfather retook his form upon the top of the temple stair. Malagor raised one hand, weaving arcane signs in the air. Dark tendrils leapt forth, spilling from the shaman's outstretched fingers to transform the nearest crewmen into withered corpses.

Even as the crumbling bodies tumbled down the temple's steps, Malagor was gone again, the thunder of wings echoing in his wake. Now the Crowfather appeared behind the Knights of the White Wolf, and a darkness pooled beneath their steeds. With a sucking roar, a pit yawned wide, devouring those too slow to scatter to safety. Already the shaman was aloft once more.

For a third time, Malagor's form solidified, perched like some grotesque gargoyle on the lintel above the temple arch. The Crowfather could see the disruption his attacks had caused, the slackened fire of the battery allowing the beastman charge to crash home at last. To the west, the centigor of the Red Revel traded blows with swordsmen and spearmen. To the east, the Savagers and the Kine of Ruin had made it into battle as well. Meanwhile, in the centre, the minotaurs were smashing a path of ruin through the white-and-blue clad men of Middenheim. The warherd were still outnumbered, almost ridiculously so. Yet the glee of slaughter was upon them, and they stood a better chance in close quarters than they had at range.



The shaman sought another target, settling upon a band of militia who were rushing to reinforce the companies to the east. Yet suddenly Malagor sensed a surge of power below, a gathering source of arcane might. The Crowfather attempted to disperse once more, but too late. Something streaked up from below, a great lance of sharpened amber encased in jagged ice. It ripped into the centre of his flock-form, and Malagor shrieked in pain from a hundred throats. He felt a horrible, sucking lurch as he was dragged back into his original shape. Black blood bubbled over Malagor's lips, and his hands pawed uselessly at the magical spear that had punched through his chest. The Crowfather looked down, his hateful gaze locking with the triumphant stare of Gregor Martak. Then, flesh blackening with frostbite and blood turning to frozen slush, Malagor toppled from his perch. He hit the cobbles below with a sickening smack, his blood splattering out like the wings of a grotesque crow.

Meanwhile, the beastman herds were fighting frantically for their lives. Axes hacked and chopped, horned heads butted in to shatter teeth and break skulls, hooves stamped down and smashed knees and feet. In return, the Empire soldiery pressed forward, halberds hacking through tough flesh as sword blades lopped heads or opened bellies. To east and west the beastmen were all but done, the impetus of their charge spent and the state troops' numbers beginning to tell. In the centre, however, the minotaurs wrought havoc. Their weapons chopped men apart, or flung them through the air like broken dolls. Driven mad by bloodlust, the hulking monsters were pushing deep into the Empire line, threatening to break right through and into the reserves behind.

Suddenly, Valten was upon them. His steed carried him hard into the minotaurs' flank at the head of Peltzer's Polearms, the halberdiers yelling out a defiant warcry as they charged. The minotaurs, fixed upon their butchery, did not recognise the threat until Ghal Maraz had crushed the first beast's skull. At that, the others turned to meet this new foe, but the Herald of Sigmar was unstoppable. Weaving easily aside from the next axe swing, Valten brought his hammer around again. It smashed the jaw from his opponent, spinning the minotaur off its feet in a spray of blood and broken teeth. Two more beasts fell in swift succession.

One crashed to its knees, its hide hacked and torn by halberd blades. The other caught Ghal Maraz's thunderous upswing to its jaw, its head bouncing to the cobbles dozens of yards away.

With that, the last beastmen turned and fled. None got more than twenty paces before crossbow bolts slammed into their backs, pitching them dead to the cobbles. Calmly, Valten resumed his place at Martak's side. As he did so he raised his voice, his inspiring words carrying along the Empire line. Backs straightened, shields were locked defiantly once more, and men's hearts swelled with pride. Across the square the legions of Chaos howled and roared, but the message was clear. It would take far more than savagery and dark magic to break the defenders of Middenheim this day.

The horde across the square had now reached vast proportions, forming a seething tide of black armour and ragged banners that stretched back into the gloom. Their chanting had reached a fever pitch, a crashing wave of tortured syllables pervading the air. Their booming voices merged with the sky-splitting thunder to create an apocalyptic cacophony. Men of the Empire glanced at one another, white knuckled hands flexing on sweat-slick weapons. The men of the Winterbite Brigade and the Greygate Guard gave yells of their own, bravado masking their fear.

Lightning flared across the sky, and Archaon's army fell suddenly silent. Valten's men watched in fear as the great host parted like an ocean. Armoured warriors, tattooed tribesmen and squabbling daemons were thrust aside, pushing back into their fellows to create a wide corridor. Down that space, riding at an unhurried pace, came the Swords of Chaos. At their head came a figure of absolute dread, the fears of every man of the Empire given physical form.

The ground beneath Dorghar's hooves writhed, sparks curling lazily up from cracks that split the stone. The beast's eyes burned blood red, and its fanged maw champed hungrily at its iron bit. Yet the menace of the steed was as nothing compared to that of the rider. The Everchosen was taller and broader even than the hulking armoured warriors that rode at his side, yet he seemed more than merely physically imposing. The air shimmered around him, the weight of his presence enough to cause even the warriors of Chaos to bow their heads. Meanwhile, the men of the Empire quailed in fear.

The Everchosen halted in a clatter of hooves, sweeping his withering gaze across the army that opposed him. In that moment, it felt to the defenders of Middenheim that all hope was lost. The clouds darkened further, forming an oppressive ceiling of darkness that grew lower by the second. The shadows lengthened, writhing with half-hidden menace. The defenders around the temple felt their weapons grow heavy in their hands as dark despair swelled in their hearts to choke hope and steal strength away. The Lord of the End Times was here to take their lives. What sense was there in resisting?



Martak felt despair crush his spirit. Ulric's godspark railed within his breast, but what was the fury of winter when set against a hatred so powerful it could unmake the world?

For a moment, the wizard's grip loosened, and his staff almost slipped from his fingers. Then Valten's voice rang out strong and clear.

'Men of the Empire. The foe have taken much from you. Your homes. Your loved ones. Yet they cannot take your hope, and they cannot take your faith. You stand beneath the gaze of Ulric and Sigmar, and I tell you that in this hour, in this place, we can still win. Here before you is the architect of all your woes, hoping you will despair at his coming. But now is not the time for despair, my brothers. Now is the time for anger! Now is the time for hate! Now, men of the Empire, now is the time for revenge!'

As Valten's voice rose to a shout, it seemed to Martak that the clouds parted for a moment, and that a halo of golden sunlight played about the man's head. The Supreme Patriarch felt hope and anger surge through him, stoking the fires of his courage into a raging inferno. He raised his voice in a roar of defiance, and around him the defenders of Middenheim did the same. The shout rose to the storm-wracked skies above, and Martak felt Ulric's savage joy at the sound.

In the next moment, the cheer of the Empire army was drowned out by another furious barrage of thunder and lightning. The Everchosen drew his daemonsword and raised it high, Dorghar rearing toward the sundered sky. Then the Everchosen's blade swept down. With a roar to shake the very Fauschlag itself, Archaon's army charged forward.

The Swords of Chaos surged on, the rest of the Chaos horde flowing around their flanks. Black armoured warriors pounded toward the foe, wild, yelling tribesmen running alongside them. Packs of hounds bayed madly as they loped across the cobbles, daemons dancing in their wake. On the host's eastern flank a massive slaughterbrute ploughed forward, gibbering spawn flailing madly around its mighty form. Behind the front wave came more northmen, and yet more, an avalanche meant to bury the defenders in bodies.

The moment the barbarous horde came within range, the Empire guns opened fire. Mortars thumped, cannons boomed and helblasters let out a staccato roar. A bombardment of helstorm rockets fell amid a regiment of Chaos warriors, explosions tearing their armoured bodies to pieces. Tribesmen were slaughtered as cannonballs ploughed through the press. Volley after volley of crossbow bolts thudded into flesh, or sent screaming steeds stumbling beneath the charge. Pink horrors split into moaning blues amid sprays of magical motes. Still, these were merely drops in an ocean.

The Chaos horde swept on, and the men of the Winterbite Brigade and the Ironarms gritted their teeth as they prepared for the charge to crash home. From amid the lines, Gregor Martak twinned his might with that of Ulric. Rising from the ground amid a whirling white vortex, the Supreme Patriarch roared jagged words of power. A blizzard of shimmering ice-forms exploded from his hands, white-feathered crows with beaks and talons of enchanted ice. The spell was aimed straight for Archaon himself, battering the Swords of Chaos with its fury. Though many rune-marked knights were torn from their saddles, the Everchosen rode on unharmed.

Kairos Fateweaver watched with satisfaction as the Swords of Chaos hit the centre of the Empire battle line with a resounding crash. Screaming soldiers were smashed off their feet by the impact, while ensorcelled blades punched through breastplates and hacked off heads. As the carnage intensified, the daemon turned his twinned gaze toward the western flank. Here his mystical sight, so often a swirling tapestry of potential images, had solidified into a vision of near-certain victory. He had told the Everchosen as much, and had been given orders to crush the western end of the Empire line while Archaon smashed his way through the centre.

With a shriek, the Lord of Change sent his daemonic host whirling madly into battle. Pink horrors gestured wildly, words of power babbling from their mouths as each attempted to outdo the next with the intricacy of its spellwork. Magic boiled in the air, tearing men apart or setting them ablaze from within. Each flare of sorcery painted the walls of the temple of Ulric with lurid sprays of coloured light. With a whooshing roar and a foul reek of brimstone, a firestorm exploded above the Empire army's western flank. Men screamed as their skin caught alight and ran like tallow. Weapons warped and curled, transmuted into lumpen lead or howling flesh.

Eager to get into the fight, packs of flamers bounded clean over the horrors' heads. The men of the Stirland Deathjacks shot several of the freakish daemons full of arrows, yet still the survivors leapt closer. Gouts of fire poured from spout-like arms and yawning, daemonic mouths. The fiery jets stabbed through the Empire ranks, twisting men into gibbering spawn, or burning them to ash. Down swept the screamers of Tzeentch, swooping over the spearmen of the Cratercrag Brigade to slice off heads with bladed wings. Through the mayhem strode Kairos, blasts of power leaping from his staff. The Vengeful Blades of Talabheim stood their ground against the sorcerous flames, shouting encouragement to the men around them. Drums

pounded. Orders rang out. Yet the beleaguered state troops were losing ground fast.

In the centre, all was madness. The charge of the Swords of Chaos had crushed the front ranks, yet beneath Valten's watchful eye the men of Middenheim held. Valten's devoted band of flagellants, the Last Faithful Men, charged into the fight, driving the enemy back. Yet more northlanders were pushing forward all the time, blades swinging and flails whirling. In the midst of this terrible cauldron of violence, everything was close-pressed bodies, stabbing swords, foul breath, splashing sweat and blood.

There was no time to take stock of the wider battle, yet Gregor Martak sensed the sudden tide of magic set loose to the west. Gathering his power, he blasted the northlanders that faced him with a flurry of sorcerous ice-crows. The barbarians were forced back, giving Martak the seconds he needed to back away from the fight. State troops closed ranks to his fore, and suddenly the wizard had a moment to breathe. Peering west, Martak's eyes widened in horror at the sight of the daemon-conjured inferno. He would have to intervene, before it was too late. It meant leaving Valten to lead the fight against Archaon alone, but if anyone could win that battle, it was surely the Herald of Sigmar.

As Martak forged away westward, Valten fought like a hero of legend. Ghal Maraz was a hurtling comet, its golden head sweeping in circles to strike Chaos knights from their saddles. Yet try as he might, he could not reach Archaon. The Everchosen was visible across the press of battle, cutting a bloody swathe through the men of the Winterbite Brigade. However, every time Valten tried to spur his steed in Archaon's direction, new foes hurled themselves into his path, determined to win glory by claiming his skull.

Behind the lines, Grand Master Weissberg spat on the cobbles and hefted his hammer. This was what happened if you left the City of the White Wolf in the hands of some puffed-up southern milksop, he thought sourly. Well, it ended here. There were infantry falling back from the fight, spilling into the path of his Knights of the White Wolf, but the Middenheimers stood firm. They didn't balk at necessary sacrifice.

Horns rang out and a mournful howl was raised to the sky as the Fellwolf Brotherhood charged. Crossbowmen who had broken from the fighting yelled in panic. They raised their hands in futile gestures before being ridden down, unable to get out of the way in time. The Knights of the White Wolf howled again as their charge crashed home. The Chaos battle line shuddered as the Fellwolf Brotherhood drove the Swords of Chaos back. Hammers pounded into breastplates and caved in helms. Ensorcelled blades hacked through plate armour, or were driven point first into howling faces. Armoured steeds slammed together, rearing in panic, crushing limbs and trampling the fallen. Grand Master Weissberg swung his own weighty hammer, cracking bones and smashing skulls with each ferocious blow.

Any other foe would have broken and scattered in the face of that sudden counter-charge. Yet Archaon's will was absolute, and the Swords of Chaos held their ground.

To the west, Martak had finally reached the daemon-threatened stretch of the line. Wasting no time, he bulled his way through the ranks of state troops, reaching deep into the winds of magic as he went. He could feel Ulric's energies waning, and urged the godspark to hold on a little longer. This spurred another surge of bitter indignation, and Martak grinned involuntarily as the furious winter god gathered his strength. Suddenly, he was amid the front rank of the Vengeful Blades and faced with an inferno. Men screamed in terror around him, flames of change consuming their bodies and souls. Daemons leapt and shimmered beyond the flames, like a scene from some dreadful sermon.

Martak swept his arms left and right. A wall of icy cold rolled out along the battle line, extinguishing the Tzeentchian fires in an instant. The Supreme Patriarch snarled as the wrath of the wild swept through him. His body swelled with power as the changeling spells of Wyssan took hold. Martak bellowed an incantation, lips splitting and bleeding at the power of the words. Spears of ice-encrusted amber shot forth, splitting whole files of daemons and freezing fungoid bodies solid. Around Martak, the men of the Vengeful Blades cheered wildly as they saw so many of the foe banished in an instant. Martak threw back his head, and he and Ulric howled as one. The sound reverberated from the walls of the temple, rising even above the clamour of battle. His men howled with him, and as one they charged. The remaining horrors howled in return, the ululating chorus a weird mockery of the Empire battle cry, and then hurled themselves into the fight.

Weapons hacked into flesh, monsters roared with fury and men yelled their defiance. Blood slicked the ground in such quantities that warriors slipped and fell, trampled to death in an instant. The Empire forces were resurging to the west, forcing the daemons back by the second. To the east, the men of Averland and Ostermark were giving ground, facing the roaring slaughterbrute and the chosen of the Glorysworn. Meanwhile, the last Empire artillery crews still maintained their barrage, lobbing their shots over the fighting into the hordes beyond.

And then, above the booming report of their guns, the artillerymen heard snatches of new sounds that filled

them with dread. From behind, within the confines of the temple, came the scream of voices and the clash of weapons. These were mingled with the chatter of rapid gunfire, and a terrible chittering.

Frantic, the artillerymen tried to pivot their weapons. They were hindered by a sudden stampede of blackened and bloodied soldiers as the survivors of the garrison spilled out from the temple's entrance. Jostled and cursing, the gunners were helpless as hulking, armoured rat ogres strode from within the temple. Forming a crude line on the steps, the stormfiends raised their many-barrelled ratling cannons. For a moment the air was filled with a rising whine as the barrels spun up to speed. One artilleryman had time to whimper a prayer to Sigmar, heart pounding in his ears. Then a storm of bullets swept the steps, slaughtering fleeing men and artillery crews alike.

Blood sprayed, and bodies twitched and danced amid the hail of fire. Gun carriages were shattered into matchwood. Bullet holes stitched their way along Nuln-forged gun barrels. Powder kegs were perforated, exploding in a string of thudding roars that tore the Empire battery apart. The rat ogres were slaughtered too, caught in the concussive blasts. Yet it mattered little, for over the blazing wreckage swept a fresh tide of ratmen. Stormvermin and clanrats poured down the steps, with Grand Warlord Skrazslik screeching exhortations in their midst.

Valten turned at the sound of the explosions, eyes widening as he saw this new foe sweeping towards the undefended rear of his force. For precious seconds he wavered, feeling like the callow blacksmith he had once been. The Everchosen wrought ruin to his front, intent on breaking the men of Middenheim and tearing the Empire army in two. At the same moment, the skaven plunged like a knife into his back. If left unchecked they could hurl themselves against the undefended rear of any part of Valten's battle line. There was no right choice in such desperate straits.

Coming to a decision, Valten wheeled his steed and ploughed back through the melee. He judged the skaven a far quicker threat to deal with, but one that could cause havoc if left unchecked. He would crush them swiftly, and hope that his followers could hold the Chaos horde just long enough for him to return and defeat the Everchosen in person. As he went, he bellowed at Grand Master Weissberg to hold the line, not even waiting for the man's surly response.



In the same moment, on the western flank, Gregor Martak came face to face with Kairos Fateweaver. The two-headed daemon laughed madly, and hurled a blast of magical flame straight at Martak's face. The wizard responded, forming a counterspell to smash the flames aside. He hurled a blast of Ulric's power at the daemon, a flock of icy wings beating amid the blizzard. The daemon's laughter died as it worked a frantic enchantment, shattering the wintery spell apart. Cawing angrily, Kairos tried to rend reality, intending to hurl his foe into the Realm of Chaos. Martak countered again, the godspark within him unmaking Kairos' spell with a violent surge of power. Now Kairos shrieked, the sound veering close to panic.

Martak lunged forward and raked sorcerous claws across the daemon's chest. Bleeding clouds of magic, Kairos swung his staff in a furious arc, realising too late that Ulric's intervention had twisted the path of fate out of true. Martak grabbed the weapon mid swing. Ulric's power surged down it to blacken the flesh of Kairos' arms, its bitter cold beginning to unmake the daemon's unnatural flesh. With a thumping beat of his wings, Kairos took to the air, tearing free of this savage foe, before disappearing from the battle in a scintillating cloud of sparks.

Cheers rang out from those soldiers who saw Kairos' departure, and Martak's followers redoubled their efforts against the daemonic host. However, in the centre the Middenheimers' line was on the verge of collapse. The halberdiers still hacked and bludgeoned their foes, yet they were close to exhaustion.

Sensing that one last woe would tip his foe past the breaking point, Archaon cut down the soldiers that barred his path and made straight for Axel Weissberg. The Grand Master saw the Everchosen coming, and his expression set in a determined scowl. As Archaon pounded towards him, Weissberg urged his steed into a swift sidestep. He put his whole body behind his hammer swing, as though he were a woodsman trying to chop down a tree.

The blow was a mighty one, fit to unseat any foe. Yet Archaon's monstrous strength allowed him to catch the strike against his shield with ease, the dull clang of the impact almost shaking the hammer from Weissberg's hands. The Grand Master recoiled, seeking to gather himself for another swing. The Everchosen did not give him the chance. Archaon swung round in the saddle and the Slayer of Kings sliced through the air. The blade cut plate mail, flesh and bone, severing Weissberg's arm at the elbow. The old warrior roared with pain and shock, but only for a moment. Archaon's second blow punched through Weissberg's breastplate, into his guts and out



through his lower back. Both hands clasped around his weapon's hilt, Archaon tore the Slayer of Kings upward, opening Axel Weissberg's torso in a shower of viscera.

The death was horrific, as had been Archaon's intent. Men cried out in dismay as they were drenched in Weissberg's blood. Panic spread like wildfire through the Middenheim companies, fanned by the bludgeoning advance of the Swords of Chaos. Men were hacked down and trampled like helpless cattle, Middenheimer banners falling from nerveless fingers. One moment the centre of the defenders' line was a desperate wall of hard-pressed soldiers. The next it collapsed into a howling mass of terrified men. Archaon spurred through the madness, ignoring the fleeing foe. He had broken the enemy army. Now to humble their leader, this so-called Herald of Sigmar.

Valten, meanwhile, was smashing his way through the skaven that threatened his rear lines. The Herald's swift assault halted the ratmen at the base of the temple steps. Yelling state troops spitted clanrats on lowered spears, and halberds hacked through stormvermin breastplates. The skaven fought back tooth and claw, biting and stabbing madly. Valten ploughed through the skaven lines like a battering ram. He shrugged off the panicked blows of Skrazslik's bodyguard and, with a ferocious roar, brought Ghal Maraz crashing down towards the warlord's head. The warlord cast about desperately for an escape route, but it was too late. Bone cracked and blood sprayed as the great and powerful Skrazslik was reduced to a gory smear.

As their casualties mounted, the skaven lines buckled, and then collapsed. The Everchosen had guaranteed them an easy part in the fighting: wait until the foe was distracted, overrun the temple garrison, then tear out the defenders' underbelly. Leaderless, bloodied and facing a desperate, furious foe, the skaven opted for the better part of valour. Yet even as the ratmen broke and scattered up the temple steps, they had already served their true purpose. Archaon had always expected them to die, and had spent their lives simply to ensure that his own forces prevailed a little more quickly, and with a little greater ease.

Valten wheeled his steed in time to witness the butchery of his men. Knots of defenders still fought on, and to the east and west the flank forces were holding – but the line was broken. Only one hope for victory remained, and as he saw Archaon spurring through the mayhem toward him, Valten's jaw clenched tight. Here was the one he had been raised up to defeat, this gold-helmed brute with his baroque armour and blood-drenched blade. Now was his moment, and he gripped Ghal Maraz firmly as he prepared to battle the Three-Eyed King.

Archaon bellowed threats and insults as he bore down on Valten. He had smashed the Herald of Sigmar's army, proved him as unworthy of rule as the Emperor he served. Now he would complete the humbling of this jumped-up fool. U'zuhl, the daemon bound to Archaon's blade, snarled to be released, but the Everchosen forced it back. This was a battle he would win with his own strength, not the borrowed might of another.

Yet the momentary contest of wills had given Valten a second's opening, and he exploited it to the full. Spurring his horse forward, Valten swung Ghal Maraz with all his might. Archaon caught the blow on his shield as he had against Weissberg. This time his brass-banded shield dented under the impact, and the Everchosen was rocked in his saddle. Valten followed up with another swing that plunged toward Archaon's helm. The Everchosen parried with the Slayer of Kings, and sparks exploded as the two weapons clashed. The sound of the impact rang across the madness of a battlefield turned to slaughter. It cut through the screams of the dying and the bellow of thunder as Sigmar's power collided with that of the Chaos Gods.

Valten made to swing a third time, determined to press his advantage. Yet he had reckoned without Dorghar. The daemon steed lunged forward, jagged fangs sinking into the throat of Valten's steed, and with a wrench, Dorghar tore out the horse's gullet. Valten cursed as his steed stumbled, the poor beast's eyes rolling up into its head. The Herald of Sigmar had but a second to throw himself clear. He landed hard on the steps of the temple as his horse collapsed, its corpse trampled beneath Dorghar's flaming hooves.

Archaon spurred his steed forward once again, leaning out to stab his blade down at the fallen Valten. The daemonsword met Ghal Maraz's haft, and the Herald of Sigmar surged back to his feet. Valten's return swing caught Dorghar full in the flank, leaving a bloody dent in its ribs and causing the daemon beast to cry in pain. With a roar of outrage, Archaon hacked down at Valten again and again. The Herald of Sigmar blocked the first blow, then sidestepped the second. Archaon's next strike cut a bloody rent in his shoulder. Valten rallied, another blow clanging from the Everchosen's shield, but Archaon's riposte opened a bloody slash across Valten's breastplate.

For a moment, Valten stumbled and seemed about to fall. Yet once again, those who watched the desperate fight seemed to see a golden light blossom about him. Fresh energy flooded Valten's limbs, and he rallied, planting his feet and determinedly hefting his hammer as he awaited the Everchosen's next assault. Archaon, for his part, raised the Slayer of Kings high, preparing to end Valten's defiance for good.

Gregor Martak could feel something terrible gathering upon the winds of magic, a malignant presence that grew stronger by the second. Fighting his way back through the scrum of panicking soldiers toward its source, he saw Archaon looming over Valten.

For a moment he stared at the frozen tableaux – the Herald of Sigmar standing resolute upon the steps of Ulric's temple, the Lord of the End Times raising his blade to strike him down. A part of Martak's mind was still hunting for the sorcerous threat. Yet now his rational thoughts were buried beneath Ulric's avalanche of fury as the godspark beheld the Everchosen before the very steps of his temple.

'Stay your hand, servant of ruin!' roared Martak, Ulric's booming voice interwoven with his own. 'This is my city. You will despoil it with your foul presence no longer!'

Ignoring the wizard, Archaon aimed another ferocious cut at his foe, the Herald of Sigmar knocked sprawling back onto the step.

At that moment, from the corner of his eye, Martak saw the shadows in the temple doorway solidify. The sense of wrongness focussed upon that point, an ancient evil bursting through the weave of the world itself. Where before had been empty space, now there was something vast and verminous. Martak's eyes widened at the glint of a wicked blade.

'Valten! At your back!' His warning seemed to roll from his tongue with the treacle-slow speed of a nightmare. The Herald of Sigmar, still hauling himself back to his feet, began to turn. Martak grasped for a spell. Both moved too slowly, far too slowly.

The Verminlord's triple blade hissed as it whipped through the air and struck Valten cleanly in the neck. The Herald of Sigmar's noble head tumbled from his shoulders, eyes wide with shock.

Martak's cry of horror mingled with Archaon's roar of outrage as Valten's lifeless body crumpled to the steps. From the shadows came a hissing voice, its sound like the scurrying of myriad rats.

'So die all who defy the will of the Horned Rat!'

Whatever else the Verminlord had to say for itself was lost in a barrage of icy winds and amber shards. It took Martak a moment to realise it was he who had unleashed the spell, as a howling gale coated the temple steps in ice. Yet the rat daemon was already gone, vanishing in a swirl of shadow and leaving nothing but mocking laughter on the wind.

Martak reeled as the scale of his failure crashed down upon him. Valten had been slain, and he, Supreme Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic, host to the last spark of Ulric's godly power, had been unable to prevent it. Around him, Middenheim's defenders were being slaughtered, beset by enemies from every side. Chaos warriors in heavy plate hacked down terrified men, lopping off limbs and heads as they chanted praise to the Dark Gods. Hideous spawn lurched through the carnage, flailing appendages snatching up uniformed men and tearing them apart, or stuffing them screaming into fang-filled mouths. Heavy northlander javelins thudded into the backs of fleeing soldiers, pitching them off their feet. The sky buckled and the clouds tore as sorcerous lightning lashed out again and again, called down by gleeful convocations of daemons. It caved in a portion of the temple dome with an explosive boom, and set fire to roofs all across the stricken city.

Amid all this horror, Martak had eyes only for Archaon. The city might be lost, but if he could kill the Lord of the End Times then all this sacrifice might yet be worth it. Gathering the last reserves of Ulric's strength, Martak hurled a great bolt of amber and ice at Archaon's chest. The Eye of Sheerian flared on the Everchosen's brow, and with shocking speed he smashed the spear from the air with his sword.

Already Martak was hurling another spear, and another. As he flung the magical projectiles he howled a wordless, wrenching sound of grief and denial. Yet Archaon rode steadily closer, Martak's spells shattering off his shield or smashing to shards against his baroque armour. Dorghar's hooves scraped sparks from stone as each impact threatened to push the beast back. Still Archaon advanced, shrugging off the worst that Martak could hurl at him.

The Everchosen loomed over Martak, and the Supreme Patriarch felt the hungry regard of the gods themselves settle upon him. It was crushing, a terrible weight that bore him to his knees. Yet still the godspark fought and raged. Martak raised one shaking hand, conjuring the beginnings of a whirling storm of ice-shards. The power of Ulric howled through him one last time, a sharp, cold ache. He embraced it with the desperation of a drowning man clutching at driftwood. Shuddering, eyes shining white and hoarfrost crackling across his skin, Gregor Martak forced himself to his feet. As he did, the whirling ice storm gathered strength, building before his outstretched hands. Ice-crows shrieked and cawed amongst the growing vortex, whirling around one another in a mad storm of frost-talons and jagged white wings.

Dorghar reared back, pawing the air frantically as the wizard's power surged. Yet Archaon simply readied his blade to strike. With a shuddering cry, Martak unleashed his last, greatest spell. All of Ulric's fading strength drove the blizzard forward to eviscerate the Everchosen with

a million razor shards. The roaring blizzard engulfed Archaon, battering his armoured body and tearing at his cloak. The Everchosen vanished altogether amid the maelstrom, his form wreathed in a maddened whirlwind of cawing shapes and ice-shard blades that would have torn a whole regiment of lesser warriors to shreds. Yet Archaon bore the mantle of four mighty gods, ascendant beings of infinite power. Martak had only the last embittered spark of one. Martak felt a moment of elation, before the Everchosen rode out of the whirling storm as it died away to nothing in his wake.

Archaon laughed, a hard, mocking boom that drowned Martak's howl of frustration. Too exhausted to attempt another spell, Gregor Martak dragged a dagger from his belt and hurled himself at the Everchosen. Dorghar kicked out and struck the weapon from his hand, breaking the wizard's wrist with a dry crack. As Martak stumbled back, Archaon leant forward and rammed his sword straight through his opponent's chest. Almost casually, he twisted the blade and dragged it free, hot blood spilling from the wound as the Supreme Patriarch fell to his knees. Gregor Martak bubbled a final, defiant curse, staring up at the Everchosen with hate-filled eyes. In response, Archaon swept his blade down once more, lopping the wizard's head from his shoulders with a single blow. Martak's headless corpse slumped forward, one more carcass amongst countless others. Archaon brandished the Slayer of Kings high, roaring with savage triumph as a barrage of lightning exploded overhead.

The army that had stood with Valten against the Everchosen's horde was no more, overrun or else fleeing into the streets in disordered bands. The heroes who had led the valiant defence were slain to a man, their hopes of victory naught but ash on the breeze. Middenheim, the ancient City of the White Wolf, had fallen.









At the heart of Sylvania, looming above a bleak and blasted landscape, stood the Black Pyramid of Nagash. It rose from amid a dark morass of death magic, the energies of Shyish swirling about the pyramid's flanks in a great lake. Down within the structure's depths, cloth whispered against stone as Arkhan the Black paced solemnly through the darkness. He approached his slumbering master with a care that owed more to reverence than trepidation.

The liche felt the surging death magic rippling along the chamber walls, flowing in icy waves into Nagash's towering sarcophagus. From amid that nexus of power, green witchfires flared in the darkness, fixing Arkhan with a cold stare.

'My lord,' the liche began, 'word comes from the north. The Everchosen is on the march. Middenheim has fallen.'

The silence drew out, the echoes of Arkhan's words swallowed by the shifting darkness. Nagash's reply, when it came, rolled like thunder.

I HAVE SENSED THIS. THE WINTER GOD IS SLAIN, HIS ESSENCE GONE BEYOND EVEN MY REACH.

Arkhan bowed his head solemnly. 'Then one god fewer remains to challenge your supremacy, my lord.'

Once again, silence settled upon Arkhan like dust, stretching out for long minutes. The liche's patience was infinite, and he would happily have waited on his knees forever if his master willed it thus. However, after a time he began to suspect that he may have been dismissed. Yet as Arkhan stirred himself to withdraw, Nagash's stentorian tones shook the chamber once more.

MATTERS MOVE SWIFTLY. THE GODS OF CHAOS FEAR MY POWER. GO. RAISE MORE WARRIORS FOR MY HOSTS. THE FINAL BATTLE APPROACHES, ARKHAN.

So commanded, the liche hurried from his master's chamber. A battle like no other was coming, he knew, but when all was done it would be Nagash that remained, the last god ruling over a world of the dead.

The City of the White Wolf lay in ruins. Word of the tragedy spread via wizards' familiars, word of mouth or desperate messengers. In Averheim, outriders brought word of Middenheim's fall directly to the Emperor, who swore the men to secrecy there and then. Only a few loyal advisers were entrusted with this information, for if the tale were to become public knowledge on the streets of Averheim it would likely kill what little hope remained.

Beneath the boughs of Athel Loren, the news of Middenheim's fall broke with little fanfare. Naieth the Prophetess had witnessed the city's last, desperate hours. Yet the problems of men were not the problems of the elves, not when matters had become so desperate. Only Lileath saw a deeper significance in Middenheim's destruction, and even then she cared only for Teclis' involvement in the matter. The dwarfs, meanwhile, remained almost entirely ignorant of the city's fall. Even if the news could have reached them within their shrinking enclaves, they would have cared little. The destruction of a human city, even one so great as Middenheim, was nothing when set against the fall of their own ancient karaks. Regardless, none who heard the tidings had the power to visit retribution upon Middenheim's despoilers. The city's loss was beyond the strength of any to avenge.

In the wake of the slaughter wrought by Archaon and his army, the last defenders of Middenheim had scattered. Some had been cut off from the muster before the temple, fighting their own battles with the reaving bands that ran wild through the streets. Others had survived the battle, escaping into the surrounding streets. Some disappeared into the caves, or tried to fight their way out along the viaducts. Others holed themselves up in the most defensible of the city's remaining structures, garrisons fortifying locations such as the House of Coin, the Tower of Wolves and the Middenheim Brewery.

These choices had availed them naught. The state troops who tried to fight their way out had found themselves battling upriver through a flood tide of foes. Most had been hacked apart, or had leapt screaming from the viaducts' heights, falling to their deaths upon the rocks far below. Those who sought safety in the tunnels had been cut off below ground, swiftly becoming lost in the cold darkness of the Fauschlag. Their fate had been a horrible one, devoured by the swarms of skaven that still haunted the subterranean maze. Those who sought to hold out within the city's bounds suffered worst, surrounded and besieged in ill-provisioned prisons of their own making. The few who were not rooted out or burned alive fell soon enough to sickness or simple despair.

Middenheim now belonged to the Dark Gods. The skies still boiled with madness, a perpetual storm tearing the heavens asunder. The fury of the maelstrom above was matched by the destruction unleashed below. Corpses were piled high into gory mountains of carrion that rivalled the city walls in height and, with no ceremony, were set alight. Northlanders looted freely, and brawls broke out over the choicest spoils. In the first days after the city's fall, all-out war had loomed between the greatest Chaos warbands. Archaon had allowed hostilities to rage for a time, permitting his subjects to winnow out the weakest of their number. On the third day, and

in the full knowledge that some would ignore his commands, the Everchosen issued an edict for the infighting to cease. On the fourth he loosed the Swords of Chaos into the streets, with orders to crush those who had ignored his commands. Few dared defy Archaon's will after that.

The symbols of the Dark Gods were everywhere. They were daubed on walls, painted in blood and sorcerous pigments. They were scorched into ritual circles adorning courtyards, or the stone flags of public buildings. They were carved into the rotting flesh of the myriad dead. Middenheim had not simply been sacked, it had been defiled. Centuries of order were overturned in a matter of days, replaced with howling Chaos. What once had been a bastion of hope was now a symbol of the horrors that lay in wait for the rest of the Empire.

Above the city's gatehouses, the crow-pecked corpses of the Fellwolf Brotherhood adorned black iron spikes. Kairos' daemons had infested several of the city's outer districts, their presence warping streets and buildings into twisted and impossible shapes. Many other structures had been torn down by the invaders, or transformed into shrines dedicated to the Dark Gods. Others still had been claimed by northlander chieftains. Ragged standards flapped above shattered roofs, leaving none in doubt as to the owners of these lairs.

Archaon's army was so vast that the conquered city could contain but a fraction of its true numbers. Outside lay the main encampment, a heaving ocean of anarchy that spread out for miles around the feet of the Fauschlag. The Drakwald's eaves had retreated still further, countless trees axe-hewn or simply torn up by their roots. Bonfires burned throughout the camp, scattered infernos that filled the air with stinging sparks, and the acrid stink of wood smoke and burning flesh. Northlanders and beastmen beyond count made up the encamped host, and their numbers swelled daily. Every few hours another warband would emerge from the forest fringes, beastmen or northlander tribesmen drawn to the dark beacon of Archaon's power.

Skaven, too, moved among the masses. Although the last of Grand Warlord Skrazslik's clawpack had been scattered by Valten's hammer, many more ratmen had found their way north to join the horde. These reinforcements had been sent by order of the Council of Thirteen and at the suggestion of none other than Grey Seer Thanquol himself, a gesture of apparent goodwill and solidity.

Amongst the sea of warriors were islands of iron spikes and rusted chains. Here were the slave pens – vast enclosures that contained thousands. The majority of the slaves were human, captured during the sack of Middenheim, or else taken from the towns and villages of the surrounding countryside. Yet more luckless captives were herded into the pens every day, brought as tribute by newly arrived warbands. Huddled in the mud, whipped and beaten, many captives sobbed and shivered. Some simply stared, glassy-eyed, into the middle distance. Most wondered why they had not simply been killed already, while simultaneously dreading the answer to their question.

All across Middenheim, underpinning the celebrations of the victors and the misery of the defeated, was a sense of taut anticipation. The Emperor yet lived, or so rumour had it. While he survived, the Empire survived with him. Moreover, none knew precisely the nature of Archaon's next move. Middenheim was but a step upon a longer road, one that the Everchosen must surely tread very soon, or else face the anger of the Dark Gods. Yet days passed, and Archaon made no move to leave the shattered city. Instead, he claimed the Temple of Ulric as his kingly hall, and brooded within its silent walls.



Archaon Everchosen sat upon a throne of skulls at the heart of a desecrated temple, and contemplated the ruin he had wrought.

He had replaced prayers and hymns with the screams of the damned. He had doused the flame of hope with shadow and blood. Statues had been hurled down and smashed to ruin, daubed with profane symbols. Mosaic floors had vanished beneath a thick layer of gore and skulls. Archaon had ordered the vaulted ceiling of the temple's central chamber hung with hooked iron chains. From many of these hung the bodies of Middenheim's defenders. Most were long dead. Some, the truly unlucky ones, were not.

A great pit dominated the chamber's floor, where once had stood rows of pews. This pit was full to the brim with bubbling blood, and a foul vapour rose from it in billowing clouds. Archaon's throne overlooked the pit, sat upon the dais where once had burned the flame of Ulric itself. Set into one armrest was the freshly flensed skull of Valten. Atop the throne, clasped in brass daemon claws, Ghal Maraz was displayed as a trophy for all to see.

The Swords of Chaos stood in silent rows around the dais. They lined the approach from the temple's arched entrance, up to Archaon's macabre throne. The sheer physical presence of the assembled knights was palpable. Archaon knew that, should the need arise, he could best any of these mighty warriors, yet still the fear they evoked in others was gratifying.

The Swords turned their heads toward the temple entrance as Vilitch the Curseling strode up the steps. He cut a distinctive figure. The brawny warrior, armoured in baroque plate emblazoned with the mark of Tzeentch. The hideous, maggot-like conjoined twin sprouting from one shoulder, eyeless head darting as he directed his mindless brother's muscled form. Beneath his helm, Archaon's lip curled in distaste. The gifts of the gods were often strange, but this worm-like sorcerer and his golem brother offended Archaon's warrior sensibilities. It was clear that the dislike was mutual; the Curseling had answered Archaon's summons, though just slowly enough to imply insult. Still, Vilitch appeared to wilt somewhat beneath the steady regard of Archaon's bodyguards. The Curseling hesitated at the edge of the fire-lit gloom. Archaon left him there for long moments before acknowledging his presence.

Finally, the Everchosen's voice rolled through the cavernous space, clear and hard as the clash of blade on armour.

'Approach, Curseling'.

Posture submissive, hands well away from his weapons, Vilitch the Curseling walked between the menacing rows of Chaos knights. He dropped to one knee before Archaon's throne. While his helmeted head remained lowered in deference, the Curseling's eyeless cranium tilted up toward Archaon. Its lips parted in an obsequious, fang-filled smile. Vilitch's voice was a whine that echoed weirdly and grated upon Archaon's nerves.

'Hail Archaon, Lord of the End Times, Three-Eyed King, Everchosen of the very Gods themselves! Oh almighty master, what would you have of this humble servant?'

To Vilitch's evident surprise, it was not Archaon that answered. A huge, wiry shape unfolded itself from the scant shadows behind the Everchosen's throne. Kairos Fateweaver shuffled forth to stand beside Archaon's throne.

'You are a loyal servant of mighty Tzeentch, are you not, Vilitch?' The daemon's voice was a warped croak, yet Vilitch heard the symphony of subtle chords that resonated behind it. Here was a creature of immortal cunning, and Vilitch paused before giving his answer. Archaon thought the twisted sorcerer seemed suddenly more cautious, as though



only now realising the depths of the waters in which he swam.

'I am a loyal servant of the ruinous powers, great Fateweaver, surely unworthy of your divine notice. It was Tzeentch who saw fit to bless me with power. Thus do I owe him my first and most binding allegiance. Yet, so too do I pay homage to the Everchosen, for what are the words of mighty Archaon but the utterances of the gods?'

Kairos' heads nodded slowly.

'You see, Everchosen? Here is one whose loyalty is absolute, yet whose mind is as sharp as a blade. It is as I said. The Curseling will carry Averheim in your name. You need not trouble yourself with a long march south. Not when you have... other duties.'

Kairos' words carried a hint of menace, yet Archaon's response was coldly amused.

'I do not question this creature's loyalty for a second, Fateweaver. It is to himself. Are not all the lackeys of Tzeentch schemers at heart?'

Kairos' feathers ruffled at this, and his shoulders hunched.

'Have a care, Everchosen. The gods hear all.'

'You wish me to send the Curseling south to root the Emperor from his rat-hole?' continued Archaon, as though Kairos had not spoken. 'In whose name would he do this deed? Mine? Or yours?'

Kairos croaked angrily, but Archaon cut him off.

'You take every chance to remind me of my debt to the gods, daemon. It is as though you believe I have forgotten it. Perhaps you do not think me worthy?'

The daemon returned Archaon's stare, gaze inscrutable.

'You are the Everchosen of the Gods, o Three-Eyed King. It does not matter what I think. So long as you fulfil your sworn purpose.'

For a long moment, the silence spun out. Screams and moans echoed from the city without. The storm rumbled and roared overhead.

Then the Everchosen rose, pacing across the dais to loom directly over Vilitch's kneeling form.

'The gods will have their due, Fateweaver, just as I will have mine. Stand, Curseling.'

Vilitch rose slowly. Archaon felt the winds of magic surging around the Curseling's staff, held in abeyance in case the sorcerer should be forced to fight. Yet the Slayer of Kings remained firmly in its scabbard. Archaon had other plans for this one.

'You will gather a force from those camped without, Curseling,' commanded Archaon. 'With this army at your back, march south. Lay Averheim's walls low. Shatter the city's gates and slaughter its defenders. But do not slay the Emperor. His life is mine to take, and mine alone. You will bring him to me in chains upon my arrival.'

Vilitch nodded briskly, his puppet brother's head twitching in a grotesque echo of the gesture.

'I understand, great Everchosen. It shall be as you command.'

As Vilitch turned to leave, Archaon reached down and caught him by the shoulder. The Curseling squirmed at the touch, Archaon's power searing his blue-veined flesh like a brand.

'If the Emperor dies before I arrive, your fate will be more terrible than anything you can imagine, Curseling. Do I make myself clear?'

Vilitch nodded again, shuddering beneath Archaon's burning touch for a long moment more before the Everchosen released him. Shoulders hunched, Vilitch hurried from the temple, clearly eager to be away from the Three-Eyed King as swiftly as possible.

Archaon watched the lurching figure retreat through the temple's arched entrance, then turned his gaze upon Kairos.

'He is your creature, Fateweaver. Will you follow him? Or has your brush with the wolf-wizard dimmed your enthusiasm for battle?'

Kairos bridled at Archaon's mocking tone.

'Do not think you have won some victory here, Everchosen. The gods expect their due, and they will not be kept waiting forever.'

So saying, the daemon broke into a shimmering cloud of polychromatic motes that flickered swiftly away into nothingness. Archaon watched the shimmering cloud dissipate, then turned and paced slowly back to his throne. He reached out a gauntleted hand, running it across the flayed hide of Gregor Martak, before plucking the bare skull of Valten from its setting. He stared into its empty eye sockets. No challenge remained in those hollow orbits. The finality of death, Archaon reflected, was the only reasonable punishment for defying his will.

The Everchosen stood like that for long minutes, still as a statue, lost in thought. Overhead, the storm raged, a fitting match for the ceaseless machinations of the Everchosen's keen intellect.

Amid the deepest shadows at the back of the cavernous hall, something vast stirred on the cusp of reality. Fires flickered in the darkness. A furnace-hot wind blew through the temple, rattling the dangling chains. A voice growled from the gloom, hot and angry and vast.

'They are weak, these sorcerous cowards you send south. They will fail you.'

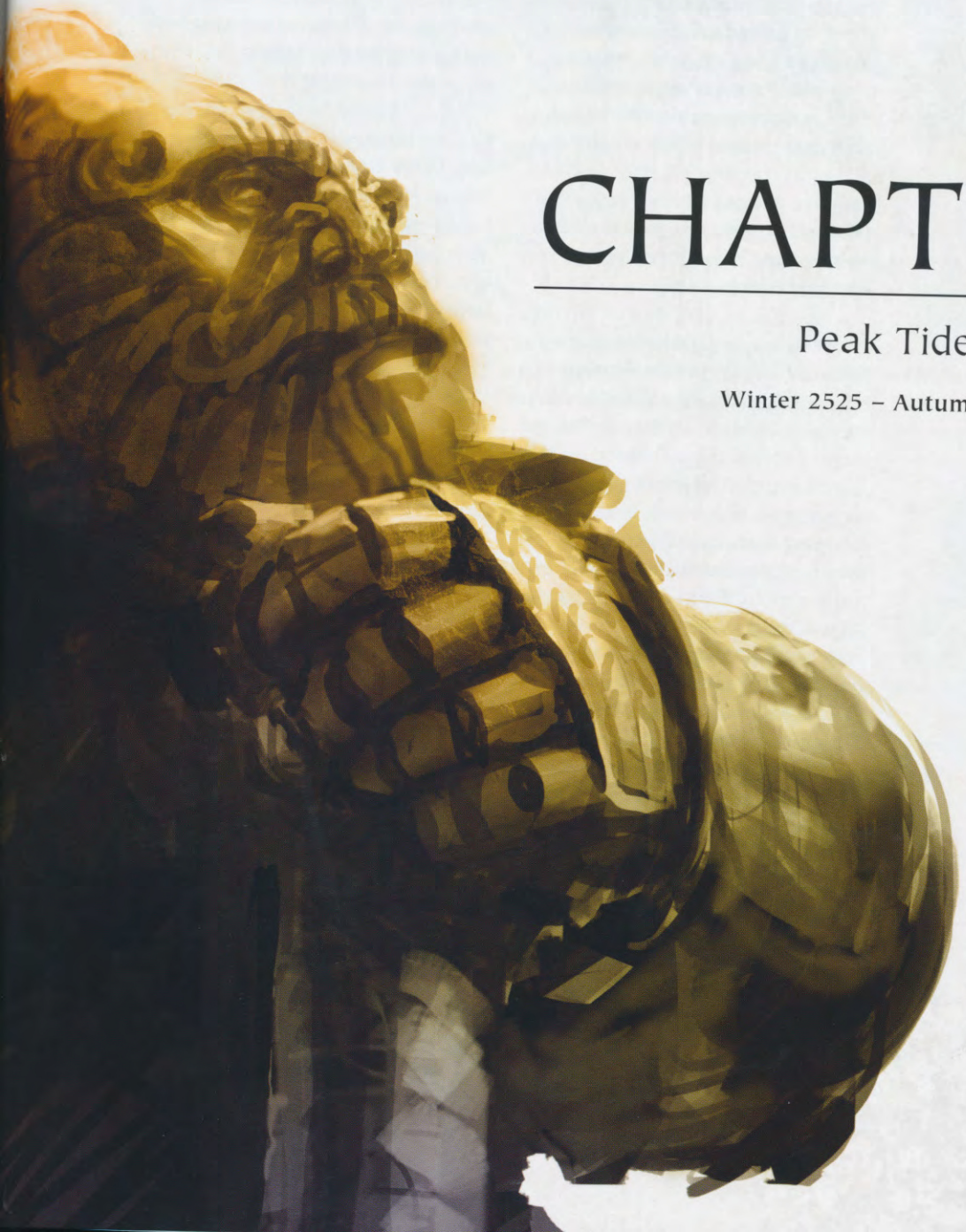
Archaon did not turn. His gaze remained fixed on Valten's fleshless skull. Slowly, his grip tightened until hairline cracks spread across the bone. Finally, with a crack, the skull shattered.

'I know,' he replied, letting the bone dust run through his fingers like grains of sand, 'but their presence will keep Karl Franz from fleeing any further. The Emperor's life belongs to me.'

In answer, an approving growl rumbled from the shadows.

'Indeed. And his skull belongs to Khorne...'





CHAPTER 7

Peak Tide

Winter 2525 – Autumn 2527

The day Karak Kadrin fell was emblazoned into the mind of Ungrim Ironfist.

It began when the slayer led his throng out of the front gates and onto Peak Pass. They had made short work of the skaven construction site – wrecking whatever fiendish devices the ratmen had attempted to build. It seemed pure arrogance to try such a manoeuvre under Ungrim's very nose. The dwarfs may have been besieged, but they were far from beaten.

Despite many skaven attempts, the inner sanctum of Karak Kadrin had not yet been penetrated. The hold's defences remained strong, and its halls were filled with warrior and mining clans. Ever a realist, Ungrim surmised that the greatest danger was his own aggressive nature.

He was well aware that he might be walking into a trap. The slayers he led did not care whether it was an ambush or not, but precautions had been taken nonetheless. The force would march under the guns of the cliffside fortifications, and they would not stray far. While the king made his foray, the rest of Karak Kadrin was on high alert – although in truth, they were always in such a state during these darksome days.

Ungrim was several miles from the front gates when he called for his throng to regroup. Even as the dwarfs began their return trek, a trio of Hell Pit abominations burst forth from new tunnels excavated across from the main gates. Assuming this was the forerunner of some larger attack, the dwarfs double-timed it back towards their mountain fastness. Long before they could reach the gates, horror unfolded before them.

Despite being bombarded with the full might of Karak Kadrin's guns, which was as impressive an arsenal as could be found anywhere in the world, the Hell Pit abominations lurched on. The batteries had unleashed a ground-shaking barrage, and its din echoed down the pass. The dwarf throng had crossed half the distance when the loathsome creatures reached the gate. They were equipped with warp brazier gauntlets – hellish wrecking balls that battered upon the nigh-impenetrable gate. It dented. It bent. A shivering rent was torn into the gromril gates, and with each furious blow it grew larger. One of the creatures wriggled obscenely, its grotesque body slithering through what seemed to be an impossibly small gap.

At that point a blast blew apart what remained of the gates. Thick clouds of green-tinted gas rolled outwards. The dwarfs had fought ratmen too many times not to recognise the deathly mists of Clan Skryre's poisoned gas. Even at more than a mile away, half of Ungrim's throng fell, twitching in agony, gasping out their last. The remaining dwarfs retreated to the mountain slopes, choking and coughing blood.

Realising there would be no return through that gate for some time, Ungrim and the survivors followed the trail picked out by Rordak, the old ranger captain. If they headed up and around the peak of Karag Sunter, the ranger knew of a remote footpath. By following that steep-sided way, the dwarfs would eventually descend near a side gate back into their stronghold. All was quiet in the valley below, and the dwarfs were surprised that the skaven had not launched further attacks on Karak Kadrin. They little dreamt of the scale of the disaster that was even then unfolding within the mountain. There was scant time to worry about others, however.

Many skaven had marked the Slayer King's escape from the gas-swept vale of Peak Pass. An entire Clan Rictus clawpack was soon on their trail. Their chieftain, Glzik, knew that promotion was assured if he could present Ikit with Ungrim's head. Battle and poison had depleted Ungrim's force, and with the exception of the slayers, the dwarfs were more concerned with returning to their fortress than continuing the fight.

What followed was a running battle along narrow tracks. The dwarfs fought a rearguard action, leaving elements of their dwindling throng to hold some constricted place. The Axes of Grimnir held back the skaven along Echo Ridge for three hours before a stormfiend sent its cone of fire to engulf them. On that narrow ledge, none could avoid the blast. Several of the dwarfs – their flesh dripping off their bodies like candle wax – made one last flaming charge. The still smouldering slayers ruptured the fuel storage and the resultant explosion shook the mountainside.

By then, however, more clawpacks were in the high peaks. Ungrim's throng – really only a warband now – had been forced to take long detours amongst the peaks. After a few days of running battles, they at last found Hunter's Gate, which would lead them back into Karak Kadrin.

Walking down the long access tunnels to reach the inner gates that would allow them entrance, Ungrim assumed the gas had long since dissipated. Ungrim and some fifty dwarfs that remained from the throng expected to find the stronghold heavy-hearted, but busy with activity. Doubtless there had been casualties, for the front gates were heavily guarded. In typical dwarf fashion the repairs would already be underway. The first sign that they were wrong lay before the Bar-Zundak fortress gate. The ironbreakers still stood guard in the narrow passage before the fortified gate, but theirs was now a silent vigil. They were dead, gassed, all of them.

Only the narrow passageway and their heavy suits of armour kept the dead dwarfs still standing, although perhaps this was also their innate stubbornness – simply refusing to fall, even in death. In ominous silence a

path was cleared. Their fear growing, Ungrim's throng waited for a response to their coded knocking. When no answer came, they retraced their steps to attempt another path. The results were similar at the next three fortified gates.

Without speaking, Ungrim headed for the main gate, a sickness growing in him. By the time the dwarfs passed through the wrecked doorway the fumes had grown so strong that they had to wrap their mouths and noses with torn rags. They entered a waking nightmare. Their appearance drove off scavenging packs of gas-mask wearing skaven. The sound of their scurrying feet was the only noise. Aside from that, all was grimly quiet.

The halls were as silent as a tomb, for that was all Karak Kadrin now was.

The tale of what happened could be recreated from the corpses. Gas bombs of vast potency had been secreted inside the abominations. The bomb had gone off just as the first creature pulled itself into the grand entrance hall. The gas cascaded out in unbelievable volumes, filling the enormous chambers and blasting down tunnels. The dwarf defenders, the mighty strength of Karak Kadrin, had fallen where they stood.

The next abomination, itself choking to death upon the noxious cloud, had dragged itself further down the halls before its own bomb had detonated. Yet from the slime trail it left behind, it could only be surmised that the unnatural beast had regenerated back to life. Still trailing a fuming canister of toxic poisoned gas, the horrific thing had crawled onwards, dragging itself down to seek the darkness of the undermines.

By the time its meandering death throes finally left it, the beast had crawled, died, and re-awoken to drag itself yet further. Some five miles down they found it, a faint hiss of gas still leaking from its foul carcass.

For days on end the king walked the despoiled halls, witnessing the horrors that had befallen those beneath his protection. There were too many to bury. Too many even for grief, for what Ungrim felt was something beyond that.

Amongst the survivors of his original throng, now there were only slayers. Those that had not previously been part of that strange cult had since taken the oath. With newly shorn crests, they awaited their king.

It happened on the day they were to depart. Alone at the Shrine of Grimnir, Ungrim ran his hands over the sacred runes struck into that shrine of stone, steel and iron. It was a ritual performed by every slayer before launching himself onto his doom quest. But this time was different.

The runes glowed. In a burst of light, they left the metal that bound them and entered into Ungrim himself. He felt the extreme heat bond to his swelling rage. Filled with red-hot anger, the Slayer King was sure he had just experienced his ancestors' spirits entering his body, granting him the godly power of Grimnir himself.

Flames curled and danced around Ungrim's body, his hair a fiery crest of living flame. The air about him shimmered and the Axe of Dargo glowed molten.

Ungrim's followers were amazed at this startling transformation. Their shock turned to awe when they watched their leader cleanse the halls with purifying fire – his anguished warcry a sheet of flame. Only when Karak Kadrin itself was a funeral pyre did Ungrim lead his followers out.

When he left the halls of his forefathers for the last time, Ungrim did not look back.





Besieged and battered, Karaz-a-Karak was an island in a sea of foes.

The dwarfs had been attacked from below, on the surface, and on the mountain stronghold's lower slopes. The skaven were relentless, their numbers inexhaustible. One line of defence after another had been defeated – the tunnels caving in or the dwarfs driven back or overwhelmed. Despite giving ground, the dwarfs had exacted immense casualties upon the ratmen, yet the attack waves kept rolling in. The steep price of their advancement was one the skaven could afford. Grimly the defenders of Karaz-a-Karak fell back and shored up the next level of fortifications in their ever-shrinking realm.

Karaz-a-Karak had never fallen to an invader, and it would not do so now. So said Thorgrim, swearing by stone and steel, axe and oath. They would hold out. Somehow they would wear down the enemy's numberless hordes.

The dwarf capital was the stony heart of the Karaz Ankor, the mountain realm of the dwarfs. It had endured through ages past and would endure forever. So was the promise of its name, for the dwarf word for mountain was no different from their word for ultimate durability. Thorgrim also took grim comfort from Azamar – the rune of Eternity.

Struck into the Throne of Power, this rune was the work of Grungni himself. The Rune of Eternity was so powerful only one of its kind had ever been wrought, and it could never be duplicated. Bound within that single rune was all the craftsmanship, all the tenacity and all the iron will of the greatest of the Ancestor Gods of the dwarfs. As the legends tell it, when Grungni was done with his creation, he stepped back to assess his work. He was a harsh and exacting judge, always demanding perfection, and never finding it. In Azamar, however, Grungni was wholly satisfied. Still, being thrifty in praise, Grungni made only this promise: while the Rune of Azamar endured, so too would the race he fathered.

It was this legendary tale that High King Thorgrim was musing upon alone in the cavernous Great Hall. He had demanded that all leave – including even his Thronebearers. A single glare from beneath his thick eyebrows had silenced any protests. Only when the echoes of the distant door closing had died did he move.

High King Thorgrim edged off his throne and took a faltering step down the great dais upon which it sat. Slowly he crouched down to examine the gold-laden carvings, the slightest groan involuntarily escaping him as he did so. The faint grunt was not a sign of great girth or the onset of old age – although both of these factors were in evidence – but rather excruciating pain. It had only been a week since the battle of Granite Gates, when Thorgrim had taken a blow from a doom glaive. It had penetrated the Armour of Skaldour, the warpmetal glancing off his ribs. The posturing, red-armoured Verminlord who dealt the injury had paid with its life, struck down by the Axe of Grimnir. At the time Thorgrim was more concerned with his armour – it was of ancient make and the skills to repair it were lost. Only later, after the battle, would he realise how deep the blade had cut him. Worse, the injury was not healing. Moving was agony.

It was for this reason that Thorgrim had banished all from the Great Hall. Stoic to the extreme, he was loath to show pain before others – yet there was something different about the Throne of Power, and he wanted to examine it personally.

During the fight to retake the Granite Gates, soon after the High King had struck down the Verminlord, he had felt something unusual. For a moment everything had gleamed in golden radiance. Thorgrim's armour – both the plates and the finely linked mail

– had repaired itself somehow. Since then, the runes had continued to glow and the gold lustre of the throne itself seemed to shine more intently. What Thorgrim had felt was arcane, an old and mighty aura, as if some powerful force had somehow bonded to the throne. Now, as he examined it, the Rune of Eternity pulsed, the metal vibrant and alive beneath his fingers.

Once again Thorgrim regretted the absence of his most knowledgeable runesmiths. The venerable Kragg the Grimm had died during the Battle of the Undermines some months ago, and Karak Azul's Thorek Ironbrow had fallen at the beginning of the uprisings. They had been the two most learned scholars of the ancient runes, and their understanding perhaps could have explained the strange changes to the throne.

From far away came the distinctive sound of the karak-horns, alerting all to another major attack. With some effort Thorgrim arose and got back into his throne. He was waiting there when his guard returned, bearing the news.

The skaven had launched another assault – the largest yet. Gyrocopters reported that hordes were pouring forth from newly gnawed tunnels. The Silver Road Pass was filled with a tide of mangy bodies. High up in the mountain, engineers using telescopes had confirmed what the rangers had already noted – the totems of Clan Mors were present, and leading the attack was the infamous Queek Headtaker himself. The ratmen's infernal war engines were being wheeled behind the oncoming swarms. The scaffold towers numbered in the hundreds.

The miners and cavern-patrols reported great movements in the undertunnels. The sounds of their carefully laid traps gave forewarning of approaching foes. Only along the upper slopes of Karaz-a-Karak was there no sign of the encroaching foe, but the dwarfs knew not to trust such early observations. They had defended their mountain fastness for thousands of years, and there was no trick or tactic they had not seen and learnt how to counter. Countless invading armies had broken upon their mountain, from daemonic hordes and Chaos-worshipping northmen to the elves of Ulthuan.

Despite his wounds and the growing heaviness he felt, Thorgrim Grudgebearer called for his axe and the Dammaz Kron – the Great Book of Grudges. At his signal, thronebearers hoisted up the weighty Throne of Power. The Everguard formed up in ranks around the throne, marching out of the grandiose vault, chanting the hammer-blessing as they went.

Thorgrim sat upon the Throne of Power, atop a sea of armoured bodies. As if sensing the rising tide of war, the Axe of Grimnir emitted a radiance, a glow that could be seen far down the pillared hall. As he travelled, Thorgrim barked orders. This was the largest army yet hurled against Karaz-a-Karak, and Thorgrim wished to cast open the citadel's gates and meet the foe head on.

Thorgrim's advisors called him foolhardy. They were now too aged for battle, their beards grown ponderously long – the surest sign of wisdom to any dwarf. Thorgrim cursed their caution. He sent them instead to open up more of the armoury and hand out the relic weapons from the locked vaults.

It was an unusual place for a meeting, thought Thanquol, but he supposed the symbolism was hard to miss.

Even with its head blasted to rubble, the statue of an ancient dwarf-thing was enormous. Once this great stone king would have watched over the Silver Road Pass, an icon of the strength of the dwarf kingdom. Now, in its ruin, the statue made rather the opposite statement.

Clouds of shadows blossomed all around Thanquol and Verminking, and soon eleven more Verminlords towered over him, gazing down, their ancient eyes gleaming with malice.

'Why-tell is the little horned one here?' asked one, a diseased looking Verminlord Corruptor.

Not knowing what to do, Thanquol gave the sign of the Great Horned Rat and bowed low before each. This seemed well received by the entities before him. Only the foulest-looking of them gave tail-flicks of displeasure.

'You know, Throxstraggle,' answered Verminking, his own twin-tails flicking menacingly. He glared intently at the greasy rat daemon for a long moment before continuing, addressing the circle of Verminlords. 'We asked-bid you here so that we can all agree. The Council of Thirteen decrees that the clan that delivers the dwarf-king's head name-picks the last Lord of Decay. We are as one on this agreement, yes-yes?'

This was news to Thanquol, who was at Verminking's feet, trying to gauge the reaction around the circle. Most of the Verminlords bowed their heads in assent. It was with some pride that he noticed that none of them had horns as twisted or magnificent as did Skreech Verminking.

'We are but eleven in number – where-tell is Lurklox?' asked one.

'Here,' said a voice from behind them. Thanquol started, instantly pleased not to have leaked out anything regrettable.

A black-shaded Verminlord Deceiver stood there, having arrived silently by unknown means. 'As we anticipated,' it said in a whispering voice, 'the Skryre-Mors attack has begun.'



Queek sniffed the air. The whole cursed pass smelled like dwarf-thing. It was cold. The Clan Mors warlord had been cold since the strange rings appeared in the skies.

All his life Queek had been known as the warlord that could crack the toughest dwarf holds. When others had tried and failed to storm a mountain fastness, they would summon Queek. No skaven had razed as many strongholds or feasted on more dwarf-flesh than the Headtaker.

Queek, and through him Clan Mors, had grown rich on the plunder. Scavenge-rights went to those who sacked the hold, and as such Queek had claimed a great deal of Dwarf flesh. For the second wave of attackers, there would be only gnawed bones to pick over. They said that in Karak Kadrin the flesh of the slain was inedible – that not even trolls could digest the poisoned meat. That was not the Headtaker's way. Mountain outposts, fortified mines, even the Great Holds, all had eventually been cracked open. Yet Queek knew that just ahead loomed his largest challenge.

The most powerful of Clan Mors warlords, Queek had seen Karaz-a-Karak many times before, albeit never so close. As the Red Guard crested a rise upon the Silver Road Pass, they could see it before them. The mountain was colossal, stretching above the pass and up into the clouds themselves. If it was daunting, the sight in the opposite direction filled them with swelling confidence. Behind Queek stretched more clawpacks than he had ever led or even seen. Lord Gnawdwell had unleashed the whole might of Clan Mors, along with all its thralls and allies. He had sent forth clawpacks from Skavenblight and the Grey Mountains. Karak Eight Peaks had been emptied: a somewhat bitter irony, for after fighting for so long to capture it from the dwarfs and greenskins, it was now abandoned. Now that it belonged to the skaven, it was no longer as desirable.

By now the underground forces should have begun their assaults. The slaves would be dying in droves, finding the dwarf traps the hard way. Their suffering would present a useful distraction. If those assaults kept steady pressure upon the myriad mine openings, the dwarfs would not be able to shift their reserves. Guarding all the gates, tunnels, weak spots, air shafts and more would tie down a huge portion of the dwarfs' force. This would allow the armies Queek led to batter down the front gates.

The attack plan was not the most complicated – but to Queek's mind, the more straightforward the better. After listening to Ikit Claw's overly elaborate schemes and assurances that the new weapons would work, he was more convinced than ever that his simple strategy would succeed. He loathed Ikit – the warlock was as arrogant as a grey seer, yet even more grasping. Queek cursed the day that Lord Gnawdwell made the claw-pacts with Clan Skryre. It did, however, have an upside.

Although Queek hated to admit it, the massed war machine batteries that were being pushed in staggered order with his clawpacks were imposing. Ikit was leading that portion of the army, and if he could not destroy the front gates with that arsenal, then it could not be done.

Queek had heard in war-council that many of the rival Warlord Clans were complaining that their access to Clan Skryre weaponry had dried up the moment it had been announced that the empty seat upon the Council could be chosen by the clan that presented the dwarf-king's head. This was not quite true, however, for they had dried up before the rival clans had even heard of the Council's decision. This was part of a scheme Clan Skryre had been working on for some time.

With their claw-pact, Clan Mors and Clan Skryre had steered events masterfully so far, and it was their belief that soon the covetous Council seat would be within their clutches, sounding a final death knell to the power of the grey seers.

Many attempts and overtures – both subtle and obvious – had been made to curry favour with Clan Eshin and Clan Moulder. As always, Clan Eshin had proven unreadable – perhaps they would grant their support, and perhaps they were already working to undermine each and every scheme. Either way, the mysterious clan gave no clue as to their real intentions. Clan Moulder had been lukewarm in their agreement, but word was that they were still selling beast-packs to rival Warlord Clans. This upset Clan Skryre, perhaps because they felt that selling arms to both sides in a conflict was their right alone.

Now was not the time to unravel the plots of the clans, however, for the slave legions had begun to draw fire from the mountainside. Queek could see the light flashes from cannonshot long before the sound reached him. Soon a rolling thunder filled the great valley. Despite their numbers, the skaven looked puny before the great arches of the main dwarf gates, mere specks before the mountain. They were a sea that could surround and rage against the rocky island, but could but never rise above to drown its vast height altogether.

They would drive the thrall legions forward for a few hours – simply occupying the defenders' time. There was no need to test the range or strength of the defences, for they were well known from countless previous assaults. In answer to those failed attempts to storm Karaz-a-Karak, they had brought in Queek.

Ikit Claw was already shrieking orders. The counter-battery fire was going to be impressive. A warlord of one of the rabble clans might

wring his followers for all they were worth, trading and stealing at a frenetic pace – then, if he was lucky, and made pact-promises and shrewd slave-deals, he might save enough warptokens to purchase a single warp-lightning cannon from Clan Skryre. The more powerful Warlord Clans – such as Clan Mors or Clan Rictus – could perhaps afford handfuls of the devices. Now, being wheeled and pushed into position were hundreds of them. The labour and resources needed to achieve such a thing must have been immense. How long had Clan Skryre waited for this moment? How long had they been hoarding their machines for such a time as this?

Their ancient rivals, the grey seers, had been manoeuvred into becoming political pariahs. Their nemesis – Clan Pestilens – had been largely destroyed along with the lizard-things. Through alliances and pact-marks, they had bonded with the two most powerful of Warlord Clans. Queek had no doubt that when he took off the head of the dwarf-king, it would find its way quickly into the claws of some Clan Skryre representative.

Queek Headtaker had fought and killed just about every type of creature that walked the Worlds Edge Mountains, but it was against dwarfs that he had the most experience. Although he disdained the bearded-things, he understood them. Having fought and killed them in numbers beyond count, Queek could readily anticipate their actions. As dwarfs were conservative, defensive and predictable, he was rarely surprised by them. However, what happened next did make the Clan Mors warlord take notice.

With a blaring of horns, the gates of Karaz-a-Karak swung open. As the doors parted the verminous host could see the gleam of the dwarf-king's throne front and centre. The dwarfs were coming out to fight, and even as they did so, fire erupted across the mountain. Every weapon port was opened, every battery voiced its thunder. The open space before the main gates became a killing field – explosions blossoming, cannonballs bludgeoning past and cones of liquid flame splashing from above. Further back on the Silver Road Pass, a series of explosions started an avalanche. The stoneslide crushed thousands of skaven, sending clouds of debris over the battlefield.

From out of the gates the dwarfs marched, Thorgrim and his Everguard at the fore. This was the armoured fist of the last of the great dwarf realms.

Thorgrim's advisors had counselled against the move. All looked upon their king, searching his lined face for signs of madness. The enemy worked in strange ways, after all. Perhaps he was under a spell?

In response to the doubters and naysayers, Thorgrim read aloud from the Book of Grudges. He spoke of Karak Azul, of Karak Eight Peaks, of Karak Kadrin, and of the horrors of Zhufbar. Karaz-a-Karak was mightiest of them all, but what good were defences against such numbers? Against such hatred? Against such reckless technology? Against a race so willing to throw away thousands, millions of their own kind simply to exhaust the defenders' ammunition? Thorgrim declared that if the dwarf realm were to end, it would do so on his terms. He did not intend to sit and wait while fate crept up on him. Instead, he would meet that fate on his terms: with his axe in hand, fighting for all that he had ever cared about.

Silence greeted this speech, for the time of raised voices and warsongs was over. Now was the time for axes to speak. As one, the dwarfs marched out to war behind their High King.



DWARF THRONG OF KARAZ-A-KARAK

It was a vengeful and hot-blooded throng that Thorgrim Grudgebearer led out of the gates of Karaz-a-Karak. They cared not that they were outnumbered many hundreds to one, for they were filled with the fire of war. If this was to be their last battle, for pride's sake alone they would take the fight to the foe.



THORGRIM GRUDGEBEARER

The last few years had been devastating to Thorgrim Grudgebearer. While the dwarf kingdom collapsed, he had been penned up – besieged and held at bay within his own stronghold. This had aged the High King, further furrowing his already lined brow. Although his countenance had grown grim, he knew there was only one way to settle scores – with the Axe of Grimnir.



UNGRIM IRONFIST

Since the doom of Karak Kadrin, Ungrim Ironfist was the Slayer King without a kingdom. Ungrim believed he had been filled with ancestor spirits – in fact what had bonded to him was Aqshy, the Wind of Fire. Freed when Teclis unbound the Great Vortex, Aqshy had raged across the world, at last embedding itself into the runes of vengeance upon the slayer shrine of Karak Kadrin. Now more than mortal, the Slayer King was literally burning for revenge.



JOSEF BUGMAN

Master brewer and mysterious ranger Josef Bugman had made a habit of turning up unexpectedly during battles. With the breaking of so many dwarf holds, Bugman and his intrepid band of rangers had been all over the Worlds Edge Mountains. Countless refugees had been saved in the wilds, given a strong draught of ale, and directed to hidden fortifications amidst the peaks.



THE EVERGUARD

To be named a hammerer of any hold was to be counted amongst the best of all dwarf warriors. To be named to the Everguard – the High King's personal bodyguard – was to join the most elite of all dwarf formations. In a ritual that dated back to the first High King, Snorri Whitebeard, the Everguard were gifted with the finest crafted runic hammers from the armoury of Karaz-a-Karak. Each of those weighty war-mallets could crack rock to powder, making the kingsguard even more formidable.



BUGMAN'S RANGERS

No dwarf formation alive could match the sharp-shooting, axe-throwing or ale-guzzling skills of the legendary Bugman's Rangers. Their gear was weather-worn and their clothing tattered, but nonetheless they were treated as royalty amongst all the clans. At home in the Worlds Edge Mountains, they knew the high passes and secret ways like no others.



DRAKEWARDENS

Part of the Karazgate Guardians, the Drakewardens were formidable irondrakes. The runes struck into their gromril armour allowed the Drakewardens to withstand searing heat. Such guards proved especially valuable against the skaven. Warpfire thrower teams expected nothing to survive the unnatural blaze of their devious weapons, but the Drakewardens had taught many of them the errors of their ways.

Thorgrim Grudgebearer
High King of Karaz-a-Karak

Ungrim
Incarnate of Fire

Last Brotherhood of Karak Kadrin
Three regiments of Slayers

The Everguard
One regiment of Hammerers

The Karazgate Guardians
One regiment of Ironbreakers and one regiment of Irondrakes, the Drakewardens

Thane Nandak Hammerfist
Karaz-a-Karak Battle Standard

Bugman's Rangers
Josef Bugman and three regiments of Rangers

Clan Hammerfist Throng
Thane Durgrim Hammerfist, three regiments of Dwarf Warriors, three regiments of Longbeards and one regiment of Hammerers

Bar Unfernak Garrison
Two regiments of Dwarf Warriors, two regiments of Longbeards and two regiments of Ironbreakers

Clan Grimdelver
Three regiments of Dwarf Warriors, two regiments of Miners and one regiment of Thunderers

Slayer Throng
Dragon Slayer Burik Barrelchest and one regiment of Slayers

The King's Battery
Master Engineer Snorek Bristlebeard, Engineer Apprentice Alric Snoreksson, three Cannons, two Organ Guns, one Flame Cannon and one Grudge Thrower

Blue Squadron
Three Gyrocopters and one Gyrobomber

Yellow Squadron
Three Gyrocopters and one Gyrobomber

CLAN SKRYRE AND CLAN MORS CLAW-PACT

Their respective Lords of Decay had ordered Ikit Claw of Clan Skryre and Queek Headtaker of Clan Mors into an alliance. Both leaders despised the other, but fully understood their own roles. Together they led a massive skaven force against the might of Karaz-a-Karak.



IKIT'S CLAWGUARD

Chief Warlock Ikit Claw had demanded a bodyguard formation. This was partly for protection, and partly just to annoy Queek – for Ikit had requested not Clan Mors troops but the black-furred stormvermin of Clan Rictus for his guard. The Clawguard bore Ikit's symbols on their shields and banner, and this drew hisses and incisor-clicks every time they paraded past Clan Mors troops.



GRIBTAK STABIT

Gribtak personified the aggressive nature of Clan Mors. Envious that longtime rival Rotrik Maulclaw had been promoted ahead of him, Gribtak made it his mission to take the honour for himself. Now it was Gribtak who carried the Clan Mors Battle Totem, Rotrik's head joining the other grisly trophies that adorned the spikes atop the bannerpole.

THE BLACK MASK

Because of Clan Eshin's reluctance to commit to joining the Clan Skryre and Clan Mors claw-pact, there were only a few of their black-clad warriors amongst the millions. Secreted amongst the Shadowrunners was a hooded and cowled assassin known only as the Black Mask. Hired by Ikit Claw, the Black Mask was not to reveal himself until he was close enough to strike down the dwarf-king. If Queek slew the dwarf-king, then the assassin was to kill him and claim the dwarf's head.





MANGEFURS

The Mangefurs were piebald clanrats of Clans Mors. Before the battle they were given warp-brew to invigorate them and raise their fighting spirits. With the rising winds of magic and the profusion of moondust in the air, the draught turned out to be extremely potent. Purplish foam dripped from the clanrats' mouths, and they gnashed their teeth and shrieked incoherent, rage-filled battlecries. In combat, the Mangefurs fought with rabid fury – each one of the scrawny beasts flailing out with the strength and energy of a half-dozen of their kind.



DOOMWHEEL BRIGADE

Led by the Warlock Engineer Splicer Krxx, the Doomwheel Brigade consisted of three of the monowheeled vehicles. Each had installed a supercharged warp-generator, a newly tinkered device that promised greater power yields. As chief pilot, Splicer had carefully developed a series of new attack formations – two of which he had proudly named the spearhead and the linecrusher. Between the chaotic nature of the rat-pilots and the potent but volatile fuel source, each of the machines moved at such different speeds, and often in such different directions, that none of these ever quite worked out.



THE SCARTORN

This warpack of stormfiends was armed entirely with doomflayer gauntlets. The thick-leathered hides of the Scartorn were so criss-crossed and gouged with scarifications that they stood out even amongst the patchwork monstrosities that were their rat ogre kin. With doom-flayers for hands, and whirling blades all over their heavy armoured carapaces, no few of the red welts and disfigurements were from their own devastating weaponry.

Ikit Claw

Queek Headtaker

Gribtak Stabit
Clan Mors Battle Standard Bearer

Clan Mors
Twelve claws of Stormvermin and twelve claws of Clanrats

Red Guard
Ten claws of Stormvermin

Mangefurs
Two claws of Clanrats

Doomwheel Brigade
Warlock Engineer Splicer Krxx and three Doomwheels

Clan Skryre
Thirty-two Warlock Engineers, thirteen claws of Poisoned Wind Globadiers, 132 Warp Lightning Batteries, nine Warplock Jezzail Batteries and forty-one legions of Skavenslaves

Ikit's Clawguard
One claw of Stormvermin

Clan Rictus
Warlord Skik Blackfang, eleven claws of Stormvermin and eleven claws of Clanrats

The Scartorn
A claw of Stormfiends

Clan Moulder Beastpacks
Master Moulder Skrakle Sixarm, Packmaster Skweel Gnawtooth, four Hell Pit Abominations and five claws of Giant Rats

The Black Mask
Assassin

Clan Eshin
Two claws of Night Runners and one claw of Gutter Runners

Clan Volkn
Warlord Moltskin Headtaker and five claws of Clanrats

The Wretched
Twenty-two legions of Skavenslaves

THE BATTLE FOR KARAZ-A-KARAK

Within moments of the gates swinging open, Ikit Claw's war engines opened fire. The dwarfs had been prepared for this, and aimed their batteries, which had been raining death upon the leading slave legions, further back at the ratmen siege engines. Cannonballs burst apart support beams, causing rickety scaffold towers to topple. Unstable warp generators exploded into fireballs ringed with lightning.

As many artillery pieces as Clan Skryre had lugged, dragged and pushed through the underways, they could not match the might of Karaz-a-Karak. They had been brought to blast open the front gates, not duel against a mountainside's worth of guns. It was an artillery war of attrition that they ultimately could not win.

Beneath the strangely streaked skies, the great mountain fastness bore witness to an apocalyptic scene. The ongoing war machine battle sent black-green lightnings arcing across the battlefield, while explosions rocked the Silver Road Pass. Streaks of fire blazed outwards to light the murky air as the battle lines charged to meet. For an instant hoarse warcries echoed off the peaks, and then, as the front ranks crashed together, the great valley rang to the clash of metal.

When the gates had opened and the dwarfs first saw the hordes that filled the Silver Road Pass, many of them regretted their haste. For a moment they were sure that their grim king would lead them to ruin. These were not slayers, seeking repentance through their own death in battle, but warriors and craft workers defending their home. They knew well the unmatched strength of their walls, the depth of their defence. Now they were leaving those behind, to meet the seething mass on the open field. Before them stretched an endless vista of rat warriors and their warbeasts.

Yet they were dwarfs – steady in deed and war. They did not waver because the deed looked impossible, but instead raised their shields higher and gripped their axes more tightly.

As their High King shouted further entries from the Book of Grudges, his voice rising above thunderous explosions, the dwarfs were swept up in furore. They were a proud and war-like people, and once they set their minds to something, very little could cause their iron will to falter. They had marched out to battle, and they would see the task done. Like a gromril-forged edge slicing through flesh, the dwarfs clove through the slave legions. Well-forged armour and tightly locked shields turned back spearpoints and denied purchase to raking claws, while dwarf axes reaped a terrible toll.

Against such an onslaught, the slave legions could not stand for long. Shrieking in panic, they sought to escape the steel-clad vengeance that was amongst them, killing at will. Behind the slaves stood the merciless clans of their own kind. No quarter was expected there. For the slaves, in that valley there was only death, and it was inescapable. This was when the half-starved legions were at their most dangerous, for in their panic, the slaves tore anything apart in a last desperate bid for freedom. With a maniacal burst of energy they sought to escape, to flee back to tunnels where they could hide and continue their miserable existence. In their desperation, the skavenslaves would gnaw through each other to escape, or even bite themselves in their stampeding frenzy.

Through the bloody turmoil came the dwarfs. Thorgrim Grudgebearer led them. From afar it was as if the Throne of Power were some dragon-prowed craft sailing upon a verminous sea. With feet firmly braced upon the throne's platform, the High King brandished his axe – no foe could stand before him. The Everguard, Thorgrim's bodyguard, and the stout throne bearers, all matched the violence of their leader – their heavy hammers breaking shields and the ratmen that held them. Although the whole world seemed wrapped in eternal twilight, the weapons of the dwarfs gleamed, shining brightly in that gloom.

The great armouries of Karaz-a-Karak had been opened. Axes and hammers forged by runesmith masters of old had been taken reverently from their places of honour. The skill to make such weapons had been lost and none now possessed the hammercraft to bind such magical power. There had been no need to clean, polish or sharpen those weapons, for the energy of their runes kept them always pristine and keen-edged.

Entire regiments of clan warriors and longbeards were equipped with weapons borne by the heroes of old. Not since the days of the War of Vengeance, in the golden age of their people, had so many dwarf formations marched to battle bearing potent runic axes and hammers. Now the fury of those weapons was once more released, and the skaven died in droves.

For the dwarfs, swept up in the madness of battle, the slaughter was not enough. Onwards they pressed, crashing through another skaven formation, trampling underfoot Clan Mors and Clan Rictus banners by

the dozen. Such was the dwarfs' driving hatred, that any initial plans to stay near the gates were forgotten. There had been talk of not advancing beyond the distance of their supporting bombardments, but such cautions were forgotten in the joys of battle. Again and again the axes of the dwarfs rose and chopped, hewing ragged ruin into their foe.

With the practiced eye of a dwarf-killer and smasher of armies, Queek Headtaker watched his foe. Too far, too fast the dwarf-things came. Very soon they would foolishly leave behind the advantage of their superior artillery. The Clan Mors warlord was surprised to see the dwarfs' counter-attack at the stage. Sallying forth out of an unbroken fortification was normally only the last bid of some desperate dwarf clan.

Queek well knew that dwarfs that had been hemmed into an ever-shrinking realm would often flail out one last time – launch one final bid to go down fighting on their own terms. Queek had seen it hundreds of times. The fury of their charge was terrifying to witness – truly no skaven claw could stop them in their vindictive rage. However, with their lack of numbers, sooner or later, they would tire.

When the dwarfs were panting and exhausted, when their shields dropped low and their axe arms were numb from chopping, when at last they expended their rage, where would they find themselves? Queek already knew. The dwarfs would be in the middle of the Silver Road Pass, beyond the range of even their fine-barrelled cannons. Let them kill the slaves. Let them smash apart a few claws, or even entire clawpacks, thought Queek. They would be like a cannonball once its impetus was spent – a heavy lead weight sinking into the snow.

The Clan Mors Warlord could wait. He had the numbers. Queek ordered up the next clawpack, holding back his Red Guard and best clanrats for the final assault. When the dwarfs showed signs of flagging, Queek would unleash his own attack. It would be a great satisfaction to drive the king's head onto the spikes of his back-banner – even if he had to give it away later.

In the meantime, much to Queek's satisfaction, part of the dwarf advance had crashed into the Clan Skryre contingent upon the left flank. Several well-armoured regiments from the gateguard had pushed forward so that they were amongst the Skryre war engines. The Drakewardens used searing blasts to drive off the warlock engineer crew. Such was the molten fury of the drakeguns that their shots ignited several of the machines, their warp-generators exploding. Black-green mushroom clouds rose, tinting the battlefield with an eerie light.

Ikit Claw himself led the countercharge. The black-furred stormvermin of Clan Rictus were vicious fighters, and would normally have given a good account of themselves. However, they faced the ironbreakers of the Karazgate Guardians, each of whom bore a runic axe and a shield from a lost age. Against them, the stormvermin could inflict little damage, while their own armour was shredded. Only the Chief Warlock himself saved the skaven from a massacre. Ikit Claw sent forth bolts of lightning and jets of warpflame. Not even runic shields could save the dwarfs from being engulfed within a cone of unnatural flames, or torn apart by fell magics.

The Drakewardens, however, were another story. Their armour was forge-proved, struck with runes that allowed them to withstand even the extreme heat from the blast-furnaces of Karaz-a-Karak. To Ikit's great consternation, the irondrakes walked straight through his warpfire blasts and began to send forth their own volleys. A stormvermin directly beside Ikit was blown into the back ranks,



a fist-sized hole seared through his armour and chest. As he was thinking that turning tail was in order, Ikit looked up to see the Doomwheel Brigade whirring by.

The warp-lightnings that arced forth from that trio of doomwheels stung the eyes. The Drakewardens attempted to concentrate their fire upon the approaching war machines, but the doomwheels had too much speed. With a crunch of armour, bones and wood, the maniacal contraptions ran over the dwarfs, hardly slowing down at all. They left behind only a trail of blood and twitching bodies.

Queek thought of himself as patient, but his aggressive nature always led him to action sooner rather than later. The dwarfs had pushed out far from their gates, and none was further than their king. The bearded ones had made no attempt to protect their flanks – simply relying upon their own impetus, armour and skill as they hacked forward. Now the Clan Mors warlord intended to make them pay.

The clawpack Queek had been holding back on the fringes were released at last. Beneath the trophy banner of Clan Mors, Queek and his Red Guard led the charge. Cutting a path straight towards the dwarf-king, Queek intended to end this battle quickly. Marching beside his own stormvermin bodyguard were the Scartorn – hulking stormfiends. In place of the brutes' hands were doom-flayers – motorized iron balls that could grind stone to dust. Their heavy armour whirred with rotating blades.

The impact of Queek's battle line into the dwarf flank could be heard even above the din of the artillery barrage. Hasty shieldwalls were battered down by heavy halberds or the wrecking ball fists of the stormfiends. Queek scythed through the foe – no armour, no matter how finely wrought, was proof against Dwarf Gouger. The pick punctured helms and stove in shields as the Clan Mors Warlord unleashed a flurry of blows that opened up holes for his followers to pour forth.

Although Queek had not quite been able to wait long enough for the optimal time to countercharge, the skaven attack was well-timed nonetheless. Already the High King and his bodyguard were wholly cut off – a tide of Clan Mors warriors surrounding them. It would take some time for the other dwarfs to reach their king, and by then, thought Queek, it would be too late.



Even in the midst of his bloody vengeance, it dawned upon Thorgrim that the tides of battle had changed. In his fury, the High King had allowed himself to be outmanoeuvred. Now, cut off and isolated, the dwarfs were less a functioning army, and more separate islands of defence amidst a sea of skaven. They would have to fight their way back. But even as these thoughts flashed within the dwarf king's mind, he saw Queek Headtaker and the Clan Mors battle standard. The red-armoured stormvermin were heading straight for the Everguard.

A sudden blaring of horns announced a new force entering the fray. Bugman had come. On the far side of the pass the dwarf ranger could be seen, leading troops down from a narrow game trail. Although not many in number, Bugman's rangers were a force to be reckoned with. They felled foes with crossbow shots, hurled throwing axes to split skulls, and chopped down any enemies that dared close the gap. But there was more – pushing through the weather-stained rangers were Ungrim Ironfist and the last slayers of Karak Kadrin.

The vengeful slayers were even less numerous, yet they fell upon the skaven like a thunderbolt. None could match the savagery of Ungrim. In that unnatural gloaming, the Slayer King blazed like a beacon. Flames curled upwards from his bright crest and his battlecry was a firestorm. With each swing, the Axe of Dargo trailed fiery streaks. The skaven died whether they stood to fight, or panicked, clambering over one and other in their frenetic haste to flee. All were slain by the incandescent rage of Ungrim.

Although Queek could not follow what was happening on the Silver Road behind him, he knew the sound of shrieking only too well. Once again his troops were letting him down. His Red Guard, even with aid from a black-garbed claw of night runners, were no match for the hammer-carrying bodyguard of the dwarf king. Queek knew that he had to end the fight quickly, for he could hear the retreat gaining momentum. If it was not stopped soon, there might be no stopping it at all.

Barking stern orders to his guard, Thorgrim heaved himself from his Throne of Power. Brandishing his rune-glowing axe, the dwarf High King strode towards Queek in an open challenge.

With a flick of his wrist, Queek spun Dwarf Gouger, striking a pose and inviting the dwarf king on. As the lumbering High King closed, Queek launched his infamous dual-weapons-windmilling attack, which had laid low so many other bearded-things. But not this time.

As Queek descended, the Axe of Grimnir met Dwarf Gouger and broke it asunder. Thorgrim's gauntleted

hand smashed aside Queek's other blade and then caught the warlord by the throat. With his feet flailing helplessly, Queek found himself lifted directly above the dwarf king's head. Another axe blow detached the Headtaker's backbanner. Squirming and thrashing, the skaven warlord tried to pull himself free. He attempted to brace his feet and flip backwards. But his world was beginning to go black around the edges. Queek scrabbled with his claws, scraping, gouging, prying.

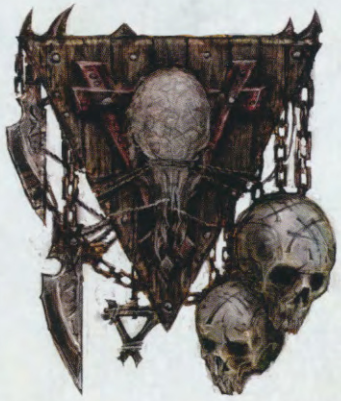
Iron-fisted, Thorgrim merely tightened his grip and pulled Queek level with his own bearded face. The last thing Queek ever saw was the hatred reflected in that steely gaze.

After hearing the snapping of Queek's neck, Thorgrim continued to squeeze for long moments before letting the armoured body crumple lifeless at his feet. Still not satisfied, Thorgrim stepped with his ironshod boot and ground. There was snapping and crunching. As a last thought, the High King spat with disdain upon the broken corpse, before turning away.

As Thorgrim strode back to his Thronebearers, a black shadow slipped away from the nearby night runners. Throwing back its cloak, the masked skaven drew forth a pair of venom-dripping blades and bounded. With all the momentum of its leap, the assassin drove both blades towards Thorgrim's back. One of the Thronebearers let go of the throne, rushing forward to help his High King. But there it was a futile gesture, he was too late...

Protected by his matchless armour, Thorgrim turned and gave a single, quick chop with the Axe of Grimnir. Its blade split the assassin from collarbone to groin, the skaven's insides dropping with a wet splat. Remounting the Throne of Power to the hoarse cheers of his Everguard, Thorgrim looked to rejoin the fight, but there was little of it left.

All across the Silver Road Pass, the skaven were in full retreat. They still outnumbered their foe many times over, but the panic and fear was upon them. Someone needed to rally them, but of all the warleaders, only the Clan Mors warlord could have checked that retreat.



As the skaven scurried away, each knot that attempted to reform was blasted apart by Ungrim's fire, or the swooping runs of the sky squadrons of Karaz-a-Karak. The gyrobombers made dozens of bombing runs – blasting the retreating masses until they were driven into the safety of the distant tunnels.

Elsewhere, the grim task of reclaiming the fallen dwarfs and securing the great store of runic items began. It would not do to let their dead brethren be picked over by scavengers, nor would it be right to leave behind a great store of powerful arms and armour.

Before taking full toll of the butcher's bill, Thorgrim examined the Throne of Power. Whatever strange power had filled it had slipped away during the battle. The High King no longer felt its strange aura. A large crack had appeared upon the throne – a seam running straight through the Rune of Azamar. Before he could muse on what this might mean, his bearers brought him before the fiery Slayer King that Thorgrim knew of old. The last of the dwarf kings had much to discuss.

'That is my flesh, you fool!' shrieked Ikit. Unbidden, a ball of living lightning formed around the Chief Warlock's clawed hand.

The warlock engineer who had been attempting to pry off Ikit's armour dropped his tools and fled. He got no more than a few paces before arcing bolts shrivelled his flesh, filling the cavern with the acrid stink of charred meat.

'You there,' scowled Ikit, pointing with his still crackling claw. 'Try-try to prise off this plating,' he commanded.

The next warlock engineer looked stunned – as if debating whether to attempt to do as he was ordered, or simply to run away now. Neither seemed like much of a good bet. Already, five or six charred piles surrounded the Chief Warlock.

Ikit was still in a rage. It had all happened so quickly. One moment he had been sure Queek was about to slay the dwarf-thing, and the next he had been caught up in a rout. Sheets of flame had scorched over his new bodyguard. Only Ikit's armour had saved him, although it had since fused itself to his blackened body.

Looking up to see why the engineer hadn't begun yet, Ikit saw the terror and confusion his tirade was causing. The dozen warlock engineers in the cavern looked on fearfully, as if wondering whether to help or simply to look for hiding spaces.

With a single shriek, Ikit summoned enough warp-lighting to fry them many times over. When it finally dissipated, the Chief Warlock was alone. He fumbled with the metal bar and began prying the armour away himself. The coveted seat on the Council of Thirteen had been so close...





'What should I see?' asked Thanquol, as he stared into the swirling scry-orb Verminking produced out of nowhere.

'Doom. Yes-yes. Doom which will lead to your ascension,' said Verminking.

This did not exactly answer Thanquol's question. He had no idea how the swirling clouds within the orb amounted to doom or, indeed, his ascension. The grey seer was about to question the Verminlord further when the thick mists of the globe coalesced into an image. The image of a dwarf-thing...

Thorgrim Grudgebearer was bone-tired. Weary to his soul. He suspected his whole body ached, but all he could feel was the throb of pain from his wounded side. With his jaw set in unrelenting determination, the High King began the arduous journey up the spiral stair. Although he longed for sleep, this climb was a necessary ritual for Thorgrim – it was his way to both commemorate the fallen, and to rid his mind of the tumult of battle.

Despite the victory, his thoughts were awhirl. Ungrim – grown stranger than ever – had given the High King much to muse over, but that would have to wait. The stairs demanded his attention. Up and up he wound, each step bringing pain.

These stone-carved steps were the King's Stairs. They led upwards to the highest lookout, a porch upon the peak of Karaz-a-Karak. It was High King Alriksson, Thorgrim's predecessor, who had shown Thorgrim this place – the King's View. These were known as the Stairs of Remembrance. With each step, Thorgrim remembered one of the slain from the day's battle. He recalled each fallen dwarf, his name and clan. The journey took hours, yet Thorgrim always ran out of stairs before he ran out of names. The rest of the dead must await his return trip.

Opening the rune-marked door, Thorgrim felt the whipping wind of the peaks. He advanced onto the balcony-like cleft, the mountain's peak behind him. The air this high was crisp and thin. There were no stars visible – it had been that way since Morrslieb had been broken.

From the top of the world Thorgrim looked down upon the lesser peaks. Only now, in this private spot, did the High King begin to examine the events of the day. Ungrim – possessed of some fire spirit – had not wished to stay within Karaz-a-Karak. More hot-tempered than ever, Ungrim had already marched out, intending to lend aid to the Empire. By the few accounts Thorgrim had received, the Emperor was alive, but his nation was a ravaged ruin.

Deep in thought, Thorgrim never saw the black shadow unfold from the rocky peak. Spider-like, it crawled down a cliff-face before letting go.

In mid-air, the darksome shape somersaulted and drew forth its blades – one in each claw and a third in its tail.

It had taken Deathmaster Snikch – greatest of all assassins – huge efforts to reach the peak of Karaz-a-Karak undetected. The blades he clutched were warpforged, each triple blessed by the retchings of the Verminlord Lurklox. They could slice through gromril as easily as incisors could sink into a corpse. With all the momentum of his fall, Snikch drove the three blades into his target.

Thorgrim staggered forward, great stabs of pain coursing through him. As he fell to his knees he could see three blades jutting out of his chest. His last thoughts came in a rush, of the open door behind him, of so many grudges left unanswered. Then, finally: of course the hateful cowards had stabbed him in the back.

Tail lashing with excitement, Thanquol watched Snikch do the grisly deed, the assassin sawing with his tailblade. The runic door stood open behind him.

'That head will come to you, little horned one,' purred Skreech over his shoulder. 'You must take-show it before the Council of Thirteen. Reclaim the grey seers' rightful place.'

Thanquol, who had long anticipated himself on the Council of Thirteen, let his mind race with possibilities.

In the orb, Snikch was scrawling runes upon the stone.

As if guessing Thanquol's thoughts, Verminking explained, 'He is summoning Lurklox. Dwarf defences prevent skitterleaping, but his scratch-markings will overcome them. Soon an army of gutter runners will be inside Karaz-a-Karak. They will open the gates for our rabble army – the lesser Warlord Clans will be inside before the dwarf-things know. The dwarf realm will be utterly broken.'

'Then we have won, yes-yes?' asked Thanquol.

Verminking shook his head, his majestic horns swaying. 'We have won... much. But not all. The lizard-things and their lands are dead-gone – but Clan Pestilens is broken. We sense Vermalanx's fury. Don't forget Skrolk, or the seventh plaguelord – for he is hidden amongst the Under-Empire. Hidden even from our eyes. Clan Skryre has been humbled, but will return even more dangerous. And more goes on behind Clan Moulder's doors than you know.'

Skreech looked down upon the grey seer, his enormous clawhand patting Thanquol like a pet.

'And our new allies – the Everchosen, Chaos. They are most powerful of all. Yes-yes. We need-must not tell you. Yet we – you and us,' said the Verminlord, his myriad features shifting minutely, 'we will bide our time. One day it will all be ours... The Children of the Horned Rat Shall Inherit.'





WARHAMMER®

THANQUOL

BOOK II





THANQUOL

The Rules

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British Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library. Pictures used for illustrative purposes only.

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Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Rd, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS
Printed by C&C, in China.

www.games-workshop.com

INTRODUCTION

The winds of change are sweeping the world. The might of the Chaos Gods waxes strong, while the old powers wane. In this time of global strife, other eyes have been watching, awaiting the perfect moment to strike.

Rising from their subterranean lairs, the Skaven have launched their invasion of the surface world. The ravenous hordes spread outwards like a verminous tide, bringing all before it to ruin. Never creatures of half measures, the goal of the malevolent ratmen is nothing short of total domination. For their first step on this road to supremacy, the Skaven must annihilate their age-old enemies...

This book describes the Skaven uprising – their attacks upon Lustria, the Dwarf Kingdoms and the Empire. It was these realms, more than any other, that had denied the Skaven in the past, and it is they who will be the first to fall before this latest seething onslaught. Yet even as new weapons are unleashed, the clans become embroiled in the old ways – scheming and plotting against each other. Even the arrival of Verminlords from beyond the veil may not be enough to keep the anarchic Skaven hordes from self-destructing.

This book contains new scenarios and rules based on the events in *Warhammer: Thanquol*. It is a vital sourcebook for anybody interested in the loathsome ratmen's invasion of the world above the Under-Empire.

This book includes the following three chapters:

New Warhammer Rules: New rules you can use in any game of Warhammer that allow you to fight in the deadly jungles of Lustria.

New Units: New units that can be used in any game of Warhammer, including Thanquol himself, Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire, the Verminlords and Skaven Stormfiends, which let you bring the story of *Warhammer: Thanquol* to life on your tabletop.

Narrative Scenarios: A host of Warhammer scenarios based on the Skaven's ruthless assault on the surface world, as well as the Doom of Belegar campaign which lets you decide the fate of Karak Eight Peaks by fighting a series of linked battles.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is intended to be a companion volume to *Warhammer: Thanquol*. If you haven't read the story yet, then we highly recommend that you do so right away, as all of the material in this book is inspired by the dark tale you will read there.

For centuries the Skaven have lurked in the shadows, ever waiting for the right moment to strike en masse. Now the time has come, and the surface world seethes and boils with verminous ruin. This book will help you recreate the battles of this time in your own games.

We have written the scenarios in this book to be as flexible as possible, which will allow you to use whichever models you may have available. You do not have to use the actual forces that took part unless you wish to do so. That being said, you will find that they often require the use of certain models if you have them available, to represent characters and units that played a critical role in the battle. However, if you do not have the appropriate models, you can still play the scenario using the models you do have. In addition, if you wish, you can use the scenarios using different armies. Although based on battles from the events in *Warhammer: Thanquol*, each scenario presents both sides with a unique set of challenges to overcome, and it is both interesting and fun to see how other armies could have coped if they had been presented with the same situation.

As well as the scenarios, you'll find that we've included new rules for some of the most prominent heroes of these legendary times, such as Ungrim Ironfist, Last King of Karak Kadrin, and Thanquol, the warpstone-addicted Grey Seer who rides to battle atop Boneripper, his towering Rat Ogre bodyguard. These updated rules are in keeping with the changes that these characters undergo during the narrative. These new iterations of the characters can be used in the scenarios mentioned above, or added to your existing collection and used with the rest of your army in any other games that you play.

We have included some new Skaven units, such as the terrifying Skaven Stormfiends, which combine the fleshcrafting ingenuity of Clan Moulder with the arcane technology of Clan Skryre. You will also find rules for fielding the dread Verminlords that wreaked untold destruction during this time period. Again, while these units play a key part in some of the scenarios, they can also be used alongside your army in other games as you choose. The rules for the units presented in this book may be used alongside the rules in *Warhammer: Skaven*, though of course you may not field both versions of Thanquol and Boneripper in the same battle!

Several of the scenarios in this book take place in the rainforests of Lustria, as the Skaven engage in a full-on offensive against their ancient foes, the Lizardmen. Accordingly, we have included a set of rules for playing amid the mist-wreathed jungle, where deadly creatures, carnivorous plants and cursed treasure are just some of the dangers awaiting your army. Some scenarios will require the use of these rules, but you can also use them in any other games that you play, either because it feels appropriate, or because it sounds like it would be fun!

If that's not enough, you will find a series of Battlescrolls which let you field unique formations of troops alongside your army. These formations are drawn from key battles in the story that you will find in *Warhammer: Thanquol*, such as the First Clawpack of Clan Mors, the Dwarf Throng of Karaz-a-Karak and the Defenders of Middenheim. Each has its own special rules, representing the cunning stratagems and heroic deeds that come to pass as the Skaven pour from their subterranean lairs with single-minded fury. These formations feature in several of our scenarios, but we have also included rules which let you use them alongside your army in other games. Each is a wonderful hobby project in its own right, and gives you a great chance to collect and paint a force with a strong narrative theme.

Finally, this book contains the Doom of Belegar – a Lord of Battles campaign which brings together most of the new rules from this book and allows you to play through the Skaven invasion of Karak Eight Peaks.

As you can see, this book represents much more than just a selection of scenarios and the special rules to go with them. Instead, you should think of it as a toolbox from which you can pick and choose what to use in any games of Warhammer that you play. Whether used on its own, or when combined with the other books in the End Times series, it will ensure that your games of Warhammer will never be quite the same again!

ARMIES OF THE END TIMES

The rules for choosing your army are updated – you can now spend up to 50% of your points on Lords and up to 50% on Heroes. These update the rules for choosing your army that are presented in the *Warhammer* rulebook, and reflect the disposition of armies during the End Times. **The updated rules for choosing your army are used by all armies.**

THANQUOL NARRATIVE BATTLES

Later in this book you will find scenarios that recreate the pivotal battles featured throughout *Warhammer: Thanquol*. These scenarios will provide players with new ways to play, and a wealth of new tactical options to master.

USING NARRATIVE SCENARIOS

There are several ways in which you can use narrative scenarios. The first and most straightforward is simply to select a battle you are excited about from *Warhammer: Thanquol*, and use the relevant scenario to recreate it on your tabletop! The Armies section of each scenario provides guidance on the forces to use, so you can replay the battles using the armies and characters that were present in the story and recreate the key moments.

Another way to use these scenarios is to play the Doom of Belegar campaign, with one player commanding the forces of the Skaven, while their opponent commands the armies of the Dwarfs. See the Doom of Belegar section (page 14) for details of how to link your battles in this way.

PLAYING NARRATIVE SCENARIOS

However you choose to use these scenarios, the following modifications to the Fighting a Battle rules in the *Warhammer* rulebook apply.

THE ARMIES

Each scenario will state which armies must be used in order to fight the battle. In addition to the army lists, most scenarios also list a number of characters and/or units that must be taken if they are available, to represent leaders and regiments that played a pivotal part in the battle. If you cannot field them, it doesn't stop you from using the scenario with the forces you do have available.

Special Characters

Many of the narrative scenarios in this book include particular characters appropriate to the story being retold. You should decide with your opponent whether you include other special characters (who may not have been present, or even alive, during the battle in question) when playing these scenarios.

THE BATTLEFIELD AND DEPLOYMENT

The deployment map, deployment zones and instructions for a narrative scenario are included with the scenario itself.

SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES

Most narrative scenarios will have one or more special rules. In most cases, these special rules are fully described in the body of the narrative scenario itself, but in some cases, a narrative scenario will use special rules found either elsewhere in this volume or in other End Times books. We recommend that you familiarise yourself with them before playing the relevant scenarios.

Some scenario special rules and victory conditions only apply to specific characters or units. If the specified character or unit isn't present in your version of the battle, then the associated special rule or victory condition is ignored: it only applies if the relevant model has been chosen as one of the armies being used for the battle.







CHAPTER 1

New Warhammer Rules

REALMS OF THE LIZARDMEN

Many of the battles described in *Warhammer: Thanquol* take place amidst the temple-cities and Lustrian jungles that are home to the ancient Lizardmen and their Slann masters. The following special rules will allow you to include the effects of this terrain in your battles.

Several of the scenarios included in this book require the use of the following rules. When this is the case, it will be clearly indicated in the list of special rules for the scenario in question. In addition, you can agree with your opponent to use any of the following rules for games that are set in the realms of the Lizardmen.

ANCIENT TEMPLE-CITIES

Sometimes a scenario will state that the Ancient Temple-cities rules apply to a battle.

Ancient Ruins: Every Mystical Monument, Building and Arcane Architecture terrain feature has the Ancient Ruins terrain type in addition to its normal rules (see the *Warhammer* rulebook).

Hidden Treasures: A unit that starts its Movement phase either touching or inside an Ancient Ruin can search the Ancient Ruin. If it does so, it may not move in that Movement phase. Roll a D6 when a unit searches an Ancient Ruin. On a roll of 1-5 they find nothing. On a roll of 6, they have discovered a hidden treasure. The player commanding the unit receives 100 additional victory points at the end of the battle, as long as it has not been destroyed or fled the table.

Wrath of the Ancients: Roll a D6 when a unit discovers a hidden treasure. On a roll of 1 or 2, roll the D6 again and refer to the table below. If the unit that discovered the treasure is from *Warhammer: Lizardmen*, then no roll is required (they are preserving the treasure rather than stealing it).



D6	Result
1	**Annihilation:** The Ancient Ruin explodes. All units within 6" of it suffer D6 Strength 8 hits. Then remove the terrain feature from the table.
2	**Cursed:** For the remainder of the game, the unit must re-roll all successful To Hit rolls for shooting or close combat attacks, and all successful saves.
3	**Boulder Trap:** The unit suffers D6 Strength 8 hits.
4	**Gas Trap:** All models in the unit suffer a Strength 2 hit with no armour saves allowed.
5	**Poisoned Darts Trap:** The unit suffers 3D6 Strength 1 hits that have the Killing Blow special rule.
6	**Horrifying Visions:** The unit must take a Panic test.



LUSTRIAN JUNGLE

Sometimes a scenario will state that the Lustrian Jungle rules apply to a battle.

Jungle Terrain: All Forests are considered to be Jungle (do not roll on the Mysterious Terrain table). Skirmishers treat Jungle as dangerous terrain. All other models treat Jungle as impassable terrain.



Jungle Rivers: All Rivers are considered to be Jungle Rivers (do not roll on the Mysterious Terrain table). Jungle Rivers are dangerous terrain.

Jungle Events: At the start of each turn, the player whose turn is taking place must roll 3D6 on the table below. If the General of the rolling player's army is from *Warhammer: Lizardmen*, then the player is allowed to re-roll results of 7 or less.

3D6	Result
3	**Lashworm Attack:** One unit chosen by the opposing player suffers D6 Strength 4 hits.
4	**Stifling Humidity:** Units cannot march this turn, and subtract 1 from their charge range.
5	**Hopelessly Lost:** One unit chosen by the opposing player has the Stupidity special rule for the turn.
6	**Foul Vapours:** One unit chosen by the opposing player must subtract 1 from their Strength characteristic for the turn.
7	**Jungle Haze:** The ranges for all spells and missile weapons are halved for the turn.
8-13	**All Is Well:** Nothing happens.
14	**Native Guide:** One unit of the rolling player's choice can treat Jungle terrain and Jungle Rivers as open ground for the turn.
15	**Swarm:** One enemy unit of the rolling player's choice immediately takes D6 Strength 1 hits with no armour saves allowed. The selected unit may only make a Hold charge reaction if it is charged this turn.
16	**Massive Carnivorous Plant:** One unit of the rolling player's choice that is within 3" of a piece of Jungle terrain takes a single Strength 6 hit with the Heroic Killing Blow special rule.
17	**Madcap Fungus Spore Cloud:** One unit (friend or foe) of the rolling player's choice must take a Leadership test. If the test is failed, the unit suffers D6 Wounds with no armour saves allowed. Whatever the result of the Leadership test, the unit gains the Immune to Psychology special rule for the rest of the battle.
18	**Quicksand:** Each model in a unit of the rolling player's choice must take an Initiative test. If the test is failed, the model is removed as a casualty with no saves of any kind allowed.



LORDS OF BATTLE CAMPAIGNS

The Lords of Battle campaign rules allow two players to fight a series of linked Warhammer battles. The results of one battle will affect what happens in the next, with victory hanging in the balance until the final battle.

We have included a complete Lords of Battle campaign later on in this book (page 14). The following rules must be used if you decide to fight the campaign, and will also apply to any other Lords of Battle campaigns that you fight.

OVERVIEW

At the heart of every Lords of Battle campaign is a *battlechart*. Each battlechart consists of several *battle boxes* that are linked together by *campaign arrows*. You must follow the instructions in a battle box, beginning with the starting *roster box*. More often than not, a battle box will contain details of a scenario that must be fought, the outcome of which will determine the next battle box to be used.

The campaign continues in this way, with the players following the instructions in the battle boxes and following the arrows on the battlechart, until they are directed to a *victory box*. The victory box will tell you which player has won the campaign. A typical Lords of Battle campaign will consist of 3-5 battles, but they can have more and very occasionally will have fewer.

Some battle boxes allow the players to use one or more *stratagems*. These affect the way a battle is fought by allowing the use of special tactics or additional troops, and are fully described in the following rules. The battlecharts and different stratagems that can be used mean that there are hundreds of different ways for a campaign to unfold, allowing you to re-fight each Lords of Battle campaign many times without any two campaigns being exactly the same.

After completing the instructions in an battle box, follow the campaign arrow to the next battle box that must be carried out. If a battle box has several campaign arrows leading away from it, then the one you must use will be clearly indicated.

USING THE BATTLECHART

You will require a battlechart in order to fight a Lords of Battle campaign. A battlechart that allows you to fight a Lords of Battle campaign based upon King Belegar's defence of Karak Eight Peaks can be found on page 14.

Each battlechart is split into *battle boxes* that are joined together by *campaign arrows*.



BATTLE BOXES

A battle box contains a set of instructions that must be followed. Carry out the instructions in the box being used, and then follow one of the campaign arrows leading from the battle box to the next battle box on the chart.

Scenarios

Some battle boxes contain details of a scenario that the players must play. The outcome of the scenario will usually be used to determine which of the campaign arrows leading from the box must be used next.

In general, all of the standard instructions for the scenario being used are followed normally. Unless stated otherwise, the only exception to this is the armies that are used for the scenario; the players must use the armies from their campaign rosters for the battle (see opposite), instead of the armies described in the scenario.



CAMPAIGN ARROWS

Each battle box is linked to one or more other battle boxes by a set of campaign arrows. If a box has more than one campaign arrow leading from it, then the campaign arrows will be labelled to indicate which one is used. Note that campaign arrows are one-way; only ever use the campaign arrows that lead *away* from the battle box.



ROSTER BOX

The first battle box on every battlechart is called the *roster box*. It contains all of the instructions each player must follow when selecting the armies they will use in the campaign (see The Armies, opposite). After both players have selected their armies, follow the campaign arrow from the roster box to the next battle box on the battlechart.



SPECIAL RULES AND STRATAGEMS

Most battlecharts will include one or two battle boxes containing special rules and/or bonus stratagems (bonus stratagems are described on page 13). These battle boxes do not have campaign arrows leading to or from them; instead, they apply in all of the campaign games that you fight, unless other restrictions apply.

In addition to this, standard battle boxes that contain a scenario to be fought will often include special rules and/or bonus stratagems. In this case, the special rules and stratagems apply only to that specific battle.

Scenario special rules apply as normal.

VICTORY BOX

A victory box is a battle box that marks the end of the campaign. It will state which player has won the campaign, and the level of victory that they achieved. The higher the level of victory, the greater the bragging rights a player earns when recounting tales of the campaign to friends afterwards!

Lords of Battle campaign victories are rated on the following scale, from lowest to highest:

- Narrow Victory
- Heroic Victory
- Legendary Victory

THE ARMIES

Details of the armies that can be used to fight a Lords of Battle campaign will be listed in the roster box on the campaign battlechart. These instructions will also list any restrictions on the models or units that can be used in each player's army. In addition, the players must determine the *strategic characteristics* of their General, as described shortly.

Both players will need a Warhammer army of at least 1,000 points. The armies can be as large as you like, but we've found that 2,000 or 3,000 points is ideal.

Unless you and your opponent agree otherwise, you must use the same army for all of the battles that you fight in the campaign. If you prefer, you can agree to change your army lists between battles but the army Generals should be the same throughout the campaign.

These things aside, the players' armies are chosen using the normal rules. Remember that you may get the chance to add more points to your roster during the campaign, so be sure to set the points level for the starting roster with this in mind.

BATTLE CASUALTIES

The casualties suffered in one battle are assumed to be replaced in time for the next battle, and don't 'carry over'. So, if a character dies, or a unit is wiped out, you can use them in your next game. However, you will find that the instructions in a battle box will often say that the side that lost the last battle has to leave some units out of the next battle it fights. This means that losing a battle will sometimes leave you under-strength in future engagements – as you would expect.



STRATEGIC CHARACTERISTICS

In a Lords of Battle campaign, each player's army General has three additional *strategic characteristics*: *Guile*, *Persuasion* and *Planning*. These are used to help decide the effectiveness of any strategies that the General tries to carry out during the campaign, as described next.

GUILE

Guile represents the General's natural cunning. It is used to determine if a General can spot a trap before it is sprung, or a way to gain an advantage over the enemy.

PLANNING

Planning represents the General's ability to come up with and execute a plan. It is used when a General wants to carry out an action that requires things to be prepared in advance.

PERSUASION

Persuasion represents the General's ability to influence others. It is used when the General must convince people to work towards his own ends, or if he wants to curry favour.

DETERMINING STRATEGIC CHARACTERISTICS

All three strategic characteristics have a value than can range from 1 to 10 – the higher the better.

Unless the instructions for a campaign state otherwise, each player receives 10 points to divide between the three strategic characteristics of their General. The points can be divided as desired, so long as each strategic characteristic is given at least 1 point, and none is given more than 5.

Designer's Note: *Modifiers will sometimes apply to a General's strategic characteristics. Modifiers can take a characteristic to more than 5, but cannot take it to more than 10.*

USING STRATEGIC CHARACTERISTICS

Strategic characteristics are used for *tests* and for *comparisons*.

Tests: When called upon to *test* a strategic characteristic, roll a D6. If the result of the roll is equal to or less than the strategic characteristic being tested then the test is passed; if the roll is higher, the test is failed. A roll of 1 always succeeds and a roll of 6 is always a failure.

Comparisons: When called upon to *compare* strategic characteristics, each player rolls a D6 and adds the strategic characteristic that is being compared to their roll. Whoever has the higher result is the winner of the roll. In the case of a tie, make the comparison again.

STRATAGEMS

Sometimes, a battle box will say that a player is allowed to pick one or more *stratagems* before a battle starts. When this happens, the player is allowed to pick the stratagem(s) from one of the following lists and use them in the ensuing battle. For example, if a battle box said that a player was allowed to pick a common stratagem, then they could pick one of the stratagems from the list of common stratagems below.

Stratagems are picked before the battlefield has been set up or deployment has begun. A player may not pick the same stratagem more than once per game. After a battle is fought, all stratagems that have not been used are lost.



COMMON STRATAGEMS

Family Heirloom: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. Select one character in your army. The selected character can be given one magic item worth up to D6x25 points, in addition to any other magic items the character has already been given. This item does not count towards the points limit on the value of magic items that the character may take, but all other restrictions on taking magic items must be followed as normal.

Historic Landmark: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. Set up a Mystical Monument of your choice anywhere on the battlefield.

Magic Potion: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. Up to D3 units from your army are allowed to drink from a cauldron filled with a mysterious magic potion. Roll a D6 for each unit that does so:

D6	Effect
1	All models in the unit add 1 to the Movement and Initiative characteristics on their profile for the duration of the battle.
2	All models in the unit add 1 to the Weapon Skill and Ballistic Skill characteristics on their profile for the duration of the battle.
3	All models in the unit add 1 to the Strength characteristic on their profile for the duration of the battle.
4	All models in the unit add 1 to the Toughness characteristic on their profile for the duration of the battle.
5	All models in the unit add 1 to the Attacks characteristic on their profile for the duration of the battle.
6	All models in the unit have the Unbreakable special rule for the duration of the battle.

GUILE STRATAGEMS

Assassin: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. Roll a D6; on a roll of 4 or more, the opposing General suffers a Wound, with no armour save allowed. On a roll of 2-3, one unit champion of your choice in the opposing army is slain (if there are no champions, then count this as a result of 4+). On a roll of 1, nothing happens.

Deception: Use this stratagem immediately after deployment and before the first turn. Two units in your army (including any characters that have joined them) may swap places. Both units must remain in the formation they were in before they swapped positions. Then, each unit must be placed so that centre of the unit is where the centre of the other unit was located before the positions of the units were swapped. Both units must be legally deployed (as per the scenario instructions) after the swap has taken place.

Spy: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. Your opponent must show you their army roster, and tell you where any characters and/or hidden models are deployed in their army. You may freely examine the roster or request this information at any time.

Steal the Initiative: Use this stratagem immediately after deployment and before the first turn. You may choose whether or not you take the first turn, no matter what the scenario instructions say. If both players use this stratagem then they cancel each other out and the normal rules are used instead.

PLANNING STRATAGEMS

Ambush: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. You can deploy one infantry or one cavalry unit, plus any attached characters, as if they had the Scouts rule. Roll a D6 for the unit after deployment is complete and before the first turn. On a roll of 4+ it can declare a charge on the first turn.

Feigned Retreat: Use this stratagem immediately after deployment and before the first turn. Any number of units in your army can make a move straight back a number of inches up to their Movement value. Units that make this move cannot wheel, reform or march, and must end up further from all enemy units than they were at the start of the move.

Forced March: Use this stratagem in your first turn. Any number of units in your army can march at triple their Movement rate in that turn, instead of only double.

Night Fight: Roll 4D6 at the start of each player turn. The result is the maximum distance that line of sight can be traced in that player turn.

Outflank: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. You can hold back any of your fast cavalry, flyers, and characters on cavalry mounts or mounts with the Fly special rule as reinforcements. These units must arrive at the start of turn two, from a table edge that is in neither side's deployment zone.

Training: Use this stratagem immediately after deployment and before the first turn. Select one non-character unit in your army. The unit adds 1 to the Weapon Skill and Ballistic Skill characteristics on its profile for the duration of the battle.

PERSUASION STRATAGEMS

Local Scouts: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. Secretly roll for each piece of mysterious terrain before the battle starts, making a note of the result. Reveal the relevant information the first time the terrain is entered. If both players have local scouts, roll openly for each piece of mysterious terrain before deployment.

Inspiration: Use this stratagem immediately before deployment. Select one character in your army. That character adds 1 to the Weapon Skill and Ballistic Skill characteristics on their profile for the duration of the battle.

Propaganda: Use this stratagem immediately after deployment and before the first turn. The opposing army's General subtracts 1 from the Leadership characteristic on their profile for the duration of the battle.

BONUS STRATAGEMS

As noted earlier, sometimes an battle box will have additional *bonus stratagems* that can be used in a specific scenario or through a specific campaign. Details of these stratagems will be found on the battlechart for the campaign that is being fought.



LORDS OF BATTLE CAMPAIGN: THE DOOM OF BELEGAR

STARTING ROSTERS

Each player chooses an army to an equal points value agreed before the game. One player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Dwarfs*. The other player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Skaven*. Each player must generate a Guile, Persuasion and Planning value for their army General (page 11). The Dwarf player adds 1 to his General's Planning characteristic, and the Skaven player adds 1 to his General's Guile characteristic.

DWARF ARMY

The Dwarf army must include the following units or options if the models needed to represent them are available:

- Belegar Ironhammer

SKAVEN ARMY

The Skaven army must include the following units or options if the models needed to represent them are available:

- Queek Headtaker

CAMPAIGN SPECIAL RULES

The following special rules apply to all games that are fought as part of a Doom of Belegar campaign:

Endless Hordes of Ratkin: If a unit of Clanrats or Skavenslaves is completely destroyed, then a new but otherwise identical unit enters play as reinforcements at the start of the next Skaven player turn.

Death Before Dishonour: All units from *Warhammer: Dwarfs* have the Unbreakable special rule.

THE OUTER GATES

Fight the Breaking of the Mountains scenario (page 54).

STRATAGEMS

Before fighting each of the three battles that make up the scenario, the players must compare one of their strategic characteristics. Before the first battle, the players must compare Planning. Before the second battle they must compare Guile, and before the third battle they must compare Persuasion. The winner of each comparison can pick one stratagem, that must be used in the ensuing battle. The stratagem can either be a Common stratagem, or one that matches the characteristic that was compared. For example, winning the Guile comparison would allow you to take a Common stratagem or a Guile Stratagem.

THE UNDERHALL

Fight the Dawn Attack scenario from the *Warhammer* rulebook, using the Darkest Depths special rules from *Warhammer: Nagash*, in addition to the special rules that normally apply.

Before playing the scenario, each player can take a strategic characteristic test to see if they receive a stratagem (see next). The winner of the Outer Gates scenario is allowed to either take an extra test for a different strategic characteristic, or re-roll their first test if that test was a failure.

SKAVEN STRATAGEMS

The Skaven General can test Guile, Planning or Persuasion. If they pass the test, they receive the following stratagem depending on the characteristic they tested:

Guile: Secret Tunnels. The Skaven player can use the Secret Tunnels Campaign stratagem (opposite) in this battle.

Persuasion: Allies. The Skaven player can use the Allies Campaign stratagem (opposite) in this battle.

Planning: Foresight. The Skaven player can use one Common or Planning stratagem of their choice in this battle.

DWARF STRATAGEMS

The Dwarf General can test Guile, Planning or Persuasion. If they pass the test, they receive the following stratagem depending on the characteristic they tested:

Guile: Cunning. The Dwarf player can use one Common or Guile stratagem of their choice in this battle.

Persuasion: Local Scouts. The Dwarf player can use the Local Scouts stratagem in this battle.

Planning: Defensive Positions. The Dwarf player can use the Defensive Positions Campaign stratagem (opposite) in this battle.

Who won the Underhall scenario?

Dwarfs (or Draw)

THE TABLES TURNED

Fight the Blood and Glory scenario from the *Warhammer* rulebook, using the Darkest Depths special rules from *Warhammer: Nagash* in addition to the special rules that normally apply.

STRATAGEMS

Before fighting the scenario, each player must test one of their strategic characteristics. The Dwarf player subtracts 1 from the result of the roll. If their test is successful, the player can pick one stratagem to be used in the ensuing battle. The stratagem can either be a Common stratagem, or one that conforms to the characteristic that was tested. For example, a successful Guile test would allow you to take a Common stratagem or a Guile stratagem.

CAMPAIGN OUTCOME

The winner of The Tables Turned achieves a heroic victory.

Skaven

HALL OF PILLARED IRON

Fight the Battle for the Pass scenario from the *Warhammer* rulebook, using the Darkest Depths special rules from *Warhammer: Nagash* in addition to the special rules that normally apply. (Note that the battle is being fought in a narrow cavern rather than a mountain pass!)

STRATAGEMS

Before fighting the scenario, each player must test one of their strategic characteristics. The Skaven player subtracts 1 from the result of the roll. If their test is successful, the player can pick one stratagem to be used in the ensuing battle. The stratagem can either be a Common stratagem, or one that conforms to the characteristic that was tested. For example, a successful Guile test would allow you to take a Common stratagem or a Guile stratagem.

CAMPAIGN OUTCOME

If the Skaven win Hall of Pillared Iron, then the Skaven player achieves a legendary victory.

If the Dwarfs win Hall of Pillared Iron, then the Dwarf player achieves a narrow victory.

CAMPAIGN STRATAGEMS

Allies: You can add an allied unit worth D6x50 points to your army. All the allied units that you take must be selected from a single army book, but do not have to obey any of the restrictions that apply to choosing an army (i.e. you do not have to take a General or include three units, or apply any of the percentage limitations on what you choose). If your army includes any allied units, then the Trusted, Suspicious and Desperate Allies rules from the *Warhammer* rulebook must be used, and also the Fragile Alliances rule if your army includes any Skaven or Dark Elves.

Defensive Positions: The Pitfalls special rule (see *Warhammer: Nagash*) is used during the Skaven player's turn (i.e. Pitfalls only affect the Skaven army). In addition, units belonging to the Dwarf army count as being in Hard Cover until they move (for any reason) from their starting position.



Secret Tunnels: You can place D3 units in reserve instead of deploying them on the battlefield. These units can enter play as reinforcements, starting from the first turn. You must test Planning after committing the unit to the battle, but before it is set up. If the test is passed, it can enter from either of the narrow table edges as well as your own long table edge. If the test is failed, the unit can either be returned to reserves, or enter from your long table edge.





CHAPTER 2

New Armies and Units

THANQUOL AND BONERIPPER

Ascendant Grey Seer and Enhanced Bodyguard

Through magic, manipulation and shrewd intuition, Thanquol had served the Under-Empire on many missions. In every deed and every action, Thanquol had but one goal: how he could exploit the situation to best serve his own needs.

Like every skaven, Thanquol was a self-serving, ambitious opportunist – however, no other could match the grey seer's good fortune. Whether it was precognition or the blessing of the Horned Rat, the grey seer had an uncanny sixth sense that allowed him to land feet first no matter what. With a twitching of his tail, Thanquol would alter war plans or stratagems at the last minute. This was often a probe for new advantages, but could simply have been a sudden strong intuition. In the past, such hasty re-directions allowed his armies to avoid ambushes, or pointed him in the direction of undiscovered treasures.

Not all of Thanquol's last-minute masterplans worked out. In fact, few, if any, of his ideas panned out according to their initial design. His constant tinkering and meddling invariably left the original plan so altered that no-one, least of all Thanquol, was entirely sure what was supposed to happen next. However, as Thanquol was a powerful mage, and also incredibly lucky, the Council of Thirteen learned that the end results were as often as not better than expected.

Indeed, for many years, Thanquol had managed to profit from his high standing with the Council of Thirteen – so much so that his horned peers could only look on with envy. The grey seer had a knack for wheedling himself into prime position to be rewarded with many, more tangible, assets. Chief amongst these prizes was his rat ogre bodyguard, Boneripper or, more properly, a series of rat ogre bodyguards named Boneripper – for none of them lived for very long. Each one was larger and bore more mechanically enhanced parts than the last, although no few used re-animated pieces of their former namesakes as well.

Richly rewarded as he was, Thanquol could afford more and more warpstone. Securing a steady supply of that precious commodity became a prime goal of his missions. The twisted, prophetic visions that the warpstone granted the grey seer had always paid off. There was a downside, however, as Thanquol had become completely addicted to the dangerous substance. Other skaven found that even a nibble of pure warpstone had horrific consequences, but no matter how much Thanquol ingested, he never seemed troubled by it. He could grind down large nuggets, boosting his powers hundredfold with no disastrous effects.

As events unfolded, and the grey seers were manoeuvred out of their ascendant position, Thanquol was just returning from Tilea. With his coffers full of slaves and warpstone, his personal power had never been greater. Like his peers, Thanquol was fearful of this ominous new development, but rather than railing at the indignity of the situation, he saw opportunity. With Grey Seer Kritislik dead, there was an empty seat on the Council of Thirteen. He needed only to prove his worth to the remaining Lords of Decay – and ensure none of his fellow grey seers stood in his way.

When Great Warlock Skribolt asked for Thanquol's assistance during the Clan Skryre-led attack upon Nuln, Thanquol – ever full of himself – was certain he was asked because of his high standing, his knowledge of the man-things, and his successful attack years ago upon the very same city. He was happy to oblige Skribolt, seeing a chance to prove his prowess once and for all. As was often the case, though, the grey seer had badly misjudged.

Skribolt, like many others, had long-standing grudge-debts against the horned mages. Without wishing to openly attack the grey seer, Skribolt did the next best thing – he pinned all the blame for every failure upon Thanquol. This, along with separating the sorcerer from his bodyguard under the pretence of 'repairs' seemed a sure way to dispose of him. However, Skribolt could not have anticipated the grey seer's amazing ability to somehow come out on top in every situation.

Driven by desperation, Thanquol attempted to summon a Verminlord. This was always a nerve-racking experience for any grey seer, but was even more so for Thanquol. His previous attempt had summoned a rampaging Bloodthirster – and not just any, but Skarbrand, the Destroyer from Beyond. Although the end result was perhaps more devastating, it was an experience that had rightfully left a mark upon the grey seer.

As fortune would have it – with the cursed moon that men called Morrslieb dragged closer, and the tides of Chaos growing stronger than ever before – Thanquol's summoning brought forth not just a Verminlord, but perhaps one of the most powerful of the rat daemons to ever walk the world – Skreech Verminking.

Anxious to get his claws dirty in the mortal realm, Verminking became Thanquol's patron, aiding the grey seer in usurping leadership of the Nuln attack from Clan Skryre. It was Verminking that enhanced Boneripper,

using his magics to enlarge the creature and amalgamating several other specimens within that hulking beast. Boneripper was akin to all rat ogres, only greater in every respect; more muscle-bound, bestial, and absolutely hostile towards everyone save Thanquol and its creator.

Skreech Verminking also ensured that the warlock engineers outfitted the giant rat ogre with the latest and most devastating weaponry. Thus, when Thanquol met his 'improved' Boneripper, the beast bore a warpfire thrower upon each of its four arms – enough firepower to immolate entire enemy regiments. For closer encounters, warp braziers could be affixed – wrecking balls of burning warpstone that struck with the impact of falling meteors.

Despite his callous and self-centred ways, Thanquol had always been fond of his Bonerippers. This was not so much an emotional attachment as it was the simple relief of knowing that he was watched over by a sturdy and loyal, albeit mindless, bodyguard. Naturally, with his protector now grown huge and better armed than ever, Thanquol's appreciation likewise increased. The new Boneripper was so large that the grey seer could scramble up its back, using it as a monstrous mount of sorts.

Thanquol and Boneripper made a fearsome duo, the arcane might of the grey seer complementing the savage brawn of the giant rat ogre. While some may have pointed out that Thanquol's blessings were merely down to good fortune, the grey seer himself claimed that, this time, his genius could not be denied. It was possible that all cowered before him because of his towering rat ogre – but Thanquol knew it simply to be his rightful due.



THANQUOL AND BONERIPPER . . . . . 650 points

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld	Troop Type
Thanquol and Boneripper	6	4	3	6	5	8	5	6	7	Monster (Special Character)

Thanquol and Boneripper can be included in a Skaven army. Their points cost counts towards your Lords allowance.

Thanquol and his mount, Boneripper, have a combined characteristics profile. They are treated as a single model with an armour save of 6+ for all rules purposes.

You may not take Thanquol and Boneripper from Warhammer: Thanquol *in the same army as Thanquol and Boneripper from* Warhammer: Skaven.

MAGIC:

Thanquol is a Level 4 Wizard. He uses spells from the Skaven Spells of Ruin or Plague (see *Warhammer: Skaven*) in any combination. Thanquol can choose to substitute any one of his spells for *The Dreaded Thirteenth Spell.*

EQUIPMENT:

- Warpfire projectors (page 41)

OPTIONS:

- May replace warpfire projectors with warpfire braziers (see below) . . . . . *free*

SPECIAL RULES:

Large Target, Terror, Unbreakable.

Blessings of the Horned Rat: Thanquol and Boneripper have a 4+ ward save.

Boneripper's Warpfire Projectors: If Boneripper is equipped with warpfire projectors, he can make two warpfire projector attacks in each of his Shooting phases. These attacks are completely resolved one at a time, and may be directed at different targets if desired. In addition, he re-rolls all failed To Wound rolls when shooting with these weapons.

Warpstone Addiction: Thanquol does not suffer a Wound if the result of a warpstone generated power dice roll is a 1.

MAGIC ITEMS:

Staff of the Horned Rat: Arcane Item. The bearer adds 1 to the result of any casting roll for a spell from the Skaven Spells of Ruin or Plague.

Warp-amulet: Talisman. Roll a D6 at the start of each of the controlling player's turns. On a roll of 5+ the bearer recovers 1 Wound that was lost previously in the battle.

Warpstone Tokens: Thanquol starts the battle with D6+2 warpstone tokens (see *Warhammer: Skaven*).

WARPFIRE BRAZIERS

Thanquol's latest Boneripper can switch out his warpfire projectors for something more suited to close combat: warpfire braziers. Trailing green flame like some sickened meteor, these enormous wrecking balls allow Boneripper to pulverise stone or smash through armour with ease.

Range	Strength	Special Rules
Combat	+1	Flaming Attacks, Multiple Wounds (D3), Storm of Attacks Warp-fumes, Warpstone Weapon

Storm of Attacks: A model equipped with warpfire braziers can re-roll all failed To Wound rolls in the Close Combat phase (including Impact Hits and Stomps). However, it never benefits from the Extra Attack special rule for having more than one close combat weapon.

Warp-fumes: At the beginning of any round of close combat in which a model equipped with warpfire braziers is engaged in combat, all models (friend or foe) in base contact with that model must pass a Toughness test or suffer a single Wound with no armour save allowed.

Warpstone Weapon: Warpstone Weapons and attacks made by them count as magical.



LORD SKREECH VERMINKING

The Rat King

Amongst the Children of the Horned Rat there was a legend that, one day, the thirteen-headed one would rise. It was said that this Rat King would usher in a new era, bringing closer the day when the Great Horned One would come forth and the entire world would be made into a nest-lair of ruination. This mythical figure would prove to be Skreech Verminking, mightiest of the Verminlords.

Verminking's tale began long ago, in a different age of the world. The nascent race of skaven had only recently discovered a huge warpstone meteor interred in the sundered mountain called Cripple Peak. It was then, and remains to this day, the largest deposit of that coveted substance yet found. The skaven, however, were not the first to lay claim to it.

Cripple Peak was the domain of the father of necromancers – the great Nagash. He had turned the mountain into an undead stronghold, and his shambling minions mined deep underground, extracting the warpstone for some fell purpose of the necromancer.

So it was that the skaven made war, bursting into the lower mines of Nagashizzar, or the Cursed Pit as the ratmen came to know it. An endless battle of attrition began, with the skaven pitting their vast numbers against a foe that could never be slain. The war stretched into years, then into decades. The Council of Thirteen craved the limitless power offered by the warpstone, but no matter how many warriors they ordered into the conflict, they could not break the stalemate. For his part, the Great Necromancer could find no way drive off the skaven that infested the tunnels under the mountain, and so was unable to bring his own dark plans to fruition.

In the end, Nagash offered an unholy pact to the Council of Thirteen. In return for peace, the Great Necromancer would supply the skaven with warpstone mined below Cripple Peak. After much deliberation, the Council agreed and claw-marked the pact. In truth, the Council desired all of the warpstone, yet even their reserves were finite. This compromise at least offered some return.

Nagash soon sent rotting emissaries to the Council of Thirteen. He offered more warpstone if the skaven would lure greenskin tribes into the Cursed Pit. The Council of Thirteen agreed, but they also redoubled their number of spies, as they were intrigued about what their foe was plotting. At first, there was little to report. However, it soon became obvious that powerful magic was at work. Storm clouds of energy revealed a spell that would reshape the world itself. The Council of Thirteen hastily convened, for Nagash's Great Ritual was underway.

Through their scrying orb, the skaven saw what they feared. Far to the south an innumerable legion of undead was flowing north, like a river of bone. Millions of restless dead strode relentlessly towards Nagashizzar in perhaps the mightiest army the world had ever seen. Before that host, the living would be snuffed out like a candle's flame in a black whirlwind.

For the first time, the Council of Thirteen voted unanimously – they had to stop Nagash. Unsure if their weapons could harm a being of such stature, one of the Council suggested a blade of purest warpstone be forged, and he oversaw that work. And so it went, with each member contributing to the task at hand. Finally, a last Council member sent forth spies via secret tunnels to deliver the fell blade into the hands of an unwitting pawn.

The plan worked – but only barely. Nagash was cut into a thousand pieces. Even in defeat, the Great Necromancer had lashed out at his foe. Far away in Skavenblight the Council of Thirteen was stricken with the arcane feedback of that spell. It was so potent that two of the Lords of Decay dropped dead, blood spraying from their eyes and ears. Yet it was over – the most powerful necromancer the world had ever known was stopped. The skaven scurried to collect the pieces of Nagash, taking them to the warpforges to destroy them. Without his great will, Nagash's legions were no more than bones in the desert.

The skaven grew strong and proliferated. Deep they tunnelled under the Worlds Edge Mountains, establishing many lair-nests. In Nagash's absence, the skaven had been poised to claim swathes of the surface world, and the Horned Rat was pleased. Yet his pride soon turned to wrath, as petty rivalries and internal strife bled all momentum from the skaven's progress.

In anger, the skaven deity plucked up each of the Lords of Decay, placing them in a dark hole within his realm. There they were rejoined with the members of their Council who had been killed by Nagash's spell – for the Horned Rat had debated about how to reward these supplicants. How long the Lords of Decay remained in that pit was unknown, for time passes strangely in all the corners of that shadowy limbo. In that hellish pit, there was nothing to sustain the fallen Lords of Decay except the scraps of failed plots thrown to them by the Horned Rat. So, day after day, year after year, the disgraced Lords of Decay could do nothing but gnaw upon missed opportunities, point claws at one another, and bicker.



In the end, the Horned Rat relented. Besides, he was fond of his children, flaws and all, and since then no single Council had surpassed the deeds of that banished group. With an enormous claw, the Horned Rat drew forth his errant congregants. What emerged from out of that pit, however, was not twelve Lords of Decay, but a single entity – a hideous amalgamation of the entire Council of Thirteen. Twisted and tail-locked, they were now one, squirming creature. The Horned Rat looked over the creation he had wrought and deemed it would not quite do. With a searing bolt of black lightning, the rat god formed the twisted shape into a form more pleasing to him – that of a Verminlord – and with a final, vomitous belch, he anointed it with a portion of his own godly power. Horns still sprouting and twisting, the Verminlord rose from this baptism of filth, and thus was Skreech Verminking born.

Verminking was a Verminlord like no other. He incorporated within his being the stealth of Clan Eshin, the arcane talents of the grey seers, the technological insight of Clan Skryre, the flesh-crafting skills of Clan Moulder, and the warrior ambition of the Warlord Clans. Although Clan Pestilens had not yet been formed at the time of Nagash's fall, the forebears of their founders were upon that Council of Thirteen, and they too now resided within Skreech's twisted body. In this manner, Verminking bore great knowledge of disease, along with a burning zeal to spread that corruption in the name of the Horned Rat.

At long last, after so much time in the black pit, Verminking was free. He glared into the mortal realm, scratching at the ever thinning walls that separated the shadowy realm of ruin from the world of mortals.

LORD SKREECH VERMINKING ..... 650 points

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld	Troop Type
Skreech Verminking	8	8	4	6	6	6	10	5	8	Monster (Special Character)

Lord Skreech Verminking can be included in a Skaven army. His points cost counts towards your Lords allowance.

MAGIC:

Skreech Verminking is a Level 4 Wizard. One of his spells must be *The Dreaded Thirteenth Spell*; the remainder of his spells can be generated from the Skaven Spells of Ruin or Plague in any combination.



SPECIAL RULES:

Immune to Psychology, Large Target, Scurry Away!, Terror.

Daemonic Attacks: Attacks made by a model with this special rule are magical. This includes any special, ranged or Stomp attacks they make.

Master of Ruin: Skreech Verminking re-rolls failed casting attempts when attempting to cast *The Dreaded Thirteenth Spell*.

Protection of the Horned Rat: A model with this special rule has a 5+ ward save.

Rat Daemon: Skreech Verminking is a Daemon, and is affected by any rules, abilities, weapons, spells and so on that work against Daemons. He may never be the Army General.

Ruinous Arsenal: Skreech Verminking is armed with two Magic Weapons: a Doom Glaive and a Plaguereaper. At the start of each Close Combat phase, you must declare which weapon he is going to use for that turn.

MAGIC ITEMS:

Doom Glaive: Magic Weapon. Attacks made with this weapon have the Multiple Wounds (D3) special rule.

Plaguereaper: Magic Weapon. Attacks made with this weapon have the Always Strikes First special rule.



VERMINLORDS

Daemons of the Horned Rat

To behold a Verminlord is to see a splinter of the verminous glory that is the skaven deity: the Great Horned Rat. It is to see creeping decay and inscrutable knowledge made manifest. The rat daemons are living icons of ruin, the ultimate scavengers from beyond the veil.

Verminlords are everything a skaven aspires to be, taken to extremes. They are towering figures, and despite their sinuous build, they possess the raw strength to challenge a giant. Yet for all their power, Verminlords are subtle creatures that far prefer manipulation to open battle. Wherever possible, a Verminlord will use its matchless guile to get others to do its bidding.

Although leery of placing themselves in harm's way, when pressed, the rat daemons reveal a feral savagery. Simply by beckoning with its claws, a Verminlord can summon to itself a doom glaive – a hellishly sharp weapon fashioned from warpstone. Whirling this massive polearm, a Verminlord can split foes in two and then split each half again before the corpse hits the ground. Only the very powerful or the very foolish would dare to challenge such a creature.

As avatars of the Horned Rat, Verminlords can call upon fell energies. With the power of its voice alone, a Verminlord can manipulate the weak-willed into doing almost anything. Foes upon the battlefield have laid down their weapons before a Verminlord, convinced by whispered words that this was the wisest course of action. They stare at the Verminlord trustingly as they do so – even as the doom glaive falls. The rat daemons can even call down storms of warp lightning, or disappear in a cloud of nebulous shadow only to reappear at another location in the blink of an eye.

It is, of course, entirely possible for Verminlords to manifest in the world of mortals. However, unless the Winds of Magic are raging, the rat daemons must soon return to the shadowy and ruinous realm of their master. It is possible to summon a Verminlord, though only the grey seers know the secret rites that can call these beings from beyond the veil. Naturally, this rare knowledge gives the horned sorcerers a great advantage, and they have exploited this to gain political power. The more cynical amongst the clans question whether grey seers truly are the prophets of the Horned Rat, suggesting instead that they are charlatans, covetously keeping this information to themselves.

Grey seers are quick to threaten the use of their ability to summon a Verminlord, but they are loath to actually do so. This apprehension is for a good reason: those who open a rift between worlds often do not live long enough to regret it.

Verminlords cannot be tricked or beguiled, for they see through the most cunning plans, and are able to smell lies and discern true intentions with supernatural insight. As such, it is easy for a Verminlord to pluck out hidden fears and secret desires, using these to gain an advantage. Diabolically clever and calculating, a Verminlord insinuates itself into a plan – fitting in its own needs with the same ease with which a rat squeezes and wriggles into a narrow crevice.

The moment a Verminlord touches his clawed feet upon the mortal realm, it begins to scheme. Shrewd beyond the ken of mortals, the rat daemon's plots are so utterly convoluted that they are all but unfathomable. As the webs of fate change, so too will a Verminlord's plans – shifting alliances, switching supplicants, or altering in their design. Thus, it is insanity itself to trust a Verminlord, for today it may bring aid, but tomorrow drive a doom glaive through an unguarded back. To observers, such betrayals appear whimsical – but they are simply unknowable, bound up in an intricate and labyrinthine world of intrigue and treachery. Barring perhaps the scale of the betrayals, this is not much different to the Council of Thirteen's own actions, or the daily routines of every skaven clan.

A Verminlord is wiser and more wicked than any skaven, yet it retains a jealous lust for power and a love of schemes and betrayal. That Verminlords exhibit many of the same flaws, foibles and desires as the skaven themselves is not surprising. All Verminlords are fragmented embodiments of the Horned Rat. Some are formed from the thoughts of that verminous deity, while others are skaven elevated to immortality for glorious deeds that spread ruination and decay across the mortal realm – the daemonic forms of ancient Lords of Decay warped into something greater by the Horned Rat.

Like skaven themselves, each Verminlord has its own motivations and its own proclivities. Just as skaven divide into factions, so too do Verminlords. All are embodiments of blight, but some favour one method over another. For instance, those that prescribe pestilence first and foremost are the Corruptors, the disease-mongers, whilst those who are masters of shadowy intrigue and stealth are the Deceivers.

As the rift in reality grows wider, more and more Verminlords have entered the material world. They can be found stalking the Under-Empire, offering aid to clans, but in turn manipulating them like pieces

on a game board. Naturally divisive, many Verminlords have chosen favourites in the ongoing struggle for clan supremacy. Sometimes they side with those they have a greater affinity with, especially those that embody a specific aspect of the Horned Rat. Many Verminlord Deceivers seek Clan Eshin and its thralls, while a larger proportion of Verminlord Warpseers plot to reestablish the dominance of the grey seers. The most warlike amongst the Verminlords' number often grant their mighty patronage to the Warlord Clans.

As creatures of Chaos, Verminlords are by their very nature unpredictable. Like does not always call to like, and it is possible to find a Verminlord Corruptor – a master of plagues – working not alongside Clan Pestilens, but rather trying to thwart them. This may be as vindication for old betrayals, or the continuation of a war within the shadow realms – for even there, beneath the feet of their creator, the Horned Rat's children plot and feud.

The Horned Rat knows that, for them to conquer, the skaven must work together. At his demand, the Verminlords have formed a secretive collective – the Clandestine Council. It is a warped mirror of the Council of Thirteen – a gathering intended to ensure that all work together towards the same goal. The reality, however, has so far proven somewhat different.



VERMINLORD DECEIVERS

Lords of Assassins, the Shadows that Kill

Perhaps the least seen of all Verminlords are the Deceivers. This is as they prefer it. It is not their way to barge about upon a battlefield like some clumsy warlord. Instead, their power lies in stealth. They move in clouds of shadow, obfuscating even those around them. Only when their intrigues are ripe will a Verminlord Deceiver step out of the darkness to strike. Out of nowhere they appear, moving with blurring swiftness. Into their uplifted hands they summon forth triple-bladed throwing stars. With a snap of its wrist, the Verminlord can fling the killing star, sending it to scythe down foes in a great circling arc. The flash of its passing can be seen, leaving decapitated victims and sliced off limbs in its wake. At the end of its circuitous flight, the Verminlord Deceiver will snatch it out of mid-air and throw it again in quick succession. Such is their agility, and their ability to rapidly displace themselves, that the creatures can even throw their weapon and catch it from some completely different part of the battlefield.

In close combat, the Verminlord Deceivers favour the warpstiletto. A stabbing weapon the length of a man, its steeply acuminated shape allows the blade to penetrate deeply into a foe, where its toxic nature can do the most damage with great efficiency. Whilst common soldiers might batter each other ceaselessly, with only a swift thrust from the warpstiletto a Deceiver can fell any foe, no matter how large.

VERMINLORD DECEIVER ..... 500 points

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld	Troop Type
Verminlord Deceiver	8	8	4	6	6	6	10	5	8	Monster (Character)

A Verminlord Deceiver can be included in a Skaven army. His points cost counts towards your Lords allowance.

MAGIC:

A Verminlord Deceiver is a Level 4 Wizard. One of his spells must be *Skitterleap*; the remainder of his spells can be generated from the Skaven Spells of Ruin or Plague in any combination.

SPECIAL RULES:

Immune to Psychology, Large Target, Scurry Away!, Terror.

Daemonic Attacks: Attacks made by a model with this special rule are magical. This includes any special, ranged or Stomp attacks they make.

Protection of the Horned Rat: A model with this special rule has a 5+ ward save.

Rat Daemon: A Verminlord Deceiver is a Daemon, and is affected by any rules, abilities, weapons, spells and so on that affect Daemons. He may never be the Army General.

Shrouded in Darkness: Enemy units that target a Verminlord Deceiver with a shooting attack suffer a -1 To Hit modifier in addition to any other modifiers.

Shadowstrider: A Verminlord Deceiver can re-roll failed casting attempts when attempting to cast *Skitterleap*, and can choose itself as the target of this spell.

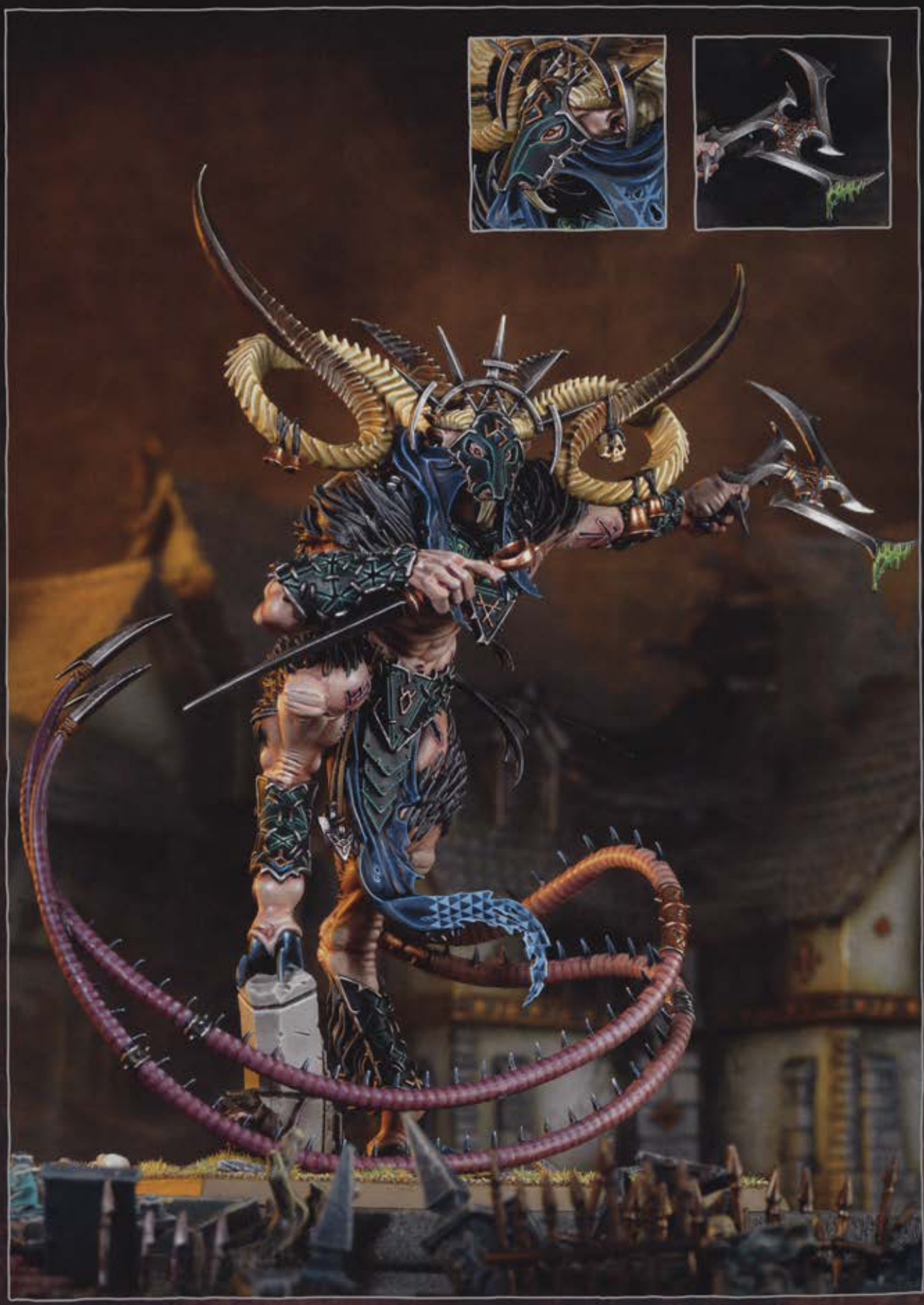
MAGIC ITEMS:

Warpstiletto: Magic Weapon. Attacks made with this weapon have the Armour Piercing and Poisoned Attacks special rules.

Doomstar: Magic Weapon. This is a ranged weapon with the following profile:

Range	Strength	Special Rules
12"	User	Arcing Death, Poisoned Attacks, Quick to Fire

Arcing Death: A weapon with this special rule makes as many shots as the number of models in the front rank of the target unit that are within range.



VERMINLORD CORRUPTORS

Pestilent Reapers, Cullers of Civilisation

Verminlord Corruptors are disease given form. They are surrounded by an aura of creeping sickness, and all about them life withers away. The spreading of plague is their craft, and at their command are the worst maladies of the world. With but a malicious glance, a Verminlord Corruptor can cause foes to break out in the Roteye Pox, the Oozing Twitch or the Black Plague. There are none more malignant nor more uncompromising than these infested terrors. Of all the Verminlords, the Corruptors often have severely decayed and, consequently, the least elaborate horns – though simply mentioning this to one of these repulsive rat daemons is certain to begin a vendetta that will last an eternity.

Although not above a degree of skulking, Corruptors are more likely than any other Verminlords to be at the forefront of battle. They are zealots who incite extreme hate in others, proving especially effective in goading plague monks into an extreme frenzy. More sorcerous than most of their kin, the Corruptors can call down plaguestorms, shrivel skin, or vomit forth impossible geysers of noxious poisons. Should any foe live long enough to close with a Verminlord Corruptor, their battle has only just begun. Living upon the greasy pelt of a Corruptor can be any number of tiny parasites, stingfleas or three-eyed mites. They bite all who approach, and infect their prey with bubonix – the flesh-bubbling disease that rots foes in minutes. As the foe reels, the Verminlord Corruptor will then summon forth a pair of Plaguereapers, sickle-like blades which it will use to eviscerate its enemies with a savage fury.

VERMINLORD CORRUPTOR ..... 500 points

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld	Troop Type
Verminlord Corruptor	8	8	4	6	6	6	10	5	8	Monster (Character)

A Verminlord Corruptor can be included in a Skaven army. His points cost counts towards your Lords allowance.

MAGIC:

A Verminlord Corruptor is a Level 4 Wizard. One of his spells must be *Plague*; the remainder of his spells can be generated from the Skaven Spells of Ruin or Plague in any combination.

SPECIAL RULES:

Immune to Psychology, Frenzy, Large Target, Scurry Away!, Terror.

Daemonic Attacks: Attacks made by a model with this special rule are magical. This includes any special, ranged or Stomp attacks they make.

Plaguemaster: A Verminlord Corruptor can re-roll failed casting attempts when attempting to cast *Plague*.

Protection of the Horned Rat: A model with this special rule has a 5+ ward save.

Rat Daemon: A Verminlord Corruptor is a Daemon, and is affected by any rules, abilities, weapons, spells and so on that affect Daemons. He may never be the Army General.

MAGIC ITEMS:

Plaguereapers: Magic Weapon. Paired Weapons. Attacks made with these weapons have the Always Strikes First special rule.



VERMINLORD WARBRINGERS

Tyrants of Battle, the Great Stabber-slicers

The Verminlord Warbringers are the most commonly seen of the rat daemons, and of all the Verminlords, none are so full of themselves and self-posturing. Warbringers have a fondness for dramatic entrances, such as arriving in clouds of smoke before mustered hordes of skaven. They stride the battle lines, towering over the ratmen, who cower in the presence of such majestic and terrible beings. Wherever possible they strike heroic poses, with their sinuously curving horns thrust regally outwards, and their weapons glinting in the fires of battle.

All of this preening is not merely pretentiousness on the part of these Verminlords, however. Skaven – particularly clanrats and stormvermin – rally to the awe-inspiring sight of these godly creatures. Thus can the presence of such a Verminlord steady even the most craven force. With each colossal stride or dramatic whip of the tail, the chittering tumult rising from the fighting hordes increases in its intensity. Skaven who bask in that verminous presence for long enough will be overcome by a bloodthirsty, teeth-snapping rage that they long to unleash upon the foe.

The Warbringers are not zealous about leading from the front; they far prefer to stride amongst a seething tide of ratmen, for they draw strength from being amongst their mortal underlings. When they reach the front line, few mortal creatures can match their speed or strength, and they cut down whole ranks at a time with great sweeps from their doom glaives. When facing larger enemies – or to deliver a dramatic coup de grace – a Warbringer will manifest an enormous spike-fist, driving it through the foe and tearing out its entrails for all to see.

VERMINLORD WARBRINGER ..... 550 points

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld	Troop Type
Verminlord Warbringer	8	8	4	6	6	6	10	6	8	Monster (Character)

A Verminlord Warbringer can be included in a Skaven army. His points cost counts towards your Lords allowance.

MAGIC:

A Verminlord Warbringer is a Level 4 Wizard. One of his spells must be *Death Frenzy*; the remainder of his spells can be generated from the Skaven Spells of Ruin or Plague in any combination.

SPECIAL RULES:

Immune to Psychology, Large Target, Scurry Away!, Terror.

Daemonic Attacks: Attacks made by a model with this special rule are magical. This includes any special, ranged or Stomp attacks they make.

Protection of the Horned Rat: A model with this special rule has a 5+ ward save.

Rat Daemon: A Verminlord Warbringer is a Daemon, and is affected by any rules, abilities, weapons, spells and so on that affect Daemons. He may never be the Army General.

Verminous Fury: A Verminlord Warbringer can re-roll failed casting attempts when attempting to cast *Death Frenzy*.

MAGIC ITEMS:

Doom Glaive and Punch-dagger: Magic Weapon. Paired Weapons. Attacks made with these weapons have the Killing Blow and Multiple Wounds (D3) special rules.



VERMINLORD WARPSEERS

Lords of Black Lightnings, the Great Manipulators

The Verminlord Warpseers are the most inscrutable of all the rat daemons. Great leaders and visionaries, they are often found at the centre of the most complex plots. All Verminlords are manipulative, but the Warpseers bring beguilement to new levels. Every syllable whispered and every subtle nuance has been crafted to influence an endgame that it alone can fathom. When a Verminlord Warpseer arrives in the world, it does so not with a plan, but with dozens, even hundreds of plots and intrigues – and is not through words and schemes alone that a Verminlord Warpseer will work its wiles.

When it comes to the arcane arts, the Warpseers wield great power. All Verminlords can hurl black lightning, but when the Warpseers do so, it is not lone bolts that they cast but vast, arcing chains of destruction. With a stomp of their clawed foot they can open rifts, crack foundations and topple the structures of the so-called civilised world. At their command, the vermin of the world swarm, forming tidal waves of rats. So powerful is their call, that rodent kind from the shadow realms join the pack, and nothing can stop their chisel teeth, for they are able gnaw the soul from a body in seconds.

Verminlord Warpseers alone can summon forth a scry-orb of enormous proportions. This sphere can be used to gaze into all possible futures, allowing the Verminlord to know the unknowable and see that which is beyond sight – a powerful boon as they plot the fall of their enemies and the fate of their allies. At times of great need, the Verminlord Warpseer can hurl this swirling orb as a weapon, its destruction releasing a miasma of multiple futures and fumes of purest warpstone. Those caught within the blast are driven mad, reduced to utter feeble-mindedness by the nightmare visions they are gifted.

VERMINLORD WARPSEER. . . . . 550 points

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld	Troop Type
Verminlord Warpseer	8	8	4	6	6	6	10	5	8	Monster (Character)

A Verminlord Warpseer can be included in a Skaven army. His points cost counts towards your Lords allowance.

MAGIC:

A Verminlord Warpseer is a Level 4 Wizard. One of his spells must be *Warp Lightning*; the remainder of his spells can be generated from the Skaven Spells of Ruin or Plague in any combination.

SPECIAL RULES:

Immune to Psychology, Large Target, Scurry Away!, Terror.

Daemonic Attacks: Attacks made by a model with this special rule are magical. This includes any special, ranged or Stomp attacks they make.

Master of Lightning: A Verminlord Warpseer can re-roll failed casting attempts when attempting to cast *Warp Lightning*. Furthermore, he always counts as rolling a 6 when determining how many hits the spell causes.

Protection of the Horned Rat: A model with this special rule has a 5+ ward save.

Rat Daemon: A Verminlord Warpseer is a Daemon, and is affected by any rules, abilities, weapons, spells and so on that affect Daemons. He may never be the Army General.

MAGIC ITEMS:

Doom Glaive: Magic Weapon. Attacks made with this weapon have the Multiple Wounds (D3) special rule.

Scry-orb: Enchanted Item. A Verminlord Warpseer has a +1 bonus to its ward save while it carries this item. Once per game, in the Shooting phase, you may choose to throw the Scry-orb. If you do so, the bonus to its ward save is immediately lost for the rest of the game.

To throw the Scry-orb, place the small round template with its centre anywhere within 12" of the Verminlord Warpseer and within its line of sight. Scatter the template using the scatter dice and a D6. Models touched by the template must pass an Initiative test or be destroyed, with no saves of any kind allowed. Remember that a 6 is always a failure. "Look Out Sir!" works as normal.



STORMFIENDS

Warped Creations of Clan Moulder

Rat ogres are hulking flesh-beasts, stitched together out of component parts assembled or grown by Clan Moulder. They combine great strength and savage ferocity with the speed of a skaven. However, just because they were a successful breed and sold to nearly every Warlord Clan that could afford them did not mean that Clan Moulder was not still tinkering. Indeed, the flesh manufacturers of that clan were never satisfied, but were always seeking ways to make their creations even more deadly.

In the end, it was Throt the Unclean, a Master Moulder of Hell Pit, that hit upon a solution. While others fixated upon developing longer claws or grafting multiple arms, Throt set about getting to the root of the matter. Rat ogres did not lack in brawn or fighting potential; they lacked mental capacity. They were small-minded creatures with a singular instinct to kill. It took much training from packmasters to lead them into battle, and even then the brute-beasts were difficult to control. Thus, what Throt attempted to improve were their woefully tiny brains, reasoning that if the beasts were smarter they could be given weapons to use.

The operations were dangerous work, for it was impossible to subdue a rat ogre – they were either viciously fighting with all their might or they were dead, with little to nothing in between. Even when they were chain-bound with heavy fetters, it was difficult to do brain work on the rat ogres. Worse still, the experiments were abject failures. The more the creature could think, the less violent it became. Throt was all too aware that the sole reason Clan Moulder sold so many rat ogres was due to the creatures' mindless aggression. To rob them of their kill-kill mentality was out of the question.

The next step for Throt was a logical one – if he could not make the beast smarter, could he fuse the packmaster onto the beast itself? Not surprisingly, those packmasters who were chosen to be permanently stitched into the back of a rat ogre, their brains and vital fluids connected, were profoundly unhappy. As these packmasters now controlled over-muscled hulking mauler-beasts, their dissatisfaction was all too apparent, and these experiments had to be cancelled. As there were no willing volunteers, Throt had little choice but to grow them himself.

Through gruesome and repugnant techniques, Throt grew the required subjects and merged other parts with captives or slaves. The result was a batch of scrawny and submissive skaven with unusually large brains. Once permanently integrated into a warpstone-powered harness and rigged with coils and tubes, the skaven's body would become more and more atrophied. Eventually, if it lived long enough, the skaven would become little more than a shrivelled husk with an auxiliary brain that could help steer the savage beast with which it was melded.

Early results were astoundingly successful – the rat ogres remained ferocious, yet they could be briefly controlled by the far more sensible brain-creature hardwired into their backs. Unfortunately, there was a drawback; the rat ogres were able to use weapons now, but Clan Moulder quickly found out they had nothing with which to make their new creation any more destructive than its previous iteration had been. The rat ogres could wield the enormous clubs or oversized swords taken from defeated ogre tribes, but it made them no more dangerous then they had been with their own claws, fangs and boulder-like fists. There was only one place in all the Under-Empire where the best weapons available could be found: the warpforges of Clan Skryre.

Meaningful collaboration between the skaven clans has always been rare, as neither side trusts the other. Even when both parties begin with good intentions, such brokered deals never end well, as the temptation to take advantage, swindle or somehow cheat has always been an overwhelming urge for any skaven. However, Clan Moulder's timing could not have been better when Throt arrived in Skavenblight seeking Clan Skryre aid.

Clan Skryre was seeking allies, for Lord Morskittar had long been planning the demise of the grey seers. The Lord of Decay considered support for his schemes, especially from the Greater Clans, to be vital. This being the case, Morskittar's orders were to placate the beast-makers as much as possible. As it happened, Ikit Claw of Clan Skryre had developed several powerful – albeit problematic – new weapons. In between his failed rocket launch attempts, the Chief Warlock had attempted to upgrade the devices of the weapon teams, but each new design proved too difficult for the teams to carry, too weighty for even larger crews to lift or aim.

Although Ikit himself was hardly keen to work with Throt – it was his belief that all those from Clan Moulder stank of offal – the Chief Warlock was anxious to get back in Lord Morskittar's good graces. It was not long before the improved rat ogres were being kitted out with the new weapons. Ikit was surly to begin with. However, as each technical problem was overcome, he began to see great advantages. The hulking rat ogres could bear heavy weapon loads; a fact that allowed them to carry multiple

guns along with the necessary ammunition feeds or warp-generator power sources.

Despite Ikit's misgivings, Throt proved especially adept. Without question, the Master Moulder sawed off bits of arm bone to facilitate the attachment of warp-forged gauntlets, or increased the rate of brain-juice transference to better allow the brain-creature to guide his brawny teammate. It was Throt who suggested an automatic cut-off mechanism on the ratling cannons, for it had proven impossible to get the rat ogre or its brainier counterpart to stop firing, resulting in them using up their ammunition in one sustained spray of bullets.

To trial the new weapon-beasts, a handful of them were released into a sealed slave pen. The results were spectacular. The weapons were improved and more deadly than ever. Better still, they were not carried by skaven, but by hulking brutes that could more easily shrug off enemy arrows. In the few cases where enemies got close enough to attack the newly dubbed 'stormfiends', they found themselves mauled, crushed or battered by club-like weapon barrels.

When the skaven overran Tilea, the stormfiends were unveiled before the Warlord Clans. The sight of a rat ogre armed with doom-flayer gauntlets and wearing armour full of spinning blades wading through a street battle was enough for many to place orders immediately. Skaven warlords simply stood agog as they witnessed three ratling cannons borne upon a single rat ogre, whirring away to single-handedly halt enemy countercharges. Soon, Clan Skryre and Clan Moulder could not produce the up-gunned weapon-beasts quickly enough, no matter how many warptokens they overcharged.



STORMFIENDS . . . . . 85 points per model

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld	Troop Type
Stormfiend	6	4	3	5	4	4	5	4	7	Monstrous Infantry

Stormfiends can be included in a Skaven army. Their points cost counts towards your Rare units allowance.

UNIT SIZE: 3+

EQUIPMENT:

- Light armour (or warpstone-laced armour if the model is equipped with doom-flayer gauntlets or shock gauntlets, see below).

Skaven Weapons of the End Times
Each model in a unit of Stormfiends must be given one of the following Skaven Weapons of the End Times (page 40). Note that the unit can take the weapons in any combination; there is no restriction on how many or how few of each can be taken, and they do not cost any additional points.

- Doom-flayer gauntlets
- Grinderfists
- Ratling cannons
- Shock gauntlets
- Warpfire projectors
- Windlaunchers



SPECIAL RULES:
Fear, Skirmishers.

Big and Bulky: Stormfiends cannot use the Fire On The March and Light Troops rules that normally apply to units with the Skirmishers special rule.

Double the Death: Stormfiends equipped with doom-flayer gauntlets, grinderfists or shock gauntlets re-roll all failed To Wound rolls in the Close Combat phase (including Impact Hits and Stomps). Stormfiends equipped with ratling cannons, warpfire projectors or windlaunchers re-roll all failed To Wound rolls when shooting with these weapons.

Designer's Note: *Although Stormfiends are armed with multiple weapons, they never benefit from the Extra Attack rule for having more than one close combat weapon.*

Warpstone-laced Armour: Stormfiends equipped with doom-flayer gauntlets or shock gauntlets have warpstone-laced armour that gives them a 4+ armour save. If a unit of Stormfiends includes one or more models with warpstone-laced armour when armour saves are taken, then use their armour save of 4+ against all of the Wounds that have been inflicted. However, any Wounds that are not saved must be applied to models with warpstone-laced armour before any are applied to models with light armour. If this creates a gap in the unit, move a model up from the back rank to fill the gap. If the unit consists of only a single rank, close the gap by moving the remaining models sideways towards the centre of the gap.

Any attacks, spells or special rules which allow you to target a specific model ignore this special rule, and use the armour save of the model that is targeted; if the target has warpstone-laced armour save it has a 4+ save, and if not it has a 6+ armour save.





SKAVEN WEAPONS OF THE END TIMES

In secret warpforges deep below Skavenblight, grey seers, plague monks and warlock engineers have joined forces to create a terrifying range of new weapons and equipment.

DOOM-FLAYER GAUNTLETS

By attaching huge motorised iron balls and whirring blades onto the ends of a stormfiend's arms, a truly fearsome tunnel-fighter was created. To further protect these close-combat maulers, they bear heavy armour adorned with spinning cleaver-blades.

Range	Strength	Special Rules
Combat	+2	Whirling Doom

Whirling Doom: A model with doom-flayer gauntlets has the Impact Hits (D3) special rule.

WINDLAUNCHERS

Some stormfiends bear paired windlauncher mortar-fists. Mundane armour offers no protection against the vapours released by the poisoned wind globes lobbed into the fray by these weapons. With each shot, a new glass orb filled with gaseous death clicks into position, ready to be fired.

Windlaunchers are fired as a single stone thrower with the following profile:

Range	Strength	Special Rules
6-24"	n/a	Plague Wind, Slow to Fire, Warpstone Weapon, Wild Misfire

Plague Wind: Windlaunchers do not have a Strength characteristic. Instead, all models under the template suffer a single wound on a D6 roll of 4+, regardless of their Toughness, with no armour save allowed.

Warpstone Weapon: Warpstone Weapons and attacks made by them count as magical.

Wild Misfire: Do not roll on the Stone Thrower Misfire chart if the windlaunchers misfire. Instead, the template for the attack scatters 2D6" in the direction shown on the scatter dice. If a hit is rolled on the scatter dice, use the small arrow on the hit symbol to determine the direction of scatter.

GRINDERFISTS

Some of Throt's stormfiends were adapted to carry warp-grinders, allowing them to create their own tunnels by vaporising soil, rock and roots alike. Once in combat, such a stormfiend will grind at the foe, disintegrating flesh with ease.

Range	Strength	Special Rules
Combat	5	Tunneller, Warp-strike, Warpstone Weapon

Tunneller: A unit that contains a model with grinderfists is not deployed at the beginning of the game, but instead uses the following rules. During deployment, but before Scouts are set up, place a tunnel marker anywhere on the battlefield that is not impassable terrain (a coin is ideal). At the beginning of your second turn, roll a dice: on a 2+ the unit arrives. On a roll of a 1, it arrives at the start of your next turn instead.

When the unit arrives, roll for scatter using a scatter dice and an artillery dice. If you roll a misfire, the unit is delayed and will instead arrive at the beginning of your next turn. If the marker scatters into impassable terrain or a friendly unit, reduce the scatter distance by the minimum required so that this is not the case.

Once the final position of the marker is established, place the unit so that a model with grinderfists is touching the marker. The unit can face in any direction, and can act normally this turn, including declaring a charge. A unit arriving on the battlefield in this fashion does not count as having moved for the purposes of shooting.

If the centre of the marker is under an enemy unit when a unit with grinderfists arrives, you should instead place the emerging unit as though it had charged the front of the enemy unit. It will fight in the Close Combat phase, but does not count as having charged for purposes of Impact Hits, Combat Result etc.

If it is impossible to deploy the unit for any reason, the unit does not emerge and will instead arrive at the beginning of your following turn, using the rules above.

Warp-strike: In the Close Combat phase, a model with this rule does not roll To Hit; it inflicts D3 automatic hits instead.

Warpstone Weapon: Warpstone Weapons and attacks made by them count as magical.

SHOCK GAUNTLETS

For the ultimate in shock assaults, stormfiends armed with electrified gauntlets were produced by Clan Skryre. Powered by warp generators, it is the heavy armour the beast wears that is the true weapon, for it conducts arcs of warp lightning that wreath the rat ogre's body in crackling energies. Simply being near one of these creatures is enough to sizzle many foes to a burnt crisp.

Range	Strength	Special Rules
Combat	+1	Warp Lightning Discharge

Warp Lightning Discharge: A model with shock gauntlets inflicts D3 hits rather than 1 when making a Stomp. Attacks made by a model with shock gauntlets ignore armour saves.

RATLING CANNONS

For pumping out sheer firepower, there is little that can match a stormfiend equipped with ratling cannons. Three sets of eight-barrelled weapons bedeck this hulking muscle-beast, enabling it to pour forth warp-bullets which riddle entire enemy units with holes.

Range	Strength	Special Rules
18"	5	Armour Piercing, Hot Warplead, Multiple Shots (3D6), Quick to Fire, Warpstone Weapon, Wildfire

Hot Warplead: Ratling cannons do not suffer any To Hit penalties for firing at long range or firing Multiple Shots.

Warpstone Weapon: Warpstone Weapons and attacks made by them count as magical.

Wildfire: Each To Hit roll result of 1 inflicts one hit on the closest friendly unit in the firing unit's front arc that is within range, instead of the target unit. If there are no eligible friendly units, then the attack misses.

WARPFIRE PROJECTORS

Stormfiends armed with warpfire projectors wade into battle shooting arcs of green-black warpfire from their heavy gauntlets. While these great cones of unnatural flame might occasionally miss their target, it is a small price to pay for the devastation even a single shot can wreak upon enemy regiments.

Warpfire projectors are fired as a single fire thrower. Place the template touching any of the model's barrels. Warpfire projectors have the following profile:

Range	Strength	Special Rules
n/a	5	Flaming Attacks, Multiple Wounds (D3), Move or Fire, Quick to Fire, Warpstone Weapon, Wildly Off-target

Warpstone Weapon: Warpstone Weapons and attacks made by them count as magical.

Wildly Off-target: Do not roll on the Black Powder Misfire chart if the warpfire projector misfires. Instead, the weapon inflicts D6 automatic hits on the closest friendly unit in the firing unit's front arc that is within 12". If there are no eligible friendly units, the warpfire projector simply does not fire this turn.





UNGRIM

Incarnate of Fire

Like all the Slayer Kings of Karak Kadrin that had come before him, Ungrim Ironfist walked a thin line. The fulfilment of his Slayer's Oath required that he meet a glorious death in battle. Yet to do so with wilful intent would see him abandon his other, equally binding oath of kingship over his people. Certainly, it was in keeping with the strong martial traditions of the dwarfs for Ungrim to lead his war throng from the front, yet always he was forced to kerb his recklessness lest he meet an unworthy or overly deliberate death.

Previously, this had forced the Slayer King into a perilous balancing act. Now, however, warrior-kings were needed more than ever. Not since the Goblin Wars had the realms of the dwarfs been so beset by enemies. In such troubled times, Ungrim came into his own.

Yet, no matter how many times Ungrim marched to war and returned victorious, new perils soon called him away. Many of Karak Kadrin marvelled that their king was still alive, so often and so vigorously did he throw himself to the fore.

Battle followed battle, yet always Ungrim came back. On his last sojourn westwards, Ungrim attempted to bring aid to the Empire – for the vampires were restless once again. Upon the Slayer King's return, he found Karak Kadrin an island in a sea of enemies. Skaven armies had broken into the lower mines and night goblins from Karak Ungor had travelled down to invest the high passes.

The situation only grew worse. Swollen by new armies of wolf riders and ogres travelling from the east, the foe grew in numbers daily. The skaven attacks increased until Karak Kadrin was under full-blown siege. Never one to let the foe take the initiative, Ungrim Ironfist sallied forth time and again to strike at his enemies. Sometimes the Slayer King mustered a war throng to lead to battle, and at other times he simply rounded up all the slayers from Grimnir's Shrine. He destroyed tunnelling equipment, broke into nest-lairs and annihilated droves of skaven, yet the foe always came back – sometimes within days.

The news from the rest of the dwarf kingdoms was worse. King Belegar was in dire need of help, King Kazador reported greenskins massing in the south and even Karaz-a-Karak requested aid – a rare move from the proud High King. With each delivery of grim tidings, Ungrim gathered an army and attempted to break out. Although he won each battle and cleared a path to leave, he could not do so in good conscience. The foe's numbers were too great to spare even a single dwarf.

Ungrim felt the pull of the slayer – the urge to march off to either glory or doom. Yet this was at odds with his duties as a king – to protect his realm and people above all else. The strain began to tell upon Ungrim. A volcanic rage was building within the dour Slayer King. And then the skaven dared to begin construction of an enormous siege engine in the middle of Peak Pass, only miles from Karak Kadrin's front gate.

For Ungrim, it was a relief to march to battle – for only in the press of close combat could the Slayer King assuage his rising frustration.

The throng that Ungrim Ironfist led out of the front gates made short work of the skaven construction site – only to then witness the destruction of Karak Kadrin. It was foully done, through the devilry of poison gas. It

had been Ungrim that led the remains of his army to cut their way out of Peak Pass even as clouds of toxic vapours rolled through the valleys. None knew then how deadly the attack had been. It was assumed by Ungrim, and all who witnessed the attack, that after the deadly cloud dissipated they would return to find repairs already underway.

It took several days for Peak Pass to completely clear of the gas, during which time Ungrim and his throng fought for their lives along the little-known mountainside trails. Only when they returned to drive off the gas mask-wearing scavengers did they realise the scale of the tragedy that had occurred.

For days on end the King walked the despoiled halls, witnessing the horrors that had befallen those under his protection.

Alone, at the desecrated Shrine of Grimnir, Ungrim either stumbled upon a strange fortune or met with his predestined fate. As he ran his hands over the sacred runes struck into that shrine of steel and iron, a ritual performed by every slayer before embarking upon his doom quest, something was bound to Ungrim. Swelling with rage and white-hot anger, the Slayer King was sure his ancestors' spirits had entered into his body, granting him godly power.

What Ungrim felt was Aqshy – the Wind of Fire. Freed when Teclis unbound the Great Vortex, Aqshy had raged across the world. Perhaps sensing the fiery spirit of Grimnir, or simply detecting the all-consuming thirst for revenge that burned bright within Ungrim, the Wind of Fire settled – for a time at least – within the Slayer King himself.

Flames danced around Ungrim, leaping from his fiery crest of hair. From his body and armour rose a shimmering heat, and the Axe of Dargo glowed like hot coals. When he strode out of Karak Kadrin, Ungrim was more than mortal.

Ungrim's followers – the slayers and warriors of Karak Kadrin – were stunned by the destruction of their stronghold. Yet they were amazed, and not a little cowed, by the transformation of their king. His rage cast forth sheets of fire, and his battle cry was a torrent of living flame. When Ungrim swung the Axe of Dargo, it trailed light and heat like a comet, and its strike was a blazing thunderclap. No longer duty-bound to protect a people who were scattered and destroyed, he had become vengeance itself. Now the world would see Ungrim the Slayer, and his revenge would not be denied.

UNGRIM, INCARNATE OF FIRE ..... 425 points

	M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld
Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire	3	9	4	5	6	4	5	5	10

Troop Type
Infantry (Special Character)

Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire can be included in a Dwarf army. Ungrim's points cost counts towards your Lords allowance.

You may not take Ungrim Ironfist and Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire in the same army.

EQUIPMENT:
- Gromril armour

SPECIAL RULES:
Ancestral Grudge, Daemon Slayer, Deathblow, Dragon Slayer, Relentless, Resolute, Slayer, Unbreakable.

Breath of Aqshy: Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire has a Strength 4 Breath Weapon with the Flaming Attacks special rule.

Lord of Fire: Innate bound spell (power level 5). *Lord of Fire* is a **magic missile** with a range of 24" and causes 2D6 Strength 4 hits with the Flaming Attacks special rule.

MAGIC ITEMS:
Axe of Dargo: Magic Weapon. In close combat, blows struck by the Axe of Dargo are resolved at +2 Strength and have the Killing Blow and Flaming Attacks special rules.

Dragon Cloak of Fyrskar: Talisman. The Dragon Cloak of Fyrskar grants Ungrim a 4+ ward save, which improves to a 2+ ward save against all hits with the Flaming Attacks special rule.

Slayer Crown: Magic Armour. The Slayer Crown adds 1 to Ungrim's armour save as well as his Toughness (this is already included in his profile).



BATTLESCROLLS

Battlescrolls allow you to add unique battlefield formations to the army that you use in your games of Warhammer.

Each Battlescroll lists its *Race* (the Warhammer army book it is considered part of), and details of a *Formation* (a specific group of units that enable you to use special rules when you include them in your army).

RACE

The Race determines which Warhammer army book the Battlescroll is considered part of for all rules purposes. For example, a Formation with The Empire Race is considered to be chosen from *Warhammer: The Empire*.

BATTLESCROLL FORMATIONS

When you choose an army, you can take one or more Battlescroll Formations as part of your army.

The Battlescroll will tell you what units you need to take in order to field the Formation, and what, if any, extra options or restrictions apply to the units that make it up. The Army List Entries for each unit in the Formation (the units' profiles, points values, unit size, options, special rules, etc.) can be found in the army book or Warhammer supplement that contains the details of the unit in question.

SPECIAL RULES

Each Formation includes one or more special rules associated with the units that make up that Formation. The special rules for a Formation only apply to the units that make it up (even if there are other units of the same type in your army).

FORMATION POINTS VALUES

Formations do not usually include a points value; just add up the points value of the individual units and options to find out the total points value of the Formation. Occasionally a Formation will require that you pay extra points in order to use it. In this case, the cost of the Formation is the total cost of the units plus any extra points the Battlescroll specifies you have to pay.

The points value of the units in the Formation count against the total points allowed for your army, but are not included when working out the percentage of points spent on different categories of unit – nor do these count towards the number of duplicate Special or Rare choices in your army. For example, a Formation with 500 points' worth of models would count as 500 points towards the total number of points allowed for your army, but would not count towards the number of points spent on Lords, Heroes, Core units, Special units or Rare units in your army.

If you wish, you can field an army made up exclusively of Formations chosen from Battlescrolls. If you choose to do this, then you do not have to spend 25% of the points for your army on Core units, and you do not have to select a model as the General if the Formations that you use do not include any character models.

ALLIED FORMATIONS

Formations do not have to be chosen from the same army book as the rest of your army. If you decide to do this, then Formations made up of units from different army books follow the rules for Allied Armies on pages 136-139 of the *Warhammer* rulebook, with the exception that allied Formations can be used in any game, not just those between teams of players.



THANQUOL'S UPRISING

Across the Empire, the skaven attacks seemed doomed to the same failures that had brought low their previous invasions. With the aid of a summoned Verminlord, Thanquol sought to reverse that trend. The wily grey seer knew that if he did not succeed in this war, this would be the last clawpack he would ever command.



RACE: Skaven

FORMATION

Thanquol's Uprising consists of the following units:

- Thanquol and Boneripper (page 20)
- Lord Skreech Verminking (page 24)
- The Lektrik Coven (see right)
- 1 unit of Clanrats
- 1 unit of Stormfiends (page 38)
- 1 unit of Gutter Runners
- 1 unit of Giant Rats
- 3 Rat Swarms

RESTRICTIONS

The Lektrik Coven is a unit of between 3 and 13 Warlock Engineers, who are Infantry instead of Characters. One Warlock Engineer is the unit's champion, and must be upgraded to a Level 1 Wizard and equipped with a Warp-Energy Condenser. No other model in the unit may be upgraded to a Wizard or take any Magic Items.

SPECIAL RULES

Core Formation: If your army includes this formation, then you do not have to spend a minimum of 25% of your points on Core units.

Failure Is Not An Option: Any unit from this Formation that is within 6" of Thanquol, apart from Skreech Verminking, has the Unbreakable special rule.

Lektrik Coven: The unit champion knows the *Warp Lightning* spell. When he casts *Warp Lightning*, add 1 to the casting result and the number of hits caused for each other model in the unit. Furthermore, if a 1 is rolled when determining the number of hits caused, the caster does not suffer a Strength 5 hit; instead, remove a single Warlock Engineer from the unit as a casualty.

FIRST CLAWPACK OF CLAN MORS

Behind the slave legions and massed assaults of the lowly dregs came the real strength of Clan Mors. Claw after claw of clanrats and armoured stormvermin scurried forth, supported by Clan Skryre weapon teams and beast-packs from Clan Moulder. All bore the symbols and distinctive red of Clan Mors.



RACE: Skaven

FORMATION

The First Clawpack of Clan Mors consists of the following units:

- Queek Headtaker
- 1 unit of Stormvermin
- 2 units of Clanrats
- 1 unit of Warplock Jezzails
- 1 unit of Poisoned Wind Globadiers

RESTRICTIONS

None.

SPECIAL RULES

Core Formation: If your army includes this Formation, then you do not have to spend a minimum of 25% of your points on Core units.

Unleash Terrible Violence: Any unit from this Formation must re-roll the charge range for a failed charge if they are within 12" of Queek Headtaker when the charge roll is made.

Withering Hail of Fire: Once per battle, at the start of your Shooting phase, you can declare that you are using this ability. During that phase, the unit of Warplock Jezzails and the unit of Poisoned Wind Globadiers from this Formation can each shoot twice, as long as they are within 12" of Queek Headtaker. Each unit's set of shooting attacks must be completely resolved one after the other, and can target different enemy units if desired.

THE DWARF THRONG OF KARAZ-A-KARAK

It was a vengeful and hot-blooded throng that Thorgrim Grudgebearer led out of the gates of Karaz-a-Karak. They cared not that they were outnumbered many hundreds to one, for they were filled with the fire of battle. If this was to be their last battle, for pride's sake alone they wanted to take the fight to the foe.



RACE: Dwarfs

FORMATION

The Dwarf Throng of Karaz-a-Karak consists of the following units:

- Thorgrim Grudgebearer
- Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire (page 43)
- Josef Bugman
- 1 unit of Hammerers
- 1 unit of Rangers
- 1 unit of Irondrakes
- 3 units of Slayers

RESTRICTIONS

The unit of Rangers must be upgraded to be Bugman's Rangers.

SPECIAL RULES

Core Formation: If your army includes this Formation, then you do not have to spend a minimum of 25% of your points on Core units.

Last Chance For Glory: You can re-roll failed To Hit rolls when making a Deathblow attack with Ungrim or any Slayer model from a unit from this Formation that is within 12" of Ungrim.

The Great Armouries of Karaz-a-Karak: You can re-roll To Wound rolls and armour saves of 1 for any model from a unit in the same army as this Formation that was chosen from the Core section of the army list in *Warhammer: Dwarfs*.

THE RED HOST

The Red Host of Tehenhauin was known throughout all of Lustria. They moved mysteriously through the deep jungles, arriving unbidden at the gates of each of the great cities. In times of need, the Red Host swept out of nowhere and fell upon the foes of the lizardmen with all the vengeful fury of Sotek.



RACE: Lizardmen

FORMATION

The Red Host consists of the following units:

- Tehenhauin, the Prophet of Sotek
- 1 Skink Chief
- 1 Skink Cohort
- 1 Salamander Hunting Pack
- 1 unit of Chameleon Skinks
- 2 Bastiladons
- 1 unit of Ripperdactyl Riders

RESTRICTIONS

The Skink Cohort cannot include any Kroxigor models. Tehenhauin and the Skink Chief cannot be mounted. The Bastiladons cannot replace their Arks of Sotek with Solar Engines.

SPECIAL RULES

Hatred (Skaven).

Core Formation: If your army includes this Formation, then you do not have to spend a minimum of 25% of your points on Core units.

The Living Bastions: The Arks of Sotek mounted on the Bastiladons in this Formation each inflict 3D6 Strength 2 hits, instead of only 2D6 Strength 2 hits.

The Red Shields: The Skink Chief from this Formation must set up as part of the Skink Cohort from this Formation, and cannot voluntarily leave the unit. As long as the Skink Chief is part of the Skink Cohort, then all models from the Skink Cohort add 1 to the Weapon Skill characteristic on their profile.

THE DEFENDERS OF MIDDENHEIM

The army that was arrayed in defence of Middenheim comprised not only the city's standing garrison but also dispossessed state troops from across the Empire. Their numbers had been whittled down by treachery and disaster, yet still they were a powerful force – a united army for whom provincial origins had ceased to matter.



RACE: The Empire

FORMATION

The Defenders of Middenheim consists of the following units:

- Valten, Herald of Sigmar (see *Warhammer: Nagash*)
- 1 Battle Wizard Lord
- 1 Grand Master
- 1 Knightly Orders unit
- 1 unit of Halberdiers with 2 Detachments of Crossbowmen
- 1 unit of Free Company Militia
- 1 unit of Swordsmen

RESTRICTIONS

Valten must have full plate armour, a barded warhorse and Ghal Maraz. The Battle Wizard Lord must be on foot and have the Lore of Beasts. The Grand Master must have a great weapon. The Knightly Order must have great weapons and be upgraded to Inner Circle Knights.

SPECIAL RULES

Core Formation: If your army includes this Formation, then you do not have to spend a minimum of 25% of your points on Core units.

Gregor Martak, Empowered by Ulric: The Battle Wizard Lord knows the following spell in addition to the usual spells that he can take:

ICY BLAST OF ULRIC
Cast on 5+

Icy Blast of Ulric is a **magic missile** with a range of 12" that causes D6 Strength 5 hits. In addition, the target suffers a -1 modifier to all To Hit rolls (both shooting and close combat), and to its Leadership, until the start of the caster's next Magic Phase. Shooting attacks that do not use Ballistic Skill must roll 4+ on a D6 before firing, or the shot(s) is lost.

Stubborn Faith: Valten, and all units from this Formation within 6" of Valten, have the Unbreakable special rule. In addition, as long as Valten has not been removed as a casualty, all friendly units from *Warhammer: The Empire* have the Stubborn special rule.





CHAPTER 3

Narrative Scenarios



THE MISTS OF XLANHUAPEC

The third temple-city to be attacked by the skaven was Xlanhuapec. Having successfully traversed the mists surrounding the temple-city, the skaven army prepared to overwhelm its defenders. The battle was fought in the wide, open streets and plazas of the city. The slann mage-priests that resided at Xlanhuapec were still recovering from the effects of deflecting the meteorites that had rained down upon the continent. Unable to play any part in the battle, many were slain by the hordes of skaven that had invaded their city even as they slumbered.

THE ARMIES

Each player chooses an army to an equal points value agreed before the game. One player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Skaven*. The other player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Lizardmen*.

Skaven Army

The Skaven army must include the following unit if the model needed to represent it is available.

- 1 Plague Priest (Lord Blistrox).

The Plague Priest representing Lord Blistrox must be upgraded to a Level 2 Wizard. In addition, he adds 1 to his Wizard Level (so that he is a Level 3 Wizard), and adds 1 to the Attacks and Wounds characteristics on his profile. He can take Magic Items (including Clan Pestilens Befouled Items) and Scavenge-pile items up to a total of 100 points, instead of only 50 points.

Lizardmen Army

The Lizardmen army cannot include any Slann Mage-Priests (including special characters).

FIRST TURN
The Skaven army takes the first turn.

GAME LENGTH
The battle lasts for six game turns.

VICTORY CONDITIONS
Use victory points to determine the winner, as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES
Ancient Temple-cities (page 8).
Magic of the End Times (see *Warhammer: Khaine*).

Slumbering Slann Mage-Priests: The victory points received for finding a hidden treasure (see page 8) are increased from 100 points to D6x100 points in this scenario – the 'hidden treasure' in this case is a Mage-Priest. If a unit from the Skaven army discovers a Mage-Priest, they slay them rather than carry them off. This means that the Skaven player receives the victory points even if the unit is subsequently destroyed or flees the battlefield. However, units from the Lizardmen army Hate every model in a unit which discovered a Mage-Priest for the remainder of the battle.



THE BATTLEFIELD
The terrain on the battlefield consists of buildings, representing the temple structures within Xlanhuapec, and areas of open ground, representing streets and plazas. Ideally, this scenario should feature plenty of buildings, as it's fought within the streets of the temple-city itself.

DEPLOYMENT
Roll-off to see which player picks the half of the table they will deploy in. Their opponent will deploy in the other half. Players take it in turn to place units on the table, using the alternating unit method of deployment described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.





THE BREAKING OF THE MOUNTAINS

The final war for Karak Eight Peaks was fought as a long series of bitter battles. Most of these were back-and-forth skirmishes in the narrow corridors and small caverns that honeycombed the dwarfs' underground realm. Dozens of battles were fought to control these darkened passageways, turning the subterranean world into a battlefield just as bloody as any found on the surface.

Designer's Note: *The Breaking of the Mountains is rather different to most Warhammer scenarios; instead of fighting a single battle, you will divide your army into three contingents, and fight three separate battles using one of your contingents in each. The three battles represent the most important of the battles taking place to gain control of the maze-like series of corridors and caverns making up the dwarf stronghold.*

THE ARMIES

Each player chooses an army to an equal points value agreed before the game. One player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Skaven*. The other player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Dwarfs*.

Skaven Army

The Skaven army must include the following Formations if the models needed to represent them are available. If a Formation is listed, the army must include as many units from the Formation as possible, but the special rules for the Formation are only used if it is taken in full.

- First Clawpack of Clan Mors (page 46).

Dwarf Army

The Dwarf army must include the following units if the models needed to represent them are available.

- Belegar Ironhammer.

Army Contingents

The players must split their armies into contingents, using the following method. Each player has three contingents, named Contingent A, Contingent B and Contingent C.

To organize your army into the contingents, first select a unit from your army roster. This unit joins Contingent A (place the letter 'A' next to the unit on your roster to show this). Then pick a second unit, which must join Contingent B, and then a third unit, which must join Contingent C. The fourth unit you select must join contingent A, and so on until all of your units have been assigned to one of the contingents, in the order A, B, C, A, B, C, A, B, C, etc.

THE BATTLES

Having selected your contingents, you must fight three battles to determine the winner of the scenario. Each of the battles is fought using the following scenario instructions.

FIRST TURN

After deployment, the player that set up second rolls a dice. On a roll of 6 they can choose who has the first turn. On a roll of 1-5 the player that set up first has the first turn.

GAME LENGTH

The battle lasts for six game turns.

VICTORY CONDITIONS

Use victory points to determine the winner of each of the three battles, as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

If you win two of the battles, or win one and draw the other two, then you win the scenario.

SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES

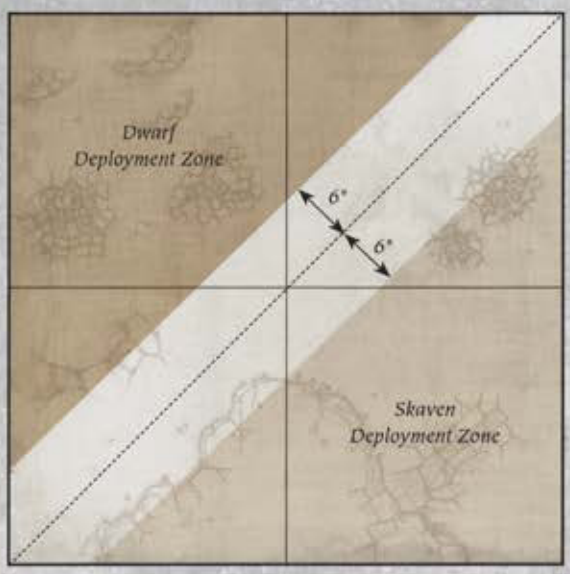
Gloom & Darkness, Low Ceilings, Noxious Fumes, Pitfalls (see *Warhammer: Nagash*), **Magic of the End Times** (see *Warhammer: Khaine*).

Cave-ins: Roll a D6 at the start of each game turn. On a roll of 6 a Cave-in takes place (see *Warhammer: Nagash*).

No Quarter: All units in both armies have the Stubborn special rule.

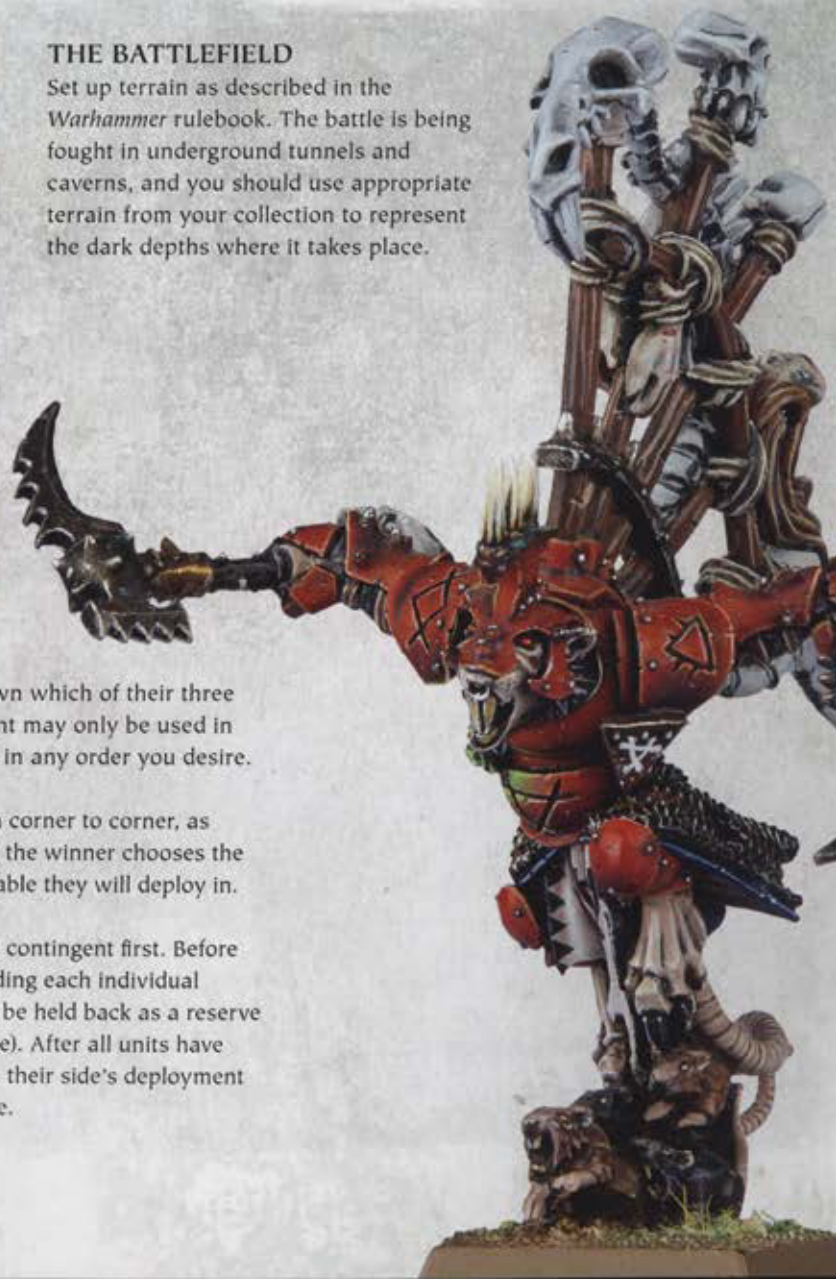
Reserves: Reserves are not deployed at the start of the battle. Instead, they can enter play on any turn of their player's choosing, using the reinforcements rules from the *Warhammer* rulebook. They can enter at any point on a table edge of their deployment zone.

We Are Not Alone: Roll a D6 before either army deploys. On a roll of 5+ the Monstrous Denizen special rule applies to this battle (see *Warhammer: Nagash*).



THE BATTLEFIELD

Set up terrain as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook. The battle is being fought in underground tunnels and caverns, and you should use appropriate terrain from your collection to represent the dark depths where it takes place.



DEPLOYMENT

Before either player has set up, they must first note down which of their three contingents they will use in each battle. Each contingent may only be used in one of the three battles you fight, but they can be used in any order you desire.

In this scenario the table is divided into two halves from corner to corner, as shown on the deployment map. The players roll-off and the winner chooses the two opposite corners to be used and which half of the table they will deploy in.

The player that won the roll-off must deploy their entire contingent first. Before deploying the contingent, roll a dice for each unit, including each individual character and war machine. On a roll of 1 the unit must be held back as a reserve (see the Reserves rule in the scenario special rules above). After all units have been rolled for, those not in reserves can be deployed in their side's deployment zone, anywhere that is more than 6" from the centre line.



DISASTER AT KARAK KADRIN

Far to the north, a skaven host under the command of Ikit Claw arrived at Karak Kadrin. Infuriated by the gall of his ancient foes, the Slayer King, Ungrim Ironfist, gathered to him the most vehement warriors under his command. Undaunted by the seething tide of skaven warriors, the dwarfs marched grimly forward to do battle. At first they drove the skaven back, the tunnel-bred vermin-kin proving no match for the skilled dwarf warriors in open battle. But, just when it seemed the skaven must break, Ikit Claw unleashed a secret weapon in the hulking form of a trio of grossly modified Hell Pit abominations. The creatures were soon at the gate of Karak Kadrin itself, and the tide turned irreversibly against the outnumbered dwarfs.

THE ARMIES

Each player chooses an army to an equal points value agreed before the game. One player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Skaven*. The other player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Dwarfs*.

Skaven Army

The Skaven army must include the following units if the models needed to represent them are available.

- Ikit Claw.
- 3 Hell Pit Abominations.

The points cost of any Hell Pit Abominations included in the Skaven army count towards the total points for the army, but do not count against the points spent on Rare units or the number of Rare units in the army.

Dwarf Army

The Dwarf army must include the following units if the models needed to represent them are available.

- Ungrim Ironfist.

FIRST TURN

The Dwarf army takes the first turn.

GAME LENGTH

The battle lasts for six game turns.

VICTORY CONDITIONS

The Skaven win immediately if they breach the gates of Karak Kadrin (see the scenario special rules opposite).

If the Skaven are unable to breach the gates before the battle ends, use victory points to determine the winner, as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES

Magic of the End Times
(see *Warhammer: Khaine*).

Dwarf Defence Batteries: The Dwarf player may, if he wishes to, allocate any war machine in his army to the defence batteries of Karak Kadrin. Units in the defence batteries are not deployed on the battlefield, and cannot be attacked by Skaven weapons or spells. Weapons in the defence batteries are allowed to shoot in the Dwarf Shooting phase, and measure their range and line of sight from the position of the Gate to Karak Kadrin (see right).

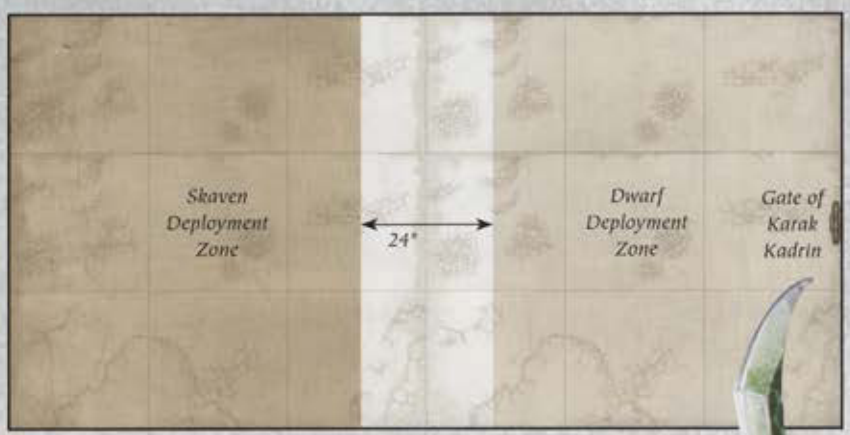
Ikit Claw's Abominations: Any Hell Pit Abominations included in the Skaven army are not deployed when the rest of the Skaven army sets up. Instead they enter play as reinforcements at the start of the fourth Skaven turn. The Abominations can enter at any point along either long table edge. All three must appear from the same table edge.

As soon as one of Ikit Claw's Abominations loses its last Wound, it explodes, releasing a cloud of toxic gas. Any model (friend or foe), within 6" of the Abomination is hit, and will suffer one Wound on a D6 roll of 3+ with no armour saves allowed.

The Gate of Karak Kadrin: The gate of Karak Kadrin lies at the centre of the narrow table edge in the Dwarf deployment zone (see the deployment map below).

No Dwarf units can deploy or voluntarily move within 12" of the gate before Ikit Claw's Abominations arrive on the battlefield (their attention is focused on the other end of the battlefield!).

Roll a D6 at the end of each Skaven turn for each of Ikit Claw's Abominations that are within 6" of the gate. On any D6 roll of 4+, the gate is breached and the Skaven player immediately wins the battle.



THE BATTLEFIELD

Set up terrain as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

DEPLOYMENT

Roll-off to see which player picks the half of the table they will deploy in. Their opponent will deploy in the other half. Players take it in turn to place units on the table, using the alternating unit method of deployment described in the *Warhammer* rulebook. See the special rules above for additional restrictions and special rules that apply to the deployment of the two armies.





DEATH FROM BENEATH

The Empire city of Nuln was proving to be an impossible nut for the skaven to crack, and numerous skaven attacks had already been ignominiously defeated. However, Thanquol was able to use these set-backs to his advantage, and with the clandestine aid of Skreech Verminking, was able to concoct a plan that would surely doom the city. The first step was to rig the industrial heart of the city with over a hundred warpstone bombs. The resulting explosion destroyed over a quarter of Nuln, and allowed the ratmen to burst from their underground lairs and attack the stunned defenders. Driven back to the city's Marktplatz, Nuln's defenders had one last chance to stop the skaven assault.

THE ARMIES

Each player chooses an army to an equal points value agreed before the game. One player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Skaven*. The other player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: The Empire*.

Skaven Army

The Skaven army must include the following units and Formations if the models needed to represent them are available. If a Formation is listed, the army must include as many units from the Formation as possible, but the special rules for the Formation are only used if it is taken in full.

- Thanquol's Uprising (page 45).
- Lord Skreech Verminking (page 24).

Thanquol and Boneripper and Skreech Verminking do not cost any points if they are taken (but see the scenario's Victory Conditions, opposite).

Empire Army

The Empire army must include the following units if the models needed to represent them are available.

- General of the Empire with lance (Grand Marshal Erkstein).
- Battle Wizard Lord on Imperial Griffon with Two Heads upgrade, who uses spells from the Lore of Beasts (Berndt Aberwold).
- Steam Tank (*Deliverance*).

FIRST TURN
The Skaven army takes the first turn.

GAME LENGTH
The battle lasts for six game turns.

VICTORY CONDITIONS
At the end of the battle, the winner is determined as follows:

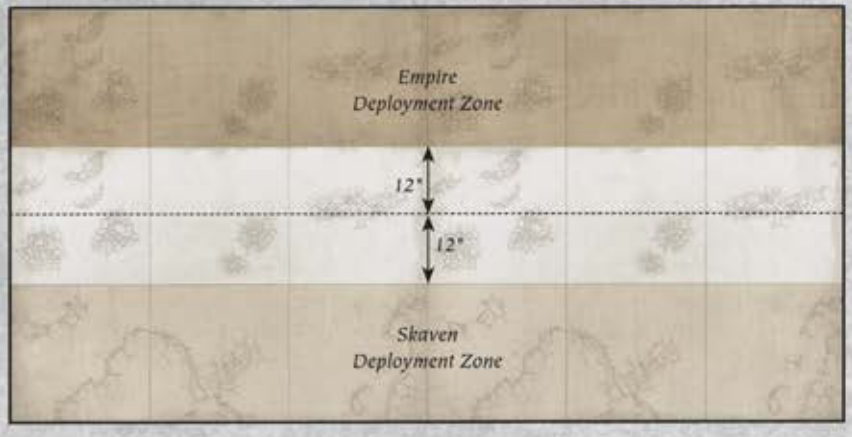
- If either Thanquol and Boneripper or Lord Skreech Verminking is removed as a casualty, the Empire player wins the battle immediately.
- In any other circumstances, use victory points to determine the winner of the battle, as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES
Magic of the End Times (see *Warhammer: Khaine*).

Backs to the Old City Wall: Units from the Empire army within 12" of the long table edge in the Empire half of the table have the Stubborn special rule.

Defend the Gunline: Any unit from the Empire army that has the Detachment or Regimental Unit special rule can make *Support Fire* or *Counter Charge* actions in support of friendly Empire war machines that are within 3" and that have been charged by an enemy unit (see *Warhammer: The Empire*). The only war machine units that they can use these actions in support of are Great Cannons, Helblaster Volley Guns, Helstorm Rocket Batteries and Mortars.

Deliverance: The Empire player can re-roll results of 1 when determining random movement distance and Impact Hits for the Steam Tank representing *Deliverance*.



THE BATTLEFIELD
Set up terrain as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

Designer's Note: *This battle took place in a large open market square known as the Marktplatz. Because of this, the battlefield should be largely flat and open, with perhaps an occasional fountain or statue. The table edges mark the edges of this open area.*

DEPLOYMENT
Roll-off to see which player picks the half of the table they will deploy in. The opponent will deploy in the other half. The Empire player deploys first, anywhere in their deployment zone that is more than 12" from the centre line.

The Skaven player deploys second. Units from the Skaven army can deploy anywhere in their deployment zone that is more than 12" from the centre line.

Thanquol and Lord Skreech
Thanquol and Boneripper and Lord Skreech Verminking are not set up at the start of the battle. Instead, the Skaven player must roll a D6 at the end of each of his turns, starting with the second turn. On a 4+ Thanquol and Boneripper and Lord Skreech Verminking arrive. On a roll of 1-3 they do not arrive this turn, but can be rolled for again at the end of the next Skaven turn.

When Thanquol and Boneripper and Lord Skreech Verminking arrive, they can be set up anywhere on the battlefield that is more than 12" from any Empire models and more than 1" from impassable terrain.



AMBUSH ON THE TRAIL OF BONES

Having pillaged Tlanxla, the skaven marched northwards towards Hexoatl. However, as they advanced along the trails that led through the dense Lustrian jungle, they were subjected to numerous ambushes conducted by the forces commanded by Tehenhauin, the Prophet of Sotek. The skink priest had gathered a large army of cold-blooded warriors to his side, and he used them to harry his most hated enemy by day and night. Tehenhauin's tactics threatened to stop the skaven in their tracks, forcing their commanders to call for aid from the Verminlords that acted as their mentors.

THE ARMIES

Each player chooses an army to an equal points value agreed before the game. One player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Skaven*. The other player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Lizardmen*.

Skaven Army

The Skaven army must include the following units or Formations if the models needed to represent them are available. If a Formation is listed, the army must include as many units from the Formation as possible, but the special rules for the Formation are only used if it is taken in full.

- 1 Plague Priest (Lord Blistrox).
- Verminlord Corruptor (page 30).

The Plague Priest representing Lord Blistrox must be upgraded to a Level 2 Wizard. In addition, he adds 1 to his Wizard Level (so that he is a Level 3 Wizard), and adds 1 to the Attacks and Wounds characteristics on his profile. He can take Magic Items (including Clan Pestilens Befouled Items) and Scavenge-pile items up to a total of 100 points, instead of only 50 points.

If the Verminlord Corruptor is taken, then he does not cost any points (but see the scenario special rules).

Lizardmen Army

The Lizardmen army cannot include any Slann Mage-Priests. In addition, the army must include the following units if the models needed to represent them are available.

- Tehenhauin, the Prophet of Sotek.

FIRST TURN
The Lizardmen army takes the first turn.

GAME LENGTH
The battle lasts for six game turns.

VICTORY CONDITIONS
Use victory points to determine the winner of the battle, as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

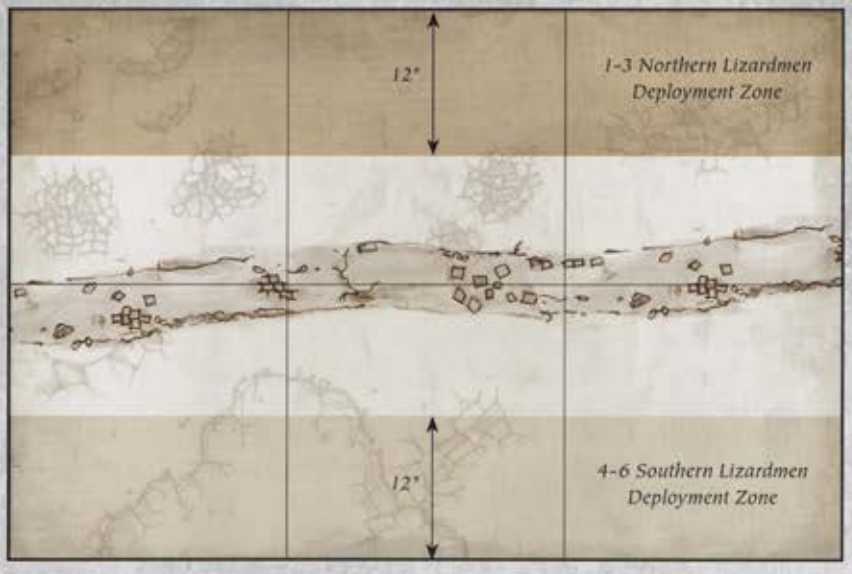
SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES
Lustrian Jungle (page 9),
Magic of the End Times (see *Warhammer: Khaine*).

Jungle Ambush: It is hard for the attacker to coordinate a surprise attack, and difficult for the defender to respond. To represent this, units must pass a Leadership test if they wish to doing anything in the Movement phase of Turn 1. Take the test before declaring a charge or moving – if the test is failed, the unit may not declare a charge or move in that Movement phase. Units with the Random Movement special rule must still pass the test in order to move. Units that have the Stupidity special rule must pass the test and then pass a Stupidity test in order to move!

Verminlord Aid Us!: If the Verminlord Corruptor is included in the Skaven army, it does not deploy with the rest of the army. Instead, the Skaven General can attempt to summon it to his aid. This call for aid can be made at the end of each Skaven turn, starting from turn 2.

In order to successfully summon the Verminlord, the Skaven player must roll a D6. On a 4+, the Verminlord is summoned. On a roll of 1-3 the Verminlord is not summoned this turn, but the Skaven player can attempt to summon it again in his next turn. Note that the Skaven player cannot attempt to summon the Verminlord if the Skaven General has been removed as a casualty.

If the Verminlord is successfully summoned, then he is placed on the battlefield within 6" of the Skaven General and more than 1" away from any enemy models. He cannot be placed in jungle or impassable terrain. If it is impossible to place the Verminlord, he is not summoned but the Skaven player can try to summon him again in a subsequent turn.



THE BATTLEFIELD
Set up terrain as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook. The battle is being fought in dense Lustrian jungle, and you should use appropriate terrain from your collection to represent the primeval forest where it takes place.

The Jungle Trail
The terrain for this battle must include a *jungle trail* that runs from one narrow table edge to the other. The trail must not approach closer than 13" to either long table edge (see the deployment map).

DEPLOYMENT
The Skaven player must deploy first. All of his units must be set up in 'march column' facing in the same direction and with at least one model in each rank on the jungle trail. A march column is a formation not more than 4 miniatures wide (i.e. not wide enough to get a rank bonus). The centre of the column must be on the centre of the road. Any units that can't be deployed are assumed to have left the battlefield and cannot return – they can't be used in the battle, but don't award any victory points to the opposing side.

The Lizardmen player then deploys his army. He must roll a D6 before deploying each unit: on a 1-3 the unit deploys in the northern Lizardmen deployment zone (see map), and on a 4-6 the southern one. Characters may either deploy on their own, rolling to see where they deploy like any other unit, or deploy as part of a unit they are allowed to join (state that the character will join the unit before rolling to see where it deploys). Scouts are set up using their special rules, after both armies have deployed. Units may not use the Vanguard special rule in this scenario.



THE BATTLE FOR KARAZ-A-KARAK

The once mighty dwarf empire had been torn to tatters by unrelenting skaven attacks. Now, only the dwarfs of Karaz-a-Karak still hold firm, all of the other holds having been reduced to smoking ruins. Refusing to give in to despair, High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer was determined to take the battle to the skaven, and meet his fate in open battle rather than cowering behind the walls of his stronghold. Marching forth, he attacked the skaven hordes head on. As the battle progressed, Thorgrim was cut off from the rest of his army, and prepared to make a desperate last stand. Then, with a blare of horns, help arrived from a most unexpected quarter.

THE ARMIES

Each player chooses an army to an equal points value agreed before the game. One player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Skaven*. The other player must take an army selected from *Warhammer: Dwarfs*.

Both armies can only include Infantry models; models of any other type cannot be taken. However, the percentage limits and minimum/maximum number of unit in each category are ignored when picking armies in this scenario (i.e. you don't have to spend at least 25% of your points on Core units, do not have to take at least three units other than Lords or Heroes, and so on).

Skaven Army

The Skaven army can only include infantry models and must include the following Formation if the models needed to represent it are available. The army must include as many units from the Formation as possible, but the special rules for the Formation are only used if it is taken in full.

- First Clawpack of Clan Mors (page 46).

Dwarf Army

The Dwarf army must include the following Formation if the models needed to represent it are available. The army must include as many units from the Formation as possible, but the special rules for the Formation are only used if it is taken in full.

- The Dwarf Throng of Karaz-a-Karak (page 47).

FIRST TURN
The Skaven player takes the first turn.

GAME LENGTH
The battle lasts for six game turns.

VICTORY CONDITIONS
At the end of the battle, the winner is determined as follows:

- If Thorgrim Grudgebearer has been removed as a casualty, and Queek Headtaker has not, the Skaven player wins the battle.
- If Thorgrim Grudgebearer and Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire are within 12" of each other at the end of the battle, the Dwarf player wins the battle.
- In any other circumstances, use victory points to determine the winner of the battle, as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES
Magic of the End Times (see *Warhammer: Khaine*).

Endless Skaven Hordes: Any Skaven non-character unit that is completely destroyed or that flees the battlefield is immediately replaced at its full starting strength. The replacement unit can enter play as reinforcements in the next Skaven turn. Skaven reinforcements can enter from any point on the table edge in the Skaven half of the table that is more than 12" from a Dwarf model.



THE BATTLEFIELD
Set up terrain as described in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

DEPLOYMENT
Roll off to see which player picks the half of the table they will deploy in. Their opponent will deploy in the other half. The Dwarf player deploys first, anywhere in their deployment zone that is more than 18" from a narrow table edge. Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire, Bugman's Rangers, and any units of Slayers in the Dwarf army are not deployed at the start of the battle, and will instead arrive as reinforcements as described below.

The Skaven player deploys second, anywhere in their deployment zone that is more than 6" away from a Dwarf model.

Dwarf Reinforcements
The Dwarf player must roll a D6 at the start of his third turn. The result of the roll determines the table edge from which the Dwarf reinforcements must arrive that turn (see the deployment map).





