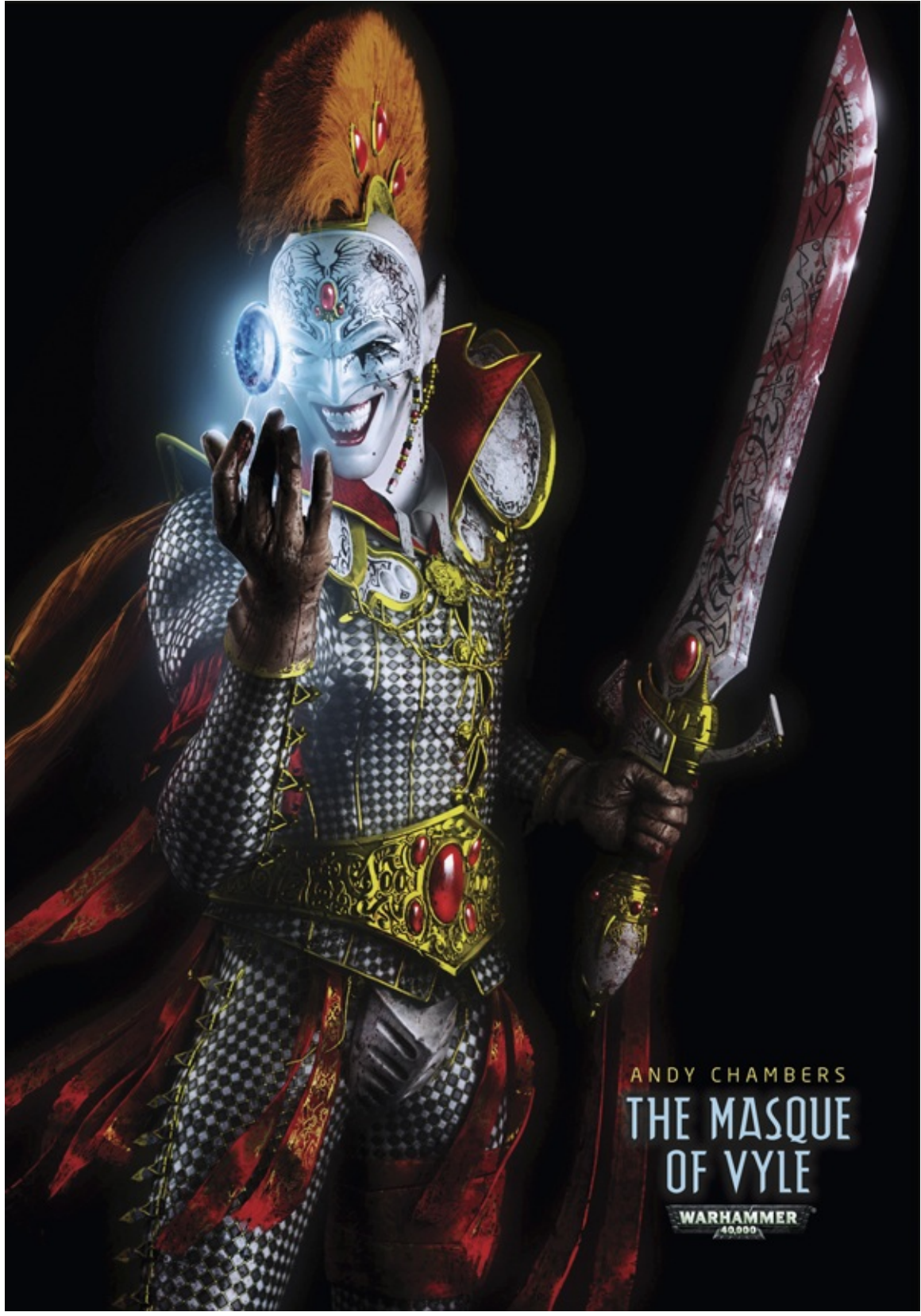




ANDY CHAMBERS
**THE MASQUE
OF VYLE**

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THE MASQUE OF VYLE

ANDY CHAMBERS



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TORTURERS AND SADISTS, NIGHTMARE MADE REAL, THE DARK ELDAR ARE EVIL INCARNATE. COLD AND BEAUTIFUL, SLENDER OF BONE, THEIR LITHE APPEARANCE BELIES THEIR DEADLY TALENT FOR SLAUGHTER AND CRUELTY.

FROM THE HIDDEN CITY OF COMMORRAGH, THE DARK ELDAR LAUNCH THEIR LIGHTNING RAIDS INTO THE DEPTHS OF REALSPACE, SOWING TERROR AND LEAVING DEVASTATION IN THEIR WAKE. THEY HUNT FOR SLAVES, FODDER FOR THE HELL-PITS AND THE PETTY AMUSEMENTS OF THEIR LORDS WHO DRAW SUSTENANCE FROM THE BLOOD SHED IN RITUAL BATTLE. FOR IN THIS HELLISH REALM, LIVING FLESH IS CURRENCY AND OVERLORD ASDRUBAEL VECT RULES ABOVE ALL WITH THE GREATEST SHARE.

BENEATH THEIR SUPREME MASTER, THE ARCHONS OF THE DARKLING CITY MURDER AND CHEAT TO KEEP ONE STEP AHEAD OF SHE WHO THIRSTS. FOR THE DARK ELDAR HARBOUR A TERRIBLE CURSE, A WASTING OF THEIR FLESH THAT CAN ONLY BE SLOWED BY THE INFLECTION OF PAIN. LIFE ETERNAL IS THE REWARD FOR THIS SOUL HARVEST, AND THE FAVOUR OF THE ANCIENT HAEMONCULI CAN EXTEND AN ELDAR'S MORTAL COIL YET FURTHER... FOR A PRICE. THE ALTERNATIVE IS DAMNATION AND ENDLESS SUFFERING, A WITHERING OF BODY AND MIND UNTIL ALL THAT REMAINS IS DUST.

BUT SUCH HUNGER CANNOT EVER BE SATIED. IT IS A BOTTOMLESS PIT OF HATE AND DEPRAVITY THAT LURKS WITHIN THE DARK ELDAR, A VESSEL THAT CAN NEVER TRULY BE FILLED, EVEN WITH OCEANS OF BLOOD. AND WHEN THE LAST DROP HAS BLED AWAY, THE SOUL THIEVES WILL KNOW TRUE TERROR AS THE DAEMONS COME TO CLAIM THEM...

‘It is perhaps axiomatic of the eldar race that some of its deadliest warriors are not warriors at all. A nomadic cult or sect of entertainers called “Harlequins exists outside the ritualistic societal norms of the eldar. Some of their performances are stylised, others abstract, while yet others are highly formalised. The performers move constantly between surviving enclaves of eldar, ostensibly for the purpose of staging depictions of their common mythology – the gods, creation, ancient heroes – often with an underlying metaphor or moralistic cue. It seems possible that the Harlequins’ purpose may also encompass diplomatic functions between different enclaves with concomitant elements of espionage. Juliannoux of Vergaun believes the Harlequins’ activities even have some bearing upon judicial matters.

The players in a Harlequin troupe seem to take up fixed roles both on and off the stage, their personal interactions always suborned to the characters they portray. Of these singular roles, the High Avatar and Death Jester are most easily comprehended as those of a leader and a personification of death. The Master Mime is a more complex figure and seems to include the concepts of invisibility or shadow play. This role crosses with that of the Shadowseer – a notorious psychic puppeteer in its own right, but with functions that also embrace a nurturing aspect to offset the harshness of the kingly High Avatar. Most curious of all is the so-

called Solitaire. An outcast generally shunned by the rest of the group, the Solitaire appears infrequently at performances. Only a Solitaire can perform the role of the entity that brought about the legendary downfall of the eldar race, the Chaos god Slaanesh, the being the eldar refer to as “She Who Thirsts ”. ’

– Excerpted from *De Libratii Xenostius Maxima*,
Volume XXII, Addendum 95.0349.378 – ‘Additional apocrypha’.



CHAPTER ONE

THE VOID-BORNE DEAD

They gathered in response to a silent call. They came slipping through the skeins of reality towards the dark place, a snarl of negativity and putrescence in the multi-dimensional lattice of the webway. They slid along the filaments of the webway very much like spiders reacting to the thrumming discord they could feel running through their home. Their objective was a kilometres-long vessel tumbling through the void like the dying carcass of a great leviathan.

Ashanthourus was the first to arrive, as befit his primacy as the troupe leader, High Avatar and Sun-King. His knowledge of the webway could be matched by few still living. Despite the parlous state it had fallen into since ancient times, Ashanthourus's insight into the webway's infinite number of routes, cross-passages and cut-throughs meant he could proceed quickly and easily to his goal.

Ashanthourus transitioned through a portal into the dark place and was attacked immediately. Broken automata lurched out of the shadows all around him and sought to crush out his life. He understood immediately that these long-limbed creations were the once-noble dead of this world, and that their vessels were cracked and their spirits irrevocably corrupted by She Who Thirsts. Change had already marked their once-smooth carapaces with barbs and scales, as if the unliving wraithbone of their bodies sought a mutagenic rebirth as the spawn of Chaos. Madness had infected them all.

Ashanthourus danced a deadly pavane with the corrupted dead, darting and weaving through their slashing blades and crushing limbs. He raised no weapon against them, his grinning face mask unfaltering as he gradually turned their horrid strength against them. He stepped negligently from blade to blade with his

hands clasped behind his back, swayed effortlessly between grasping claws and skipped around his lurching foes. One by one the corrupted vessels began smashing each other apart in their ungainly efforts to destroy him.

Lo'tos arrived moments later and beheld Ashanthourus in the midst of his exercises. As Master Mime and magician for the troupe, Lo'tos knew his place and seamlessly began to weave his own performance around that of Ashanthourus. He began by apishly imitating the Sun-King's movements with his own, stepping directly in the troupe-master's footprints. Moving like a clownish shadow, Lo'tos barely escaped the rushing blade-limbs that Ashanthourus had avoided so effortlessly. Lo'tos capered in mock terror from one of the machine-dead to another before darting back to follow the footsteps of Ashanthourus. Soon Lo'tos was fluttering around his leader and king as if in helpless supplication, before Ashanthourus led the last of the automata to impale itself on the wreckage of its fellows.

Lo'tos straightened and bowed elaborately to Ashanthourus, who returned the gesture, although he did not bow so deeply. The two of them held their pose for a moment to mark the end of the performance. Ashanthourus was resplendent in his gold-worked mask and magnificent crimson bodysuit. He contrasted strongly with Lo'tos's constantly shifting face and scrawny, shadowy body.

'That was inappropriate, Lo'tos,' Ashanthourus admonished with his deep, mellifluous voice. 'What has occurred here makes a case for tragedy rather than comedy.'

Lo'tos's mask immediately swirled into a caricature of the weeping eldar face most often characterised as Isha the moon-goddess. The magician bowed low to Ashanthourus once again and became the very image of contrition.

'The tragedy here is not of Lo'tos's making,' another voice said – this one as cool and liquid as starshine dancing on deep waters. 'You should grant him forgiveness, my king of fools.'

Ashanthourus turned his grinning mask towards the newcomer and gave a nonchalant flick of his hand towards Lo'tos as he spoke. 'Immediately given, my queen of mystery, in celebration of your timely arrival in this benighted place.'

Cylia, the Moon-Queen and Shadowseer for the troupe, stood forth from the portal still hooded and cloaked. Her mask was a reflective oval beneath her cowl and from her back spread the tubes of her *creidann* launcher like a set of branching antlers.

'I sense great evil was done here, and done too quickly for these ghost warriors to intervene and protect their home,' Cylia said sadly. 'I fear their

failure is what drove them to madness.’

As she swung forwards with infinite grace it became apparent that Cylia was followed by a threatening shadow, an armoured figure with its harness all worked with bones and symbols of death. This one had a mask crafted into the grinning visage of a skull and was known as Hradhiri Ra, the *margroach* or Death Jester of the troupe. In his hands he bore a slender, fluted cannon that was as long as he was tall. Hradhiri Ra cocked his head at the smashed wraithguard scattered about and looked back at Ashanthourus meaningfully.

‘It was severe enough to be called forth without explanation,’ Hradhiri Ra whispered in a voice that stroked icy fingers along the listener’s spine. ‘Grimmer still to arrive and find the work is already done.’

‘Our errant friend has called us with better cause than this perversion alone,’ Cylia said. ‘I sense these poor, broken vessels are only the beginning of the woes to be found in this place. Listen – what is it that you do not hear?’

All four stood with heads cocked in attitudes of listening for a moment before gazing back at one another.

‘The infinity circuit is entirely quiescent,’ said Ashanthourus.

‘The spirits of the dead are silent once more,’ concurred Hradhiri Ra in his sepulchral whisper.

Lo’tos hunched his shoulders and crossed his arms across his chest but kept his silence.

‘This craftworld has become a dead place, rotting without the protection of its ancestral spirits,’ said Cylia. ‘At the very least we should secure its gates before its poison can seep out into the webway.’

‘Then let us be about it,’ Ashanthourus said decisively and clapped his hands. By ones and twos other members of the troupe that had silently joined their master and mistress while they talked came stepping lightly out of the shadows. Most were slinking mimes or agile troupers, but a sprinkling of lesser Death Jesters and Shadowseers appeared also. In total no more than two dozen were present, but among eldar Harlequins that made for an unusually powerful Masque. Ashanthourus sent them hither and yon to secure the craftworld’s webway portals and search for survivors, although he held out little hope of finding any whole or sane.

The troupe members had seen places like and yet subtly different from this one a thousand times. The curving walls of the corridors and oval doorways, the smooth spiral ramps and the open forest domes were all familiar to anyone who had been aboard an eldar craftworld before. But in this craftworld the golden

lights of the domes were extinguished, the curving walls were torn open and the doors were shattered. Some force had come aboard this craftworld and assailed it with unthinkable violence.

Measured across the millennia the finite number of craftworlds was always a tragically dwindling figure: internal strife, external enemies and outright disappearance all took their toll. The loss of any craftworld was always a matter to be mourned, investigated and, if circumstances warranted it, avenged.

The craftworlds had wandered the great wheel of the galaxy ever since the Fall. Each one preserved a community of eldar that had the foresight to elude the unthinkable catastrophe that had overtaken the vast majority of their race during the Fall. The enormous ships were nation, fortress, domicile, parkland and life-preserving ark to those that lived out their lives aboard them. They were all unique, each one as much a living thing as a creation of industry and engineering. Much of the underlying structure of a craftworld was grown and sculpted using the amazing psychomorphic skills of its inhabitants.

The silent call that had brought the troupe hither drew them ever onwards into the depths of the craftworld. Light and heat gradually vanished as they probed deeper. Then gravity became increasingly tenuous as they moved inwards through the slowly tumbling hull of the craftworld. Now instead of walking, the troupe members perforce boosted themselves from spar to stanchion through drifting debris. They flipped themselves easily through spaces where up and down had lost all meaning; ceilings became floors, corridors became vertical shafts. It was in these chaotic spaces that the troupe encountered the first real traps left by the attackers.

Lo'tos had fallen to his natural role of pushing ahead and investigating potential performance locations. As he rounded a bend in the corridor a tiny, silent flash up ahead caught his attention. An innocent-looking gust of debris was blowing towards the magician, unfolding like a flower as it rushed up the corridor at him. Lo'tos recognised peril at once. He acted quicker than thought to swing himself to the side and into a narrow pipe barely wider than his shoulders. The debris flashed past his hiding place in a deadly blur, the invisible mass of monofilament wires hidden within it slicing through everything they touched at a molecular level.

A dozen paces behind him Ashanthourus, Hradhiri Ra and Cylia saw the magician dart aside seconds before the roiling hurricane of debris struck. As it reached them it had doubled in size, the shredding action of the monofilament

adding constantly to its mass as it tore chunks from the walls, ceiling and floor. Cylia reacted instinctively, flinging up her arms and summoning a protective sphere of psychic force about the three of them. The energy parted the tumbling mass as cleanly as the bow of a ship parting a wave. The monofilament webs were abruptly pushed aside to scour the corridor walls into nests of razors as they expended the last of their momentum.

The magician's tragic mask peered out cautiously once he was sure the danger had passed. He saw Hradhiri Ra's skull visage looking back at him. Ashanthourus was busy communicating their discovery to the other members of the troupe, telling them to be even more cautious.

'We had thought you lost to us,' the Death Jester whispered. 'Come out of that hole before our critics think to become yet more scathing.'

'How was it done, Hradhiri?' Cylia asked, and a slight inflection of her voice made the Death Jester pause and turn to look at the reflective oval of her mask in surprise. He could have sworn that the Shadowseer sounded nervous.

'A simple motion sensor and explosive charge would suffice,' the Death Jester whispered. 'Any *mon-keigh* could come up with the same idea, but monofilament webs are an eldar weapon.'

Cylia nodded, her cowl dipping to obscure the smooth curve of her face. Ashanthourus looked across sharply at them both, his grinning, gold-chased mask seeming both sinister and scheming in the darkness.

'Monofilament in itself proves nothing: we carry enough of it ourselves to weave a starship,' the troupe-master said brusquely.

'Precisely so,' Hradhiri Ra whispered. 'But who else does? Warp Spiders? Renegades? Kabalites? The list is short and it gives us our first clue as to who is responsible for this tragedy.'

Lo'tos for his part only shrugged and blurred his mask to display the swirling mass of debris he had witnessed rushing towards him. So armed with the image of his antagonist for a face the magician crept forwards more cautiously, on hands and toes like a four-legged spider.

The next trap was different, a hive of microscopic machines programmed to strip the flesh and flense the bones of any living thing they sensed nearby. Lo'tos sensed the machine-nest's almost inaudible buzzing from afar and hunted it down, hidden under a pall of psychic shadow. Once it had been located, Hradhiri's shrieker cannon put paid to the globular nest and its occupants before they could do any harm.

Ashanthourus received more reports from the other troupes moving through

the craftworld. Other traps had been found and disarmed. Their distribution seemed random and their details varied but all were of a particularly vicious brand of cunning that the troupe-master found all too familiar. This craftworld was a small one, little bigger than a city when the greatest world-ships were the size of continents. Even so it represented a potentially vast area to search with only a handful of individuals. When the danger of casualties was added to the mix it became an impossible task. With regret he ordered the troupes to cease their fruitless search for survivors and concentrate on closing the craftworld's webway portals.

'It is truly lost then?' Cylia said.

'I cannot risk losing more of us searching for survivors that may not exist,' Ashanthourus said heavily.

'They exist, I feel them,' replied Cylia distantly. 'But I fear they are beyond our capacity to save.'

Coming upon the innermost halls of the craftworld, they encountered its surviving inhabitants. Bereft of the protection given by the psychic seals built into their craftworld home, they had been warped into supple, serpentine entities by the baleful influence of She Who Thirsts. They were barely identifiable as eldar : mewling, mismatched things that had rapidly regressed into atavistic mutants. The monstrosities diverted themselves from preying on one another to rush gleefully at their newly arrived playmates with extended claws and lolling tongues.

Lo'tos immediately darted before them as a distraction, a flicker of shadow that swelled into a threatening thunderhead and then vanished into a wisp of nothing before their eyes. Cylia's *creidann* launcher spat a fan of bright sparks that shrieked through the air and landed in the midst of the accursed creatures amid clouds of coloured smoke. Hallucinogen gas in the smoke and the Shadowseer's psychic weaving reduced the crowd of mutants into a confused mass of thrashing limbs. Staggering, laughing, weaving and crying, the debased eldar clawed at themselves and one another.

Hradhiri Ra stepped forwards with grim purpose and levelled his shrieker cannon before looking to Ashanthourus for approval to begin his harvest. The troupe-master gazed into the throng for long seconds as they spilled towards him still screaming and flailing at unseen tormentors. The knot of mutants blindly surged closer still and yet Ashanthourus seemed uncaring of their progress – whether he was mesmerised or horrified his grinning mask looked on with

seeming indifference.

‘You wish to wait until you can clasp hands with them?’ Hradhiri Ra finally rasped in frustration. By now the closest foes were almost touching the tip of his cannon’s barrel. At last Ashanthourus gave a tiny nod to the Death Jester and the cannon began to sing its song of death.

Like the launcher, the cannon is a weapon peculiar to eldar Harlequins. Where more mundane eldar weapons launch spinning discs with a monomolecular edge to slice their target apart, the cannon uses modified discs to deliver doses of a virulent acid. This acid is of a singular potency and combines with the bodily fluids found in most living beings to create an impressively violent explosive reaction. So, the cannon is so-called not only for the sound it makes when firing, but for the shrieks of its victims in the brief instant before they bloodily explode.

Hradhiri Ra advanced into the mutants, smartly swivelling his cannon left and right to punch out a steady rhythm. Red mist filled the air as the unfortunate survivors were blown apart in a string of fleshy detonations. The Death Jester’s long coat and bone-marked armour soon became slicked with gore but he pushed forwards mercilessly. The mutants had already been disoriented by Cylia’s hallucinogen and confused by Lo’tos’s powers, yet even through their insanity the appearance of a bloody deathdealer in their midst was too much for them. The survivors broke and tried to flee, scrambling up walls and slithering towards doorways in the low gravity.

There was to be no escape for them. Hradhiri Ra turned his cannon onto those closest to the exits and more fountains of scarlet exploded before the disintegrating mass of serpentine creatures. The swaying crowd of mutants were driven back and forth, gibbering wildly in their terror. The Death Jester pushed in closer. Round after round from his cannon tore into the mass and produced a cacophony of dying shrieks. But Hradhiri Ra had come too close. Perhaps by chance or perhaps from a clarity born of desperation, the last few mutants turned on the Death Jester in an effort to drag down their nemesis.

Hradhiri Ra found himself suddenly attacked from all sides and unable to use his cannon to best effect. Ashanthourus, Cylia and Lo’tos instantly leapt to his aid but it was already too late. The Death Jester disappeared entirely beneath the mass of writhing, coiling bodies. Claws flashed and fangs gnashed before bright crimson spurted in an obscene climax. Ashanthourus uttered a curse and was about to wade into the mob when they were rent asunder by another bloody explosion in their midst. Bone and viscera sprayed through the closely packed bodies like shrapnel, tearing them apart.

‘Hradhiri!’ Cylia shouted in disbelief at the expanding cloud of blood mist. Within it nothing moved.

Lo’tos looked to one side and began to slowly applaud. The flat cadence of his gloved hands clapping was the only sound for a moment. Ashanthourus and Cylia gazed at the Master Mime, their masks tilted incredulously at his response to the death of a comrade. Lo’tos gestured apologetically.

‘I’d expected a better response from you,’ whispered Hradhiri Ra from behind them. ‘Are my death-defying feats now to be met with horror every time they occur?’

They looked and saw the Death Jester emerging from the shadows. He strode jauntily past the astonished High Avatar and Shadowseer into the mound of serpentine corpses left by the last of the mutants. He retrieved his cannon from the bloody crater in the centre and shook the gore from it.

‘How did you escape them?’ Ashanthourus asked.

Hradhiri Ra nonchalantly rested the butt of his cannon on one hip. ‘The secrets of the daring escape are for the *margroach* to know and his audience to guess at,’ he whispered dryly.

‘So many and yet so few,’ said Cylia as she looked over the dead. ‘Even a craftworld as small as this would be home to many thousands of souls, but I sense no one left now that these have departed.’

‘Been shuffled off their mortal coils,’ Hradhiri Ra quipped sardonically, earning him a sharp look from Ashanthourus as Lo’tos made a small retching sound by way of response.

At last the leaders of the troupe came to a broad avenue which climbed in sweeping curves to a wide archway. Impressive gates had once guarded the area beyond the arch from intrusion but now they lay shattered on the steps like a drift of fallen leaves.

Lo’tos crouched to examine the shards and stirred the blackened splinters with one long-fingered hand. He picked up a piece and crumbled it between two fingers. His implication was clear: whatever violence had struck the gate had been entropic in origin, an attack that struck at the very bindings between particles and rendered the fundamental material strength of their structure no more durable than rotting wood.

High technology had destroyed the gate, more proof if any were needed that only eldar or their most dreadful enemies from the time of legends could have breached this innermost sanctum.

Beyond the arch lay the craftworld's dome of crystal seers. The psychically conductive wraithbone of the infinity circuit normally permitted the souls of the craftworld's dead to roam throughout their former home. Ghost warrior constructs even permitted a physical manifestation for those that desired to move beyond the circuit. However most souls wished only to remain in the infinity circuit and they commonly coalesced most strongly around the dome of crystal seers.

Eldar that dedicated part of their long lives to the path of the seer came to the dome to finally give up the mantle of mortality by gradually entering the infinity circuit. Within the dome their atrophying bodies were slowly transformed into psychoactive crystal that grew little by little over countless millennia into fantastic tree-like structures linked directly to the infinity circuit.

This place should have lain at the beating heart of the craftworld's infinity circuit. It should have been a place where wisdom and ancestral knowledge veritably pulsed in the air, where generations of craftworld dwellers had been painstakingly gathered at the moment of death to be protected from She Who Thirsts behind bulwarks and sigils for all eternity. Instead, to the psychically attuned Harlequins the dome felt dead and empty.

The dome was part-filled with low dunes of scintillating sand; the air carried tendrils of brilliance where light scattered from drifting crystalline motes. The silent call had drawn the Harlequins to this place but by any metric they had arrived too late to save it.

'Destroyed, utterly ravaged,' said Ashanthourus in a voice that shook with cold fury. 'Look, every spirit stone has been taken... or smashed.'

They looked and saw that what the High Avatar had said was true. The curving walls of the dome showed thousands of hollow pockmarks where spirit stones had been interlaced into the infinity circuit. Every craftworlder carried such a talisman against the possibility of their death. The stone became a safe haven for their soul until it could be carried back to be implanted in the infinity circuit. Over the millennia a growing constellation of lambent spirit stones would have encrusted the interior of the dome.

'Servants of the Great Enemy must have broken in here,' Hradhiri Ra whispered uncertainly, 'but I can't see how the guardians permitted it. They could have called upon Khaela Mensha Khaine and thrown back the invaders, or sent for help from other craftworlds, or even abandoned this one and fled. I can see no sign that they attempted any of these things.'

Lo'tos had crouched himself in a tight huddle with his arms wrapped around

his knees. His tumbling, fractal-faced mask gazed over the shattered remnants of a people. The people of this craftworld had endured the Fall and all that came after it only to have their story end here. Even though he had seen greater evils than this one in his time the Master Mime still shivered involuntarily.

‘Cylia,’ Ashanthourus said abruptly. ‘You can discover what occurred within these walls. Your witchsight will show you past events. Look now, look and find out who was responsible for this abomination.’

Cylia hesitated. ‘Such an action is not without risk, my Sun-King. If a greater daemon were here it could perceive me at the same instant I saw it. Even the protection of the Laughing God might not save me then, time and space would present no barrier to such an entity once it had tasted my psyche...’

The Shadowseer’s voice trailed away apologetically beneath Ashanthourus’s gaze. She was unwilling to deny the High Avatar completely but knew the danger she sensed was very real. Violent events, heinous acts all left their mark on places in the material universe and brought them closer to true Chaos. The denizens of Chaos, potent entities that dwelled within its all-encompassing medium, required little more than a foothold to manifest outside their realm: a word, a symbol, even a thought could be all they needed.

Lo’tos glanced to one side and his mask abruptly changed. It altered from the tumbling debris of explosion to the stylised, smiling features most commonly associated with Cegorach, the Laughing God. The Master Mime nodded briefly in greeting.

‘I can spare you from the risk of looking,’ a new voice said. ‘You would find nothing.’

Hradhiri Ra whipped around with his cannon raised to cover the newcomer in the blink of an eye. The slight figure being menaced by the Death Jester raised its hands in mock surrender.

‘Psychic screamers were used to obscure the scene,’ the newcomer explained brightly. ‘Whoever did this was careful to leave no such easily accessible evidence of their activities.’

‘Motley,’ Hradhiri Ra snorted, and angled his cannon upwards again.

The newcomer was lithe and compact, dressed in an archaic costume that appeared grey at first glance. Closer examination showed it to be comprised of tiny diamonds of alternating black and white in endless repetition. Unlike the fully masked Harlequins the figure wore a domino, a half-mask that covered the upper half of its face. The lower, uncovered half showed full red lips and an overly-mobile mouth that was currently beaming a welcoming smile.

‘It is indeed I, Motley, one and the same my bony friend. I’m very glad to see you all – I thought you’d never get here – although I obviously hoped otherwise, of course.’

‘Spare me your protestations of familiarity and goodwill, spawn of Chaos,’ Ashanthourus pronounced coldly. ‘Justify your presence here – by what right do you call for a Masque to attend your vagrant wanderings?’

Motley bowed deeply, appearing greatly chagrined.

‘Forgive your errant servant, my noble king, I intended only to lighten a dark moment with the warming gift of laughter. I call upon the Masque by my right of sacrifice, as one foresworn to the doom of our people and perched upon the razor’s edge between apotheosis and destruction. Would you see my credentials?’

Motley raised one hand to his domino mask as if to remove it but Ashanthourus shook his head.

‘No need, fool, I recognise Cegorach’s touch upon you. Why else would you dare so much if not at the instigation of the Laughing God – unless perhaps now the other entity that you serve drives your desires?’

Motley shook his head as he lowered his hand. ‘If that were the case it would be readily apparent to all. Your own souls would not be safe around me, for one thing. We are agreed, then, that I am who I say I am and no greater a fool or changeling than is usual?’

Ashanthourus tilted up his chin imperiously. ‘Indeed,’ the High Avatar said, ‘although you are no servant of mine, errant or otherwise, and should make no such claim even in jest.’

‘Duly noted.’ Motley bowed again, almost planting his nose in the crystalline dust and keeping it there. ‘I am less than a worm and servant to none other than my own poor sense of taste – plus our mutual deity, patron and benefactor – and our mutual nemesis, the doom of our people...’

‘Enough of this, Ashanthourus!’ Cylia cried. ‘Motley has grave news for us, surely? Bid him to tell it and cease your posturing!’

It was Ashanthourus’s turn to appear chagrined; he even flinched slightly at the Shadowseer’s hot jab of emotion. Nonetheless he quickly recovered himself and regally gestured for Motley to rise and speak.

‘Speak then, knave, tell us what has occurred here,’ Ashanthourus said a little sulkily.

‘The anticipation is killing me,’ whispered Hradhiri Ra with heavy irony. Motley flashed him a little smile of appreciation at the jest.

‘As you have no doubt surmised the people of this craftworld were attacked and swiftly overwhelmed. I’ve been to many, many craftworlds in my wanderings but this one was new to me when I found it. I discovered it in much the same condition as you see it now.’

‘We’d not believed you responsible for the damage, in case you were wondering,’ whispered Hradhiri Ra drily.

‘Well quite, but you would be correct in thinking that the damage is recent. It is not long ago that this place was ravaged. Judging by the number of spirit stones that used to be here.’

Motley swept his arm around to encompass the whole dome and its empty sockets. ‘I think this craftworld was lost in the warp for quite some time and most of its inhabitants had already gone into the infinity circuits by the time it emerged.’

‘Then who attacked them and why?’ Ashanthourus demanded, having recovered some of his poise. ‘They could have posed no threat.’

‘Ah well, there is the quandary. From what I’ve seen they had barred all of the portals into the webway. They probably never even knew that others had survived the Fall and feared an influx of daemons or some such – not without good cause it must be said. Anyway, they had sealed themselves away and no one knew of their existence. I haven’t even been able to find anything that indicates the name of this craftworld.’

‘How did you find it in the first place, Motley?’ Cylia asked softly.

‘Why, by following my nose, your majesty, as I always do,’ Motley said, while ostentatiously tapping the offending organ with one finger. ‘I literally stumbled across it and soon realised... well, I recognised what is by now obvious to you all. Forgive me for not greeting you at the portal but I felt you needed to come in further to see it for yourselves before making any decisions.’

‘Focus, fool, your unnecessary prattling begins to offend my ears,’ said Ashanthourus solemnly. ‘Who were the attackers? What was their purpose?’

‘I am coming to that as rapidly as I can, your majesty, it is not a simple matter to explain and in truth I am not in possession of all of the facts. However, I can surmise from the few I hav—’

Ashanthourus clapped his hands to his mask in a show of frustration before jabbing one finger at Motley and crying out in a thunderous voice: ‘Who. Did. This? Answer!’

Motley became still and silent, hanging his head in shame. ‘That, I do not know,’ he admitted reluctantly.

Hradhiri Ra laughed mordantly. Ashanthourus threw up his hands and stalked away, his footfalls scattering rainbow clouds from the dust. After a moment Cylia came forwards, a sliver of her mirrored mask peeping from beneath her cowl like a newly risen moon.

‘What *can* you tell us, Motley?’ she said gently. ‘Ashanthourus did not tell you to stop.’

Motley smiled and continued as if there had been no interruption. ‘I can surmise from the few facts I have found that the surviving inhabitants, for reasons we may never know, did in fact unbar several portals into the webway. They must have been desperate, I think, to have done so after so many millennia alone in the dark, or perhaps they had other reasons we cannot know.’

Ashanthourus was standing away from the rest of them, but the arch of his back and the angle of his head showed he was listening despite himself. Motley chattered on, the words spilling out of him in a babbling stream.

‘So they unbarred the portals and daemons didn’t come swarming in and so they must have thought they might get to live on after all. They must have been happy at that moment and happier still when they found out that their own race, the eldar race, had survived the Fall. Somebody found them, you see, pretty quickly after they opened their craftworld. As quick as I was getting here, somebody was a good deal quicker. They must have been waiting and watching for a portal to open that hadn’t opened in millennia so they got here... first. I don’t really have to tell you who I think it was do I?’

‘Yes!’ chorused Cylia and Hradhiri Ra in frustration. Motley sighed volubly, seemingly unwilling to make accusations yet unable to deny the evidence of his own eyes.

‘I believe they had visitors from Commorragh,’ Motley said after a moment. ‘It was someone from the eternal city that found them first.’

‘It is obvious that is what we are meant to think,’ Ashanthourus threw dismissively over his shoulder. ‘The calling cards left behind as traps imply as much.’

‘I thought that too, at first.’ Motley shrugged. ‘Too obvious, but then I looked again and wondered why should renegades or craftworlders go to such trouble to do such a thing? Look around you... this place has been completely stripped of its spirit stones and wraithbone. The craftworlds would never take them – to even conceive of such a thing would be the blackest crime imaginable to them. Most renegades would not think to value them nor stoop so low as to steal them. No, only in Commorragh are such things as captive souls and stolen wraithbone

given a blood-price so high that the kabals would commit almost any outrage to gain more.'

'None of that changes what Ashanthourus has said,' Cylia sighed. 'A seer council may have determined that orchestrating this outrage will drive the craftworlds to unite and assail Commorrhagh. A single renegade with a grudge may have unleashed all of this as horrible revenge for some forgotten slight...'

'Yes, to all of these things – yes!' Motley crowed with delight. 'I would much rather see this as some vile plot than a Commorrite kabal doing what comes naturally to them. That's simply too dreary and depressing. I merely answered your question with my own beliefs. With your help perhaps we can prove me wrong, hmm?'

Silence fell across the scene. Lo'tos remained squatting with his mask reset to a flashing kaleidoscope of images. Cylia and Hradhiri Ra stood before the slight figure of Motley, looking like a bony image of Death and a waif-like revenant menacing a child. Ashanthourus stood to one side appearing most kingly in his hauteur. Nonetheless, as final arbiter of the activities of his troupe it was the High Avatar who finally broke the silence.

'So then what would you have me do?' Ashanthourus said.

'As I explained, I don't really know who did this or why.' Motley smiled. 'But I do have one very pertinent piece of knowledge that can, in its turn, resolve all the other questions.'

'And what would that be, Motley?' Hradhiri Ra whispered. 'And why have you waited this long to share it?'

'Because of your insistence in questioning me about who did it,' said Motley with an impossibly infuriating grin. 'You pushed entirely beyond what I knew to what I surmised. I can scarcely be held responsible for that now, can I?'

Hradhiri Ra tilted his skull mask in response. 'I recall now why we strive to cross paths irregularly,' the Death Jester whispered. 'Pray forgive my impatience and continue.'

'Just so, as I was saying. I don't know who they were or why they did this, but...'

All four of the troupe principals looked at the slight figure of Motley with ill-concealed impatience as he once again paused for dramatic effect.

'...I know where they went.'

'This is the one,' Motley said a sly grin. 'I entered through that portal over there and when I examined the others this was the only other one that had been

activated in the recent past.’

The sloping wall before them held a dozen leaf-shaped warpgates, none of them larger than an ordinary doorway.

‘It will not be hard to trace such a cavalcade of woe through the webway when we know their starting point,’ Hradhiri Ra whispered. ‘The stolen spirit stones they carried will have been wailing every step of the way.’

They closed down all of the craftworld’s portals and locked them, save the one that Motley showed them. Cylia located the craftworld’s emergency control circuits and brought them flickering back to life for long enough to set a new course for the vast ship. They had debated long on what to do, shouted that the sacrifice of such a vessel even in its crippled state was a criminal loss to the race as a whole.

Ultimately they could only agree that the craftworld could not be found in its current condition. Cylia set its course to return it to the depths of the void and they departed from it with many a backward glance. Even stripped of its wraithbone and spirit stones the craftworld had a lingering presence. It was almost as if an indefinable sense of life and consciousness clung to it from the multitudes that had lived out their lives within its walls. More accurately it was possible to sense the slow, incremental passing of something that had once been vast and incredible. The great vessel was a titanic corpse that could only hint at how much greater the complete living entity had been.

They turned their backs on the dark place as it sank into the multi-hued depths of the void and they took to the webway once more. A single thread of probability led them through time and space to a realm outside both the void and the material universe: a dewdrop of reality trembling on the inter-dimensional strands of the webway, a bubble of matter like and yet unlike many others created out of the eternally churning froth of warp space.



CHAPTER TWO

THE SABLE MARCHES

As he emerged from the portal, Archon Kassais eyed the turbulent, storm-wracked skies of the Sable Marches with undisguised disdain. Far out to sea he could glimpse long-bodied grav-craft dumping something into the iron-grey waters, which was odd as he'd thought the whole point of this place was to take things out of the water rather than put them back in.

Kassais shrugged mentally. He had been a visitor to a hundred different sub-realms in his time. None of them ever came close to the dark grandeur of Commorragh, the eternal city, with its glittering spires and endless, twisting streets. Some, it had to be granted, evinced a sort of primordial energy and primitive squalor that sharpened the appetite and roused the more base instincts to a pleasing pitch. He already knew that the Sable Marches was not destined to be one of these places.

Kassais knew the Sable Marches had squalor in plentiful quantities but beyond that it was highly unlikely that they had anything else to offer by way of diversion. This was mostly because for unfathomable reasons its creators had chosen to fill up most of the realm with salt water when they shaped it. The Marches were still known as a wild realm, one so primordial and fierce that it had been virtually abandoned soon after its inception. This particular realm had only been formally recolonised much, much later, after many centuries of neglect. Kassais consoled himself that at least he would not be staying in the benighted sub-realm for too long. A quick visit and then away to more agreeable realms.

Archon Kassais and his entourage had entered the realm through a moss-

grown arch close to the water's edge. Rutted tracks led off left and right along a crumbling rock wall before beginning to twist tortuously back and forth in order to climb overhanging sea-cliffs. Scrofulous-looking hovels clung precariously to the cliffs alongside the track, like accretions of droppings interconnected by flimsy-looking ladders and swaying rope bridges. The air was full of the scent of brine and rotting fish. The crash of waves and the cries of birds assailed Kassais's ears in a highly objectionable fashion.

They began to wend their way up the track with Kassais's warriors swiftly pushing ahead to clear the way for his smoothly floating palanquin. The natives endured the warriors' curses and blows with a studied sullenness that verged on impudence, a fact that irritated Kassais still further. They lined the narrow track on either side to watch the entourage's progress through lidless, saucer-like eyes. Kassais considered making an example of some of them but reluctantly decided he really couldn't afford the delay. Vyle was already waiting for him somewhere above and patience was not one of his fellow archon's stronger suits.

Apparently such islands as the Sable Marches could boast as suitable for habitation were all much like this one. Their interiors were overgrown with gloomy forests and tangled thickets that had become home to stalking leontyrs, ill-tempered grox and other less readily identifiable creatures. The towering cliffs fringing the edges of the islands overlooked permanently storm-tossed seas wherein, it was said, the amphibian natives of the realm plotted the downfall of all land-dwelling invaders.

The atmosphere was certainly tense, Kassais soon came to realise. An almost palpable sense of suppressed rage radiated from the crowd as the procession pushed through them. Kassais felt as if they were moving through a fog bank that retreated only reluctantly. Increasingly the sullen eyes gazed with a murderous intent that was swiftly hooded. Kassais smiled wickedly and hoped they were stupid enough to try something. The twenty kabalite warriors he had brought with him would be sufficient to raze the entire settlement without so much as breaking a sweat.

Kassais glanced upwards from his smoothly travelling palanquin. More saucer-eyed faces lined the buildings and bridges above them. Sooner or later one of them would think they could get away with dropping a pot of excrement on the barbed warriors shoving their way up the track. Either that or someone would simply jostle someone else and knock something down by accident. Kassais didn't care; any provocation would be enough to put him in a killing mood. He licked his lips in anticipation. He'd simply have to explain to Vyle

later why he'd found it necessary to maim and torture a few hundred of his subjects.

A disturbance was occurring above; it would come any moment now. Kassais rested one hand on the ornate hilt of his pistol in readiness.

'Hold, please!' an unctuous voice murmured in his ear. The smooth-skinned natives were dropping to their knees like wheat before a scythe and hiding their sullen eyes behind webbed fingers. The whine of grav-engines came to Kassais's ears and a second later a trio of Venom sky-chariots dropped into position hovering alongside the track. The decks of two of the craft were empty but the central one bore a figure in pleated finery that would have been impressive in the eternal city several millennia ago. Kassais bit back disappointment as he recognised the pinched face of the clothes' occupant.

'Yegara! What do you want, toad?' Kassais called out loudly. His warriors cocked their helmeted heads at the new arrival in a fashion that made it clear they beheld it with contempt.

'The great and terrible Shrike Lord sent me to find you, Archon Kassais,' the one called Yegara replied. 'He grew impatient to hunt so he bid me to find you and bring you to him without delay.'

'I'll wager he wasted fewer words on you than that,' Kassais snorted. He looked around at the grovelling natives. They suddenly seemed to be a lot less interesting to him now. 'All right, take me to him. I know Vyle can get wickedly grouchy if he gets bored.'

Yegara smiled back ingratiatingly. Kassais could have made his life a lot harder by being awkward. 'I took the liberty of bringing additional transportation, as you can see, in case you preferred a more... ah... direct route out of the slums.'

'You can't keep slaves cowed by flying around above their heads all of the time,' Kassais complained as he dismounted from his palanquin. 'You have to teach them respect where they live – down in the dirt.'

'Oh, a very finely observed point...' Yegara agreed hesitantly as Kassais gripped the rail of his Venom and vaulted aboard. Ten of Kassais's warriors efficiently swarmed aboard the other two craft in groups of five.

'I had thought perhaps you would like one of the... ah... other craft for your own personal use,' Yegara said a little desperately. Kassais was strongly built and wearing full armour that left only his face bare. In the close confines of the Venom's deck the elaborate pleats and folds of Yegara's garment were uncomfortably close to being shredded by the barbs on the shins and elbows of

the archon's baroquely sculpted armour.

Kassais bent closer, forcing Yegara to sway back over the rail to avoid impalement. 'You'd like that, wouldn't you?' he said into Yegara's sweating face. 'Put myself alone on one of your provincial little sky-cycles and simply trust to Lhilitu that I make it to the end of the journey intact. Such a tragic accident might occur, quite unforeseeable I'm sure. Still, I'll wager your own vehicle will be in peak condition.'

Yegara swallowed uncomfortably and forced a smile as he scrambled to recover his dignity. Commorrites like Kassais always viewed outlanders like Olthanyr Yegara with disdain. Forget that the Yegara clan had ruled the Sable Marches independently for centuries, forget that the bounty of their seas was vital for feeding the innumerable hungry mouths of Commorragh. All that mattered to Kassais was that Yegara was not from the eternal city; he was a peasant, a provincial bumpkin, a barbarian, barely more than a slave.

Kassais was gazing straight into his eyes and caught the spark of defiance kindling there. The Commorrite grinned mirthlessly and leaned closer still, pushing Yegara back further. He appeared to be seriously considering sending Yegara over the railing and to his death on the rocks hundreds of metres below. After a long, agonising moment Kassais relented and dragged Yegara upright with one gauntleted hand.

'Well, let's go and find Vyle, then,' Kassais said, as if nothing had happened. Olthanyr Yegara shivered in his grasp.

Yegara gasped an order to the driver to take them to the keep. The three Venoms rose and slipped smoothly away. Soon the ten of Kassais's warriors that had been left behind were just a row of ant-like figures inching up the cliff-face. Kassais wondered if the natives would take their chance to attack the reduced number of warriors and regretted that he wouldn't be there to see it if they did.

A prow-like promontory rose at one end of the island, a mountain of earth and stone overlooking the forests of the interior. Perched atop it was a rambling pile of local stone that had seemingly been roughly shaped into an array of moss-covered towers, turrets and bastions. Thick, sloping walls girdled three sides of the structure but the side closest to the sea was a honeycomb of open rooms, half-stairs and corridors that emptied into nothingness. Below them at the foot of the cliff the waves crashed triumphantly over fallen masonry and tirelessly worked to undermine the remaining structure further.

This was Windgrave, the Yegara clan's ancestral home. The Yegas had raised this keep in the very first days of settlement, or more strictly speaking they had forced the enslaved natives to do so on their behalf. The creatures had been more numerous then and it was said that the great matriarch B'Qui Yegara had mortared the stones with their flesh and blood. There were keeps on other islands but Windgrave was the first and greatest of them – the Yegas had bribed, politicked and assassinated for centuries to ensure that it remained so.

Until comparatively recently, Windgrave with its slow, dreaming atmosphere of fattened privilege and endless scheming had encompassed Olthanyr Yegara's entire world. Now his family home stood festooned with the lurid purple and crimson banners of the Shrike Lord. A thousand gleaming points showed where impalement spikes had been crudely jammed between the ancient stones as proof that the Shrike Lord was not named such out of mere fancy. Most of the unfortunates occupying the spikes were members of the Yegara clan: Olthanyr's cousins, nephews, nieces, matriarchs and patriarchs. More recently they had been joined by an increasing number of the smooth-skinned natives as their settlements were brought to an understanding that all of their lives had changed forever.

The three Venom sky-chariots swept down towards an open expanse of grassy turf before the keep. Here the encroaching forests had been burned away to leave space for outdoor entertainments and visiting ships. At present it was a hive of activity with liveried servants dashing back and forth, armoured guards patrolling and beastmasters castigating their charges. Archon Kassais perked up a little and paid attention for the first time in the journey.

'What are those things?' the Commorrite asked with surprising interest.

Yegara looked at the scene with some confusion; there was nothing unusual to be seen in it as far as he could tell. Unless...

'You mean the riding beasts?' said Yegara in a carefully neutral tone. Nonetheless Kassais gave him a withering glare.

'Yes, of course the riding beasts, you stupid toad,' Kassais spat in disgust.

'We call them arcotheurs. They are a local lifeform normally found only in deep water,' Yegara rushed to explain. 'If captured young enough they can be raised as you see them here, in an air-dwelling form.'

The arcotheurs were ribbon-like in their body shape, with multiple curved legs dangling beneath. Chitinous plates protected them from tip to tail, starting no bigger than a thumbnail and widening to a double arm-span width around the midriff. The creatures 'swam' just above the surface of the grass in a series of

undulating ripples moving backwards from their hooked mouthparts.

As they dismounted from the Venoms, Kassais saw that most of the creatures had high-backed saddles strapped just above the mouthparts. A few already had riders in tall plumed helmets, equipped with long, hooked lances. Yegara led him towards the densest knot of creatures and flunkies, the rank smell of the riding beasts assailing his nostrils as he got closer. There, beside a particularly striking specimen that was striped in black and gold, was Vyle.

The Shrike Lord turned a dour look towards Kassais and Yegara as they came up. His dark, swept-back hair and predatory features very much brought to mind his totem, the butcher bird. Archon Vyle'ak Ak Vyle Menshas, also known as the Shrike Lord, recent inheritor of Yegara's birthright of the Sable Marches and favoured of the Supreme Overlord, Asdrubael Vect.

'I'm surprised you bothered to come, and even more surprised that you made it here,' Vyle said dismissively. 'You must want something badly to make the trek.'

'Nonsense!' cried Kassais with a grin. 'A fine welcome to your own blood after travelling so far from civilisation to congratulate you on your latest acquisition!'

Vyle seemed unmoved by Kassais's protestations as he turned to Yegara. 'What happened at the waterfront? Any problems?'

'No, all was quiet, my archon,' Yegara simpered.

'That's rot, I was one finger-twitch away from ordering a massacre,' snorted Kassais. 'The natives are restless, Vyle. I don't know what you've been doing to arouse their ire but it's certainly working.'

Vyle ignored the barb and turned back to his mount, driving away his servants so he could make adjustments to the saddle himself. After fussing for a minute in silence Vyle spoke again.

'Nothing to do with me directly, more's the pity,' the Shrike Lord said with an unfamiliar edge to his voice. 'There's been enough work around here just teaching the web-fingered ingrates who's in charge after centuries of Yegara's slack-witted indulgence. This is something different. Come on, pick a mount and I'll tell you about it along the way.'

'Oh such exotic delights, Vyle, you're spoiling me!' Kassais grinned. Looking around he could see no other black and gold mounts, which rather frustrated his initial plan. Instead he settled on a feisty-looking red and black specimen. He ignored the little set of steps the servants brought forwards and vaulted into the saddle from a standing jump. The act earned him some gasps and a polite smatter of applause from Vyle's coterie, and a rousing cheer from his own knot

of warriors over by the Venoms.

The Shrike Lord gazed down contemptuously at Yegara left standing among the servants and handlers.

‘Get inside and make sure everything’s ready for our return,’ Vyle said before glancing over to the shadowed edge of the forest, ‘and make sure Kassais’s warriors are accommodated to their satisfaction once the rest of them arrive. Come on, Kassais, these things sink like solarites once the moons rise.’

The Shrike Lord surged away across the sward, his arcotheur rippling out behind him like a gonfalon in a stiff breeze. As Kassais had suspected, the hooked lances were used to goad the creatures, and shifts in bodyweight were sufficient to guide them. Beasts across the universe were all the same, Kassais laughed to himself, just dig in the spurs and away they go. He urged his mount onwards and rapidly caught up to Vyle at the head of a brightly rippling phalanx of guards, scouts and favourites struggling to manage their own mounts with more and less success.

‘Be careful of getting your feet near the mouth,’ Vyle called as he drew closer. ‘They have a necrotising venom that’ll make even your eyes water.’

Kassais snorted but nonetheless made sure that his feet were situated properly in the hooped stirrups. ‘So, what is this trouble that you alluded to if it’s not the natives – and just what are we hunting, by the way?’

‘A rezsix; big, cat-looking thing. The scouts saw one earlier today and drove it nearer the keep,’ Vyle replied distractedly, his eyes still on the looming treeline. Kassais noted its approach with surprise, they were travelling more quickly than he thought – the arcotheur’s smoothly undulating gait was deceptively fast.

‘And the other trouble?’ Kassais prompted.

‘Something’s wrong with the gates,’ Vyle said heavily. ‘As of a few days ago things can enter this satellite realm but they can’t leave.’

‘What?’ shouted Kassais, loudly enough to disturb flights of birds from the nearby trees.



CHAPTER THREE

WINDGRAVE

Olthanyr Yegara made his way across the crowded lawn towards Windgrave, sparing only a glance over his shoulder as they surged away to begin their hunt. He didn't have much time. He sincerely hoped that Kassais and Vyle would die in the forest. There were plenty of dangers, not least of which were their own dangerous and temperamental mounts. Unfortunately Yegara could place little hope in the Shrike Lord's imminent demise through accident or otherwise. The Commorrites were too tough and wary to fall prey to such things; they would be back.

Commorrites all seemed to have eyes in the back of their heads and a distressing degree of insight into what was going through his mind at any particular moment in time. It had taken Olthanyr Yegara a long time to understand what was going on. At first it seemed like some form of telepathy or empathy, a vestigial psychic ability that the Commorrites had somehow managed to sneak past She Who Thirsts. After a while he came to realise that Commorrites had deadened that part of themselves entirely – even more thoroughly than the Yegara clan had. The Commorrites could never have survived the Fall otherwise – or to be more accurate, only those of them that could deny their inherently psychic nature were destined to be counted among the survivors.

As he approached the keep, two retainers posted in front of the outermost doors hauled them open before him. Both of them were loyal followers of the clan, now chafing in the Shrike Lord's livery. Yegara nodded to the retainers in passing and noticed how they studiously ignored the gesture. Too many of the

Shrike Lord's minions were watching – them and all the traitors among Yegara's own supposed loyalists. He gathered up his pleated skirts and hurried inside.

The reassuringly thick wooden doors boomed shut behind him and he felt an illusory moment of safety. The greeting hall stretched away before him into the heart of the keep. Overhanging murder-galleries ran along either wall and were being paced by more of the Shrike Lord's guards. The galleries were festooned with suits of antiquated armour peeking out between ornamental pillars so that the tall helms of the guards appeared to move among a still, silent crowd. Beneath them a series of abstract tapestries and ancient framed images decorated the walls of the hall. A few shafts of daylight angled down through high, narrow windows to pick out dancing dust motes in the warm, fusty air.

It was all a sham intended to put a visitor off their guard, a rustic camouflage that the Yegara clan had adopted upon their arrival in the Sable Marches millennia ago when Windgrave was built. The worn square flagstones beneath Yegara's feet appeared crudely fitted, but that was only because one in four of them was a trap door that could dump its victim into a trench full of caustic slime in the cellar below. The tapestries hid secret doors to enable a quick escape or the unseen entrance of murderous accomplices. The hall held more sophisticated traps, too. The ornamental pillars concealed power field projectors that could seal off the greeting hall far more thoroughly than the impressive-looking carved wooden doors ever could. Such cunning and artifice had allowed the Yegaras to rule over the Sable Marches with a deft hand for centuries in spite of their many challengers.

To the Commorrites, to Vyle Menshas the Shrike Lord, all these defences were mere children's games, tricks to amuse but not challenge. To them the Yegara clan were a pack of simpletons: weak, inbred and effete. It seemed to Olthanyr that his clan's recollections of the great port-city of Commorragh had become fragmentary and not a little fanciful down the centuries when compared with reality. He had certainly not been prepared for what the Commorrites were truly like until it had become too late to prevent their arrival.

The Commorrites were hard, uncompromising in a way that the Yegaras had forgotten. While the Yegara clan had held sway in its own little fiefdom the great city of Commorragh had endured purges, revolutions, invasions, pogroms and regime changes in endless succession. Olthanyr understood now how they could seemingly read minds. The fact was that Commorrites – especially archons like Vyle and his relative Kassais – had been forced to learn to read expressions and body language with quite startling accuracy as a matter of survival. In

Commorragh the obsessive perfectionism of the eldar race had been honed towards detecting the vaguest twitch that might indicate when someone was lying or an eye flicker that might indicate thoughts of betrayal.

Yegara hurried on through the greeting hall, avoiding the trapped slabs out of sheer habit. All the pit doors were locked now anyway at the insistence of Vyle, but in the past not a few clan members had discovered that locks can corrode – or just be left open when they shouldn't be. Yegara was breathless and sweating slightly by the time he reached the octagonal chamber at the far end of the hall that was known as the Confluence. The Confluence lay at the juncture between the greeting hall and the seven different wings of the keep.

By tradition the wings were each known by their dominant decorative colours: Sapphire, Amethyst, Emerald, Amber, Crystal, Violet and Onyx. According to their fancy over the centuries the clan had added embellishments to the wings in appropriate hues. Over time it had become the case that the Sapphire wing, for example, contained nothing but blue: Furnishings, lighting, draperies, ornaments, frescoes, tools, looking glasses, hairbrushes – a thousand different tints and tones of blue. Likewise the Amber wing played host to a thousand different shades of orange, and so forth.

The wings had come to represent more to the clan than mere decoration. It became accepted that those beset by differing moods would migrate from wing to wing until they found the one that felt most closely attuned to their internal humours. Those gripped by feelings of introspection were drawn to the Sapphire wing, creativity to the Amethyst, vitality to the Emerald, boisterousness to the Amber, superiority to the Crystal, acquisitiveness to the Violet. Those gripped by despair had gravitated to the Onyx wing even after Qu'isal Yegara's self-immolation had blackened it further and sent part of the keep tumbling into the sea.

In Olthanyr Yegara's ordered existence the wings had all been a comforting symbol of control, that the clan had the ability to order things just so. Outside the keep in the howling chaos of the islands and the sea you would see colours mixed up all willy-nilly every day, but not inside. Inside the keep the clan kept a perfect kind of order, one so slow and unchanging that the centuries had rolled by almost without notice. Olthanyr stopped for a moment and sighed inwardly. On some levels he still missed his clanmates. Being the last surviving member of the clan was proving to be harder than he had anticipated.

Still, Windgrave held many secrets that the Shrike Lord and his minions had not yet uncovered. The last Yegara glanced around furtively and decided that he

had more than enough time left before he had to attend to other duties. He turned his feet towards the black wing and vanished rapidly into the sooty gloom.

One moment they were surging across the grass, the next they had passed beneath the shadowed line where the forest began and plunged into a green ocean. The thick boles of trees whipped past and clutching branches were smashed aside by the rippling arcotheurs. Kassais grimly clung on to the saddle of his mount and concentrated on keeping pace with the Shrike Lord as he none-too-subtly demonstrated his superior prowess when it came to riding the ribbon-like creatures.

Whether by accident or design none of the attendants or guards kept pace with the two archons. After a time Vyle slowed his mount and they came to a coiling halt in a clearing torn by the recent fall of a forest giant. Weak daylight filtered through the canopy from above; the open space was already being filled in by reaching branches from avaricious neighbours. The fallen trunk was sprouting vines and fungi all along its stupendous length.

Now that they had halted Kassais could hear the crackling progress of other riders all around them but no one else was visible through the riot of foliage surrounding the clearing. He cleared his throat meaningfully.

‘Well, dear cousin, are you going to expound on matters at all? I would like to know how vast a mistake I made in coming here,’ Kassais prompted.

The Shrike Lord was looking suspiciously into the trees but couldn’t seem to pinpoint the source of his discomfort. Eventually he turned his face to Kassais and spoke.

‘When Asdrubael Vect sent me here he gave me two tasks to complete before I could truly call this place my own,’ the Shrike Lord said. ‘The first was to bring the native population under control. The Yegaras allowed them to breed without any controls and their sheer numbers have become... a problem.’

Kassais brightened immediately at the prospect of some good, old-fashioned slave culling. Vyle read his expression and shook his head.

‘It’s not as easy as that. They hide out in the water and breed like orks. I’ve done all that can be done through direct methods. I needed more warriors to complete the task and that is why I sent for you.’

Kassais looked pained as he replied. ‘I’m afraid I only brought enough forces for a secure visit, not a war.’

Vyle merely shrugged. ‘That time has passed anyway. I’ve taken additional steps of my own.’ The Shrike Lord fell silent for a moment, absently twitching

his goad-lance to keep his restless arcotheur in one spot.

‘And what of the second task set for you by our beloved Supreme Overlord?’ Kassais asked finally.

‘He ordered me to triple the exports of protein from the Sable Marches to Commorrhagh,’ Vyle said off-handedly. Kassais blew out his cheeks at that. Vect’s avaricious cruelty seemed to know no bounds.

‘I wait with bated breath to hear your plan to achieve this miraculous twin feat of reducing the workforce and increasing their productivity at the same time.’

Vyle favoured Kassias with a thin smile. ‘I have poisoned the oceans,’ the Shrike Lord said conspiratorially. ‘Don’t gawp at me like I’m an idiot! Understand this: by doing so I have destroyed the natives’ food supply and so they will soon starve to death. Meanwhile I have gathered enough produce in the keep to survive until the seas recover their fecundity. When they do so, little of that bounty will be needed to feed the inhabitants of the realm as they will all be dead. When the gates re-open I will bring in more slaves to ensure deliveries rise to the specified amounts.’

The other archon had his eyebrows arched in a manner that indicated he remained unconvinced. ‘We were all very thrilled in Hy’kran by your elevation to suzerain of this sub-realm. It’s beginning to sound like it has become a poisoned chalice. You don’t think the natives may come knocking on your door looking for dinner?’

‘Let them try,’ Vyle spat arrogantly.

‘Hmm, perhaps we should move on to what’s happened to the gates, dear cousin? Why am I stuck in this benighted realm and how long is it liable to last?’

‘My artisans are at a loss to explain it,’ Vyle replied irritably. This matter evidently vexed him more than the natives and the harvest. ‘They say the portals are inactive from this side. They can’t explain why the portals will activate briefly to allow things to come in but nothing can get out. They assure me that temporary failures like these are not unknown and that eventually Commorrhagh will remedy the problem.’

‘That seems a little unsatisfactory to me,’ Kassais remarked.

‘I concur. Several of my artisans are now decorating the exterior of the keep to encourage the remainder to greater efforts. Little has been forthcoming.’

‘So how do you intend to pass the time while we wait for the gates to open and for the natives to starve?’

‘I’m going to hold a banquet,’ Vyle said, smiling with genuine pleasure.

Kassais smiled in appreciation of the jest and opened his mouth to reply. It was

in that instant that he became aware of a flicker of white in the corner of his vision. It was something large and cat-like, and getting rapidly larger.



CHAPTER FOUR

HUNTING

High in the forest canopy four lithe figures stood, lounged or sat as fancy took them on slender branches above the quite dizzying drop to the forest floor. Silent as statues they had watched the progress of the hunters on their rippling arcotheurs as they surged across the lawn and wove through the trees. Ashanthourus, Cylia, Hradhiri Ra and Motley noted the progress of Vyle and Kassais with particular interest.

The troupe members ran lightly along the springy boughs to keep the archons in view when they finally drew to a halt in a clearing. Cylia used her powers to conjure a tympanic membrane to allow them all to eavesdrop on the archons' conversation about the problems of the realm and the Shrike Lord's plans to combat them.

'We should simply take them here and now,' Hradhiri Ra whispered as he tapped impatient, bony fingers on the fluted barrel of his cannon.

'Nonsense,' Motley replied smartly. 'We don't know that either of them has done anything wrong.'

'“Wrong” can be a highly subjective term,' Ashanthourus observed. 'Based on what we've just heard they both deserve death many times over. Why should we not grant it?'

Motley shrugged and drew up his legs before placing his chin on his knees. 'I am only a fool,' he said. 'You are the great king, great wisdom is your prerogative.'

Ashanthourus tilted his grinning mask towards the slight, grey figure perched on his branch. 'Just so, and great wisdom has taught us that to interfere without

cause only brings more harm,' the High Avatar said. 'That and... suspicion.'

Motley grinned appreciatively at the king's disquieting words. 'Well quite, and suspicion serves no one in the long run – only the facts can bear fruit. Still, the noble Hradhiri Ra makes a salient point in an oblique fashion. Why not simply capture them and question them at our leisure? We could soon get to the bottom of things that way.'

Ashanthourus did not deign to reply so Cylia took up the gauntlet. 'Because then we should be left with one guilty and one innocent, but we couldn't simply let the innocent one go.'

'Innocent also being a relative term in this case,' Hradhiri Ra noted drily.

'The truth is that neither of these delightful specimens may be the one we want,' Motley nodded. 'I mean yes, the trail from the craftworld leads here, and lo! Verily there are Commorrites on hand... but that's the worst kind of circumstantial evidence. The attack itself may have emanated from here and have nothing to do with these two, although quite honestly I sort of doubt that. I do wish that you would have let me go with Lo'tos, we would have worked well together and might have found an answer by now.'

Ashanthourus looked down his mask's long nose at Motley before responding. 'The Master Mime has his own tasks to perform. If your role has a part to play in this performance then it will occur at the appropriate juncture and not a moment before.'

'Ah now, look!' Hradhiri Ra whispered. 'While we procrastinate Nature takes a hand.'

'Or Fate,' added Cylia seriously.

From their elevated position the Harlequins could see what appeared to be a large, pallid shadow slipping between the trees. A big feline-like creature was creeping towards the clearing with surprisingly fluid grace. The archons seemed ignorant of its approach until the point where it pounced, its muscular body hurtling across the clearing with claws outstretched and fangs bared like a white-furred thunderbolt. The Harlequins fell silent and watched the ensuing battle through to its conclusion without so much as twitching a muscle.

In the depths of the Onyx wing Olthanyr Yegara stopped nervously at a crossroads and glanced behind him. He listened carefully but there was no repetition of the sound he'd heard, or thought he'd heard. The Onyx wing was deserted. No slaves or servants would come there; they shunned the place with good cause, and no guards troubled to patrol the smoke-blackened corridors.

Olthanyr strained his ears but he could only hear the distant hiss and crash of the waves striking the cliffs far below.

He soon hurried onwards, navigating the twists and turns of the Onyx wing unerringly even through areas of pitch darkness. Eventually he came to Qu'isal's old chambers and pushed his way in through their warped ebony doors. Inside, cracks could be seen on the blackened walls and floor from the intense heat that had scoured the chambers at the height of the fire. The light and the sounds of the sea hissed in through ragged gaps where the outer wall had buckled and collapsed.

Olthanyr ignored the view of looming clouds and restless seas beyond the rents in the stonework and crouched in the centre of the chamber. He fumbled for a hidden stud and pressed it, causing a panel to slide aside at his feet. Inside the space revealed were four rounded shapes that shone dully in the light trickling in from outside. Olthanyr crooned as he scooped them out one after another: four round-bodied, beast-headed jars with jewelled eyes. Olthanyr arrayed them before him like a miniature court and sang to them in a low, twisting voice for a time before reaching out to caress them one after another: toad, lion, snake, fish.

These artefacts had been one source of the Yegaras' old power in the Sable Marches. Ancient pacts and rites had secured the future of the clan at the small cost of a little spilt blood and a few mumbled incantations. Some of the family had believed them to be a slow poison, a corrupting influence on the bloodline. After Qu'isal's death they had been hidden out of superstitious fear.

After a moment of hesitation Olthanyr lifted the lion-headed jar in one hand and pressed its jaws against his other wrist. He hissed as its needle-pointed fangs took their sacrifice of blood and hurriedly placed the jar back down again. He whispered to the lion-headed jar fiercely.

'Kill them. Send forth your children and kill them. A thousand sacrifices for your pleasure if it occurs as I desire. I swear this upon Qu'isal's shade.' Olthanyr heard nothing but the crash of the waves, saw nothing but the clouds scudding past outside, but he knew that in some distant place his curse had been heard.

Olthanyr hurriedly put the jars back into their hiding place. He took care to dust away any trace of the outline of the panel when he closed it. The last Yegara felt somewhat calmer now and left Qu'isal's chamber to start retracing his steps. As he squeezed between the curved lips of the heat-warped doors he stopped dead in his tracks. The wedge of light spilling through the gap winked off something on the floor that had not been there when Olthanyr had entered just

moments ago.

He bent down, reached for the object and then withdraw his hand as sharply as if it had been a venomous spider. It was a small rectangle of crystal no larger than his palm. On the surface of it Olthanyr could see two stylised faces superimposed at a jaunty angle to one another. One was laughing and the other was crying; both had the hollow-looking eyes and mouths of masks. Olthanyr straightened with a sharp intake of breath and looked around in fright. Nothing met his gaze but shadows and cobwebs.

Then he heard the sound again. It was the same noise he had heard when he traversed the Onyx wing to reach Qu'isal's chamber; the noise he had dismissed as being his imagination playing tricks. He heard it again and it seemed closer now, almost beside him in the gloom. It was a whispering, hollow laughter that nestled in his ears and brought chills to his spine. Olthanyr picked up his skirts and ran for the Confluence.

The doors of the greeting hall boomed open and a tide of diversely attired servants, guards, attendants and functionaries flowed in. At their head the archons Vyle and Kassais angrily cuffed away overly solicitous offers of assistance and commiseration from their minions. Kassais's armour was torn across one shoulder and some of the blood splashed across it was his own.

The Shrike Lord's eyes were hooded and his gaze darted suspiciously from one object to another as if he expected attack at any moment. He fastened on Yegara, who was standing shivering in the Confluence at the far end of the greeting hall, and began striding purposefully towards him.

'My archon!' Yegara cried out with convincing alarm and dismay. 'What happened? Are you hurt?'

'No,' the Shrike Lord snarled, catching the flicker of disappointment that crossed Yegara's features. 'Kassais was foolish enough to let the reszix take a chunk out of him.'

'I think we were both rather taken aback, to be fair,' Kassais complained. 'I don't recall any cries of "Look out, Kassais, there's a cat that's sixteen times your size about to land on you!" What I can't believe is that the damn thing managed to get away afterwards.'

'They're quick for their size.' Vyle frowned. 'And quiet, too.' Yegara looked paler than usual – in fact he was looking positively albino and couldn't seem to stop trembling. Vyle had put this down to overacting at first, but the little toad had been genuinely frightened by something. A brightly clad orrery of attendants

and servants hovered uncertainly around the nobles at a discreet distance with fear writ large on every face.

‘The banquet is all prepared as I instructed?’ Vyle asked icily. At this Yegara’s flustered countenance cleared a little. It was clearly not the banquet that he was scared about; perhaps it was merely that Yegara feared the consequences of the botched hunting expedition falling on his own head.

‘Everything has been readied for you in the Amber wing, my archon,’ Olthanyr effused convincingly. ‘I’d thought that the most fitting place to start.’

Kassais furrowed his brow. ‘Amber wing?’ he muttered.

‘This dung heap has seven wings to it,’ Vyle explained. ‘Each night we’ll feast in a different one of the halls. By the time the week is out we can be assured that the locals will be in too weakened a state to do a cursed thing against us.’

Yegara seemed to become nervous again. ‘Not the Onyx wing, my archon. I advise against it, the Onyx wing is a most... disagreeable place for anything, let alone a feast.’

Vyle rounded on Yegara and struck across him across the face with a blow that sent him sprawling. ‘Never presume to tell me what to do,’ the Shrike Lord snarled. ‘I’ll dance and sport and puke in every one of your ancestor’s precious halls to make them my own, even your haunted black wing with all its worthless ghosts and ineffectual curses. Now get up.’

Yegara climbed unsteadily to his feet, his face burning where Vyle’s gauntlet had struck it. Kassais stood off to one side smirking while the Shrike Lord humiliated the last Yegara in front of his former servants and slaves. Vyle stood perfectly still, glaring at Yegara and waiting.

‘I’m very sorry, my archon,’ Yegara promptly stammered through torn lips. ‘I forget my place. You alone are the master of this house.’

‘That’s right, and you are my slave,’ Vyle said. ‘You’ve grown pretentious in the extreme when you presume to advise me.’

Yegara bobbed his head miserably in agreement, evoking a cruel smile on Vyle’s face. ‘Perhaps I should send you outside to wait for death with the natives – I’m sure they would welcome the last in the line of their old benefactors with open arms.’

Yegara flinched involuntarily. The kind of crude horrors the natives would inflict upon him if given the chance were less than nothing compared to what the Commorrites could do, but they filled his mind with fear nonetheless.

‘Perhaps we can proceed with the banquet now, Vyle?’ Kassais said a little plaintively. ‘Fast healing always makes me a trifle peckish.’

Vyle glanced sharply at the other archon and then nodded. There was still something hidden in Yegara's face – one of many secrets he thought he was keeping from his new master. He consoled himself that there was plenty of time to break the weakling properly and find all the answers inside his rancid little skull in due course. In the coming week they would probably benefit from the additional diversion.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIRST BANQUET

In the Amber hall a magnificent table of richly polished wood had been laid out for a feast. The hundred-place-long table was groaning with platters of food. Silver-skinned fish there were in thousands, a myriad of different sizes and varieties from finger-long sprats to ocean-going leviathans, poached, fried, boiled, scalloped and raw. There were filigreed trays bearing wobbling piles of eggs, crustaceans, invertebrates and shellfish both in and out of their calciferous armour. Liveried servants in ochre and bronze stood around the walls in attendance while Vyle's courtiers and concubines mingled warily with Kassais's warriors and ex-Yegara clan functionaries.

The Shrike Lord lounged on a throne at the head of the table, with Kassais seated at his right hand and Olthanyr Yegara hovering anxiously nearby. He picked disinterestedly at the food set before him while he watched the baroquely attired throng. To his disgust many of the guests had chosen to attire themselves in shades complementary to the hall's monochromatic theme. Amber, russet, umber and taupe were in far too much evidence, with more daring individuals veering towards charcoal or gold. It gave an effect of making the room appear to be full of soft, shadowy phantoms wavering in uncertain light. Defiant of such fripperies Vyle had chosen to clad himself in a tight vest of blood-red hue over a midnight-black body suit. A storm was building outside as if in reflection of his dark mood, and occasional spears of white light shot in through high, narrow windows and threw the scene into sharp relief with an accompanying grumble of thunder.

Although he would never admit it, Vyle had the ashen taste of fear in his

mouth. He had gambled much to gain the favour of the Supreme Overlord and be appointed his seneschal in the Sable Marches. The Shrike Lord balked at no deed however heinous it might be, but he had been forced into measures that even he might admit were extreme to reach this point. The intractability of the natives, the grasping demands of Asdrubael Vect, the weakness of the Yegaras, all had conspired to push matters to a supremely dangerous pass.

Kassais sat watching Vyle narrowly, shifting occasionally in discomfort as the wounds inflicted on his shoulder by the reszix knitted with preternatural speed. He was careful to keep a look of amused disdain on his features, but behind this mask his mind was also working swiftly. For all the bravado he demonstrated the Shrike Lord seemed to be in over his head in the Sable Marches. If the gates were working, Kassais decided, he would already be long gone by now. As it was, Kassais sat and pondered how he might best turn the situation to his own advantage.

Olthanyr Yegara was fully engaged with just trying to keep his nerve. The crystal wafer he had found outside Qu'isal's chambers in the black wing returned to the forefront of his mind again and again. Part of him wanted to tell the Shrike Lord about it, to confess his error in not mentioning it previously before he was found out. Another part warned him against such folly. The Shrike Lord was going to kill him if he found out. A third, insidious voice told him to do nothing and hope that the lightning would strike down his tormentor while he was left untouched. After all if it had been Olthanyr that invoked the curse, surely that meant he would be protected from it?

A particularly bright stab of lightning lit the hall seconds before thunder boomed close by outside. Yegara gasped and blinked spots from his eyes in the aftermath. Just for an instant the room had been rendered into white light and harsh shadows, making the guests and furnishings look like two-dimensional cut-outs. In that moment Olthanyr had seen another shape that hadn't been there before, something spindly and unnatural-looking crouched beside Vyle's throne. It was all he could do not to cry out in horror, but as his vision cleared he saw that nothing was there. Vyle glared back at him angrily.

'What are you staring at, fool?' the Shrike Lord snarled. 'You look like you've seen one of your slack-jawed, inbred uncles come back from the dead.'

'It was nothing, forgive me I – by the gods!' Yegara exclaimed suddenly, shrieking the last words at a hysterical pitch. Vyle and Kassais bounded up from their seats in an instant, ready for action though they knew not from where. The other guests fell silent in shock and then craned their necks to see what new fit of

madness was gripping the last Yegara.

‘What now?’ Kassais laughed after a moment. ‘I thought the cat-beast had come back for a second round.’

Olthanyr Yegara was gazing rigidly at the corner of the table where Vyle’s hand had rested only a moment ago. There, sitting innocently upon the rich, swirling grain of the wood, was a crystal wafer, the one from outside Qu’isal’s chambers or another just like it. The Shrike Lord followed his gaze and found the small gleaming rectangle immediately. With a muttered oath he bent and examined it.

Kassais swore softly. Another crystal wafer gleamed at the place where he had been sitting. Heedless of any potential danger he picked up the slim rectangle and looked at it. The twin masks rendered on its surface, laughing and crying, gazed inscrutably back at him with hollow eye sockets.

‘It seems you have some unexpected guests, Vyle,’ Kassais said after a moment, ‘unless this is some entertainment you’ve arranged and kept silent about, you sly dog.’

‘What... what does it mean?’ Yegara bleated. The hall was silent. The guests all had their cruel, beautiful faces turned towards Vyle, expectantly awaiting his pronouncement on the strange events. The Shrike Lord had picked up his own wafer and examined it. He threw it back down and smiled his wintry smile before replying.

‘It means I have been chosen for a particular honour, one that in my generosity I shall share with you, my guests and retainers,’ Vyle said loudly. More thunder grumbled behind his words as he continued, and he began to pace slowly along the table as he spoke. ‘We have been invited to participate in a Masque, and we shall see such sights that few even in Commorragh can boast of having witnessed.’

The Shrike Lord paused and flung his head back, calling out louder still. ‘I accept, do you hear me, Harlequins? I know that you’re listening. I accept your offer. Come, make yourself known in my hall.’

As the words left his lips there was a small flash and a ring of scarlet smoke puffed up theatrically beside Vyle. As the smoke rolled away upwards a spindly figure in tight, dark clothing was revealed, with its face hidden behind a swirling mask. It bowed lithely from the waist, bending almost double, and stepped smartly sidewise. As it did so, by some trick of vision there were suddenly two figures standing before Vyle. The mask of one of the figures now wore the stylised grin of Cegorach, while the other wore the tears of Isha.

Both apparitions bowed again and struck a pose, with one arm curved above their heads to touch fingertips while the other was held across their bodies to touch palm to palm. The two figures began to dance together to silent music. It was a courtly *pas de deux* that swept them around the hall, now solemn, now ridiculous as one and then the other took the lead. The smiling one's tricks and missteps became ever more outrageous as its weeping partner attempted to keep it on the straight and narrow through the complex dance. The two leapt and rolled over one another with an agility that astounded and delighted their audience. They always remained in contact by palm and fingertips even when it seemed impossible that they could continue to do so.

The dance became faster, more frenetic with the Isha-masked dancer now trying to push away the smiling one. No matter how hard he was flung to the sides or up into the air the weeping dancer could never seem to rid herself of the smiling partner. Each time her unwanted suitor would always rush back as if drawn by magnets, their hands never parting. At the last he was flung upwards and held aloft, the two figures like mirror images with arms outstretched – one above and one below – balancing precariously. They held their pose for an impossibly long moment before the lower figure suddenly dropped her partner amidst gasps of dismay from the audience. In the act of falling the two figures collapsed together into a single entity in a swirling mask that rose and bowed to Vyle once more.

As the figure bowed there was a thunderous pounding on the hall doors. The spindly figure hunched and cocked its tumbling mask towards the Shrike Lord like a faithful hound. Vyle waved his hand indulgently.

'Go and let them in,' he said. 'Let's see what other worthies are in attendance amongst us this night.'

The lone Harlequin bounded up and raced to the doors. Kassais took the opportunity to lean over and murmur in Vyle's ear. 'Are you entirely certain this is wise, dear cousin? Letting another ship enter port, as it were?'

The Shrike Lord's expression did not so much as flicker at Kassais's show of impudence. 'You should take lessons from Yegara, you share the same strange compunction to tell me my business within my own hall,' Vyle growled back. 'Would you have me turn a troupe of Harlequins away from my door and hang the consequences? I am not so great a fool as that!'

By this time the Harlequin had thrown open the doors with a mighty heave. They revealed the scene outside utterly changed from the dour dressed stone of the Confluence. There was now a woodland scene beyond, a green clearing

basking in bright sunshine. Two figures rose from the centre of the glade. One was tall and clad in scarlet finery crowned with a golden mask. The other was slight and wrapped in a hood and mantle that seemed to be spun out of shadows. As this one rose it could be seen that her featureless oval mask shone like quicksilver.

‘Well met, my friends,’ the figure in red said in a marvellous, mellifluous voice that seemed to carry to every corner of the hall. ‘I am Ashanthourus, king to an ancient land now lost. This is Cylia, my inspiration and my queen.’

Taking Cylia by the hand Ashanthourus advanced into the hall itself, and the throng of Vyle’s guests gave back before his approach like frost before the sun. The fragrance of wildflowers drifted into the hall and with it came the sound of songbirds. Other figures suddenly appeared behind him and came streaming in through the doors bearing garlands, ribbons and floating silk banners. Moment by moment the orange hall was metamorphosed from a place of umber shadows into a bright, garish space that was wild and primitive in its aspect.

‘I thank you for your welcome of my errant servant, Lo’tos, and your acceptance of our Masque,’ Ashanthourus said to Vyle, and then nodded behind him. ‘Allow me also to introduce Hradhiri Ra and... Motley.’

The Shrike Lord looked and saw his own throne was now occupied by a slight figure dressed in archaic clothes covered in tiny diamond panes of black and white – the pattern known as motley, Vyle remembered. Behind the throne stood an imposing figure in a long coat and skull-faced helm – this would be the troupe’s Death Jester. Vyle smiled bleakly at the sight.

‘Greetings, Death,’ he said soberly to Hradhiri Ra. ‘I’ve always thought you stood at my shoulder, now I see that is true.’

‘Death stands at the shoulder of every mortal,’ the Death Jester rasped. ‘They are born only to wait for the touch of his bony fingers before passing from this realm. Today, tomorrow, it matters not – death comes for every mortal in the end.’

Kassais laughed aloud at that. ‘Perhaps in the world of mud you occupy that is true, but in the eternal city death has no dominion,’ he said.

‘Oh, I’d have to take issue with that,’ Motley said with a knowing grin. ‘I’d say the dominion of death is stronger in Commorrhagh than almost any other place in the universe. What you’re saying is that some people there simply don’t feel the pinch too often, but that isn’t true either. Everything, and I mean *everything*, dies one day. The real question is whether you can come back afterwards.’

‘Quiet, fool!’ Ashanthourus snapped. ‘These fine nobles have no patience for your philosophical blather! Get yourself gone from this company until you are called upon.’

Motley rose with a quirking smile, and bowed elaborately to all present – including the trays of shellfish – before sauntering away, whistling as he went. By this time the entrance to the hall had entirely disappeared behind gauzy draperies and loops of wire wrapped with a matching mesh. The overall effect was of a narrowing cave in natural rock, or the twisting heart of a tornado seen from above.

‘My lords,’ Ashanthourus said in a calmer tone, lowering his voice from its earlier regal clarion call. ‘I have introduced you to the principal performers in our Masque, but as you can see many others will serve roles within it; the dancers, the musicians, the chorus – even the stage itself – will be supplied by the members of our troupe as needed. I ask that you and your noble guests do not interact with the performers as they go about their duties unless invited. To do otherwise might be... dangerous. Likewise once the performance is begun it must proceed to its completion without interruption. Can you... will you agree to these terms?’

The Shrike Lord’s eyes narrowed shrewdly at the Harlequin troupe-master’s words. ‘I can agree to them but I’ll offer no absolute guarantee that you won’t be interrupted or molested. I can issue orders and punish any of my guests or servants that disobey me, but I’ll take no responsibility for chance, fate or the gods themselves intervening.’

Ashanthourus inclined his grinning mask in deference to Vyle. ‘Wise words, my lord. Truly there can be few in all the great wheel of existence that have such a pragmatic grasp of reality as yourself.’

‘So how do you intend to repay Vyle’s indulgence?’ Kassais demanded arrogantly. ‘How will you entertain us?’

Something about the Harlequins was disturbing Kassais. Possibly it was the unctuous assurances of their make-believe ‘king’. Possibly it was the way that he kept catching the other Harlequins looking at them sidelong as if they were objects of particular amusement. Whatever it was, Kassais was finding himself increasingly discomfited by the entertainers’ unexpected presence.

Ashanthourus replied in a voice that was quickened with what seemed to be barely repressed excitement. ‘We will be undertaking a performance of Ursyllas’s rendition of the Fall, the cycle that is most commonly known as the *Penumbra*.’

Vyle glanced surreptitiously at Kassais, but he saw no recognition of the names the troupe-master had used in the other archon's face. He decided it was safe to show ignorance and play it off as bravado. What true archon of Commorragh had the time or patience to study the vast myriad of plays, comedies, tragedies and morality stories surrounding the Fall of eldar civilisation?

'Never heard of it,' the Shrike Lord said carelessly. 'You're not about to bore us with some obscure nonsense no one gives a damn about, are you?'

'Not at all!' Ashanthourus declared passionately. 'The *Penumbra* is a masterpiece! Unusually it takes places in three separate acts, making it highly suitable for an extended event or celebration such as this. A full performance has been attempted less than a hundred times, but sadly I don't think we can hope to achieve that even in this august company.'

Vyle found himself bristling at the Harlequin's words. 'What? Why not? I am worthy of the best you have to offer and more!'

Ashanthourus replied with some hesitation. 'A full performance of the *Penumbra* requires... how may I put this delicately? A full performance requires a measure of participation from the audience that most are unwilling to countenance.'

+Be subtle now,+ Cylia's mind-speech whispered inside Ashanthourus's brain. +Don't over-sell the difficulty or they may realise they're being manipulated.+

+I know what I'm doing,+ Ashanthourus responded tersely. +Concentrate on Kassais – he's the weaker willed of the two. If he commits then Vyle will too – he won't allow himself to be upstaged by his guest under any circumstances.+

Vyle and Kassais were grinning at one another knowingly. Both knew there was nothing the other was unwilling to countenance as long as it did not diminish their personal power or prestige. Kassais was about to speak when he was interrupted by Motley leading forward a pale-faced and trembling Olthanyr Yegara. Motley pointedly ignored Kassais and Vyle as he grandly presented Yegara to Ashanthourus with another of his exaggerated bowing fits.

+What's Motley's game now?+ mused Cylia. Ashanthourus did not respond but the Shadowseer could sense the heightened tension in the High Avatar's mind.

'This worthy fellow has volunteered to participate in our first act, your majesty,' Motley trilled proudly. 'He's assured me he understands all of the potential risks entailed.'

Ashanthourus inclined his mask fractionally before turning back to Vyle and Kassais. 'It seems we already have a volunteer thanks to Motley's efforts. If you

will excuse me, my lords, this means I must attend to my troupe and make certain adjustments to the performance. We will be ready to begin the first act momentarily...’

+Risky...+ admonished Cylia.

+Motley has left me little choice,+ Ashanthourus sighed mentally. +I believe they won’t be able to resist the baited hook once it’s properly dangled before them.+

‘You’ll go nowhere until you’ve explained what’s happening to me,’ Vyle snapped. He snatched up a goblet and drank deeply from it, both to give himself more time to focus his thoughts and to force Ashanthourus to wait upon his pleasure. The Shrike Lord had a sense that the Harlequin troupe-master was trying to keep a worthy prize from him, thinking him unfit for it. ‘Well?’ he barked as he slammed the delicately fluted drinking vessel back onto the table. A slave hurried forwards to refill it.

Ashanthourus looked a little chagrined, his grinning mask pointed at his toes as he spoke. ‘Ursyllas’s masterpiece calls for one or more members of the audience to weave their own tales into the grand array of events being depicted. It was felt that the events of the Fall could be rendered more poignant and immediate to the watching audience by employing them as the backdrop to a personal story, if you will.’

‘I can do that,’ Kassais blurted suddenly before looking momentarily surprised at his outburst.

+And you impugn my sense of subtlety?+ Ashanthourus sniped. He received only the impression of Cylia’s tinkling laughter in return.

‘Indeed,’ Vyle nodded approvingly. ‘Kassais here has plenty of tales that would turn your hair white – and some of them might even prove to be true! All of them are pale shadows in comparison to the depth and richness of my own history, of course, and I feel aggrieved that you seem so intent on denying me the opportunity to participate, troupe-master.’

‘Please believe me, I meant no slight,’ Ashanthourus said, his rich and mellifluous tones replete with regret. ‘As I mentioned the process is not without risk. In the past participants have become so caught up in the performance that they have harmed themselves in the belief that they were living through the events depicted either in their own tale or the wider canvas of the Fall. Some have even lost their lives... As our honoured host and patron I would not wish to expose you to any danger.’

+Again – don’t oversell it, my king of fools,+ Cylia breathed into

Ashanthourus's mind.

'Dangers are meat and drink to our kind,' Kassais purred, having recovered some of his usual aplomb. 'I don't give much for Yegara's chances of survival but Vyle and I are certainly made of sterner stuff. All true archons of Commorragh have a fine insight into playacting versus reality; it's a game we play with one another every day.'

+Again, you underestimate the bravado of Commorrites,+ Ashanthourus replied somewhat smugly. +These are creatures reared in a nest of razors rather than the soft confines of a craftworld.+

'Quite,' said Vyle, while looking sidelong at Kassais's rather gauche assertion. 'It's settled then – Kassais and I will participate. You said there will be three acts. Yegara can have the first to show how not to do it, Kassais has the second to warm up the crowd with his outrageous boasting and I'll take the final one to show how it's done with a tale that will freeze the blood of those who hear it.'

+They mistake it for a chance to re-tell old horror stories,+ Cylia whispered.

+And that will serve our purposes perfectly,+ Ashanthourus thought back.

'It shall be as you command,' Ashanthourus said, and bowed. 'You may change your mind at any time if, having witnessed Yegara's efforts for example, you should no longer wish to proceed.'

'I begin to tire of your doubts, troupe-master,' Vyle said coldly. 'Be about your preparations without further delay.'

Ashanthourus bowed again and backed away before stepping rapidly over to where Yegara now stood with Cylia and the grey-clad Solitaire. Beneath his domino mask Motley was grinning broadly.



CHAPTER SIX

DAWNRISE / A TRAITOR'S TALE

Stars twinkled coldly in the depths of the void, planets wheeled in their orbits. Ashanthourus stood before them now all clad in white, his golden staff in his hand as he sonorously chanted.

*'In the dawn times our people arose,
were led by the gods to claim their place,
upon reality's great wheel.'*

Ghost-like children of light emerged from the ground all around the troupe-master. They gazed about with luminous eyes as they took in their surroundings, and silently expressed innocent joy in finding themselves not alone. Great, shadowy shapes moved against the backdrop of the stars and they were revealed now as the gleam of eldritch eyes, then as the glitter of crowns or the bejewelled folds of the garments the gods wore as they watched from on high.

A clear, feminine voice sang out, calling the children together with a haunting refrain. It was soon joined by other voices: male, female, high and low, each of whom sang their own tune as they coalesced from the starry sky. Ashanthourus spoke the names of the gods as they appeared:

*'Great Asuryan and his paramour Gia,
wise Hoec and Cegorach the trickster,
far-sighted Lileath, deadly Khaine,
industrious Vaul, the crone Morai-Heg...
and two that loved us best of all,
two from whom we sprang;
Isha of the harvest and Kurnous of the hunt.'*

Cylia took the role of Isha, Lo'tos became Kurnous of the red moon. Some of the other gods were noble, some were savage, but all joined their voices together into a greater song that rose and fell through the hall as Isha and Kurnous danced together. Cylia's *creidann* launcher spat tiny, star-like sparks that burst into scented clouds over the audience. These pre-programmed hallucinogenic gases were carefully designed to enhance and exaggerate the watchers' perceptions.

Meanwhile the children of the gods were swept into the wake of Kurnous and Isha like windblown leaves. They whirled before the majestic choir, growing less and less childlike as they followed in the steps of their creators. The children grew long-limbed and elegant, poised and confident as they danced.

*'Time passed and the gods taught us,
All that we could learn,
in turn we learned why they had need of us,
Death reached his mouldering grasp across the great wheel,
Grim mortality smote down all that stood before it.'*

The bony, skull-masked figures of Hradhiri Ra and his fellow Death Jesters rose from the darkness as if summoned by Ashanthourus's words and the gods abruptly withdrew. The voices of the chorus became jagged and martial as the grim figures appeared on the scene. The Death Jesters began to pursue the children of the gods hither and yon, but the nimble dancers darted and weaved between their souging scythes with laughter on their lips.

Now some of the dancers wielded their own blades in defence, bright arcs of multi-coloured energy that dashed aside the dark metal blades of the reapers. The central conflict broke apart into a multitude of whirling pools of light and dark where frenetic, acrobatic forms fought on without pause. Ashanthourus spoke again, this time addressing the audience directly.

'Against this time of deadly strife hear now one tale of struggle, triumph and woe from a later age. Hear the story of one who was once, very briefly, the master of this house. Heed his words and ask yourself if you would have acted differently.'

Suddenly Olthanyr Yegara stood alone in a pool of radiance to one side of the performance. He was fearful and unmoving while all about him the dancers still whirled like comets as they fought against the simulacra of death. The martial chanting of the chorus dropped away until it was only a background sibilance as of waves scouring the shore. The last Yegara was wide-eyed and sweating as he struggled to speak. From the darkness where the audience were watching there came a snort of derision as Vyle or Kassais let their contempt be known.

The sound seemed to bring a sudden and peculiar change to the last Yegara. His head snapped upright as if it had been gripped from behind, his mouth worked and words began to spill out of it in a high, sing-song voice.

*‘My ancestors found this abandoned realm long ago,
as they fled from a terror yet to cast its shadow upon the stage,
sore pressed they were, and fearful, when they came upon the Sable Marches,
so they took it for their own, despite the brute primitives that did dwell here,
benighted creatures left to their own devices when their ancient masters
withdrew.’*

The pool of radiance widened to show that a tableau had formed behind Olthanyr as he spoke, although he did not turn his head to look at it – indeed he seemed incapable of moving at all. A group of eldar stood at one side of the tableau, all dressed in spoiled finery and led by a bold-looking warrior with lustrous dark hair. The smooth-skinned, saucer-eyed natives of the Sable Marches knelt before them, offering up polished conch shells and silver-scaled fish.

*‘B’Qui Yegara knew how to deal with upstarts,
She knew how to teach respect.
She built this keep out of their blood and bones,
she stole their petty gods,
and taught them to worship her instead.’*

There was a flash and in its aftermath it could be seen that the tableau had changed. The dark-haired warrior now stood atop a mound of smooth-skinned dead with Hradhiri Ra at her shoulder. The surviving natives shrank away from the warrior and cowered on their bellies but they were trapped within the circle of light. The light encompassed their world and imprisoned them inside it with their tormentor.

‘For long, dreaming ages my clan endured in this hidden arbour that B’Qui made.

*Generation after generation lived in luxury and sloth on the backs of the
conquered.*

*The clan prospered, branched and divided across the islands.
Its members only came together again generations later,
to scheme over who would win the inheritance after B’Qui’s passing.’*

Now in the tableau behind Olthanyr Yegara several eldar stood posed around a funeral bier bearing the dark-haired warrior. At each corner of the bier stood a beast-headed jar, a small detail that Olthanyr shuddered away from, and Hradhiri

Ra stood at its foot. The eldar attending the bier were noble-looking and finely dressed yet they eyed one another with obvious enmity and ill-disguised contempt. Beyond the immediate tableau, one of the pinwheeling conflicts swept silently closer and more skull-masked Death Jesters slunk onto the scene. These scions of death came to stand behind every shoulder in the tableau like grinning shadows.

*‘Qu’isal Yegara proved to be the wisest,
he was the first to realise conflict was inevitable and struck first.
Ferocious cunning laid his rivals low within Windgrave’s Confluence,
and he claimed B’Qui’s inheritance for his own.
Alas, that he could not wipe out every root and branch
of our fractured clan in that instant.’*

The skull-masked shadows struck at the eldar with knives in hand. Some of the victims died, some fled and soon only one noble was left crouching possessively over B’Qui’s funeral bier with a smile of feral triumph on his lips. The pool of radiance abruptly vanished and Olthanyr Yegara’s microcosm was swallowed up in the cavorting conflicts of the wider performance. The eldar were surging triumphantly against the skulking death bringers, leaping acrobatically over their heads as they drove the ghoulish shapes into the shadows. Ashanthourus stood forward to narrate again.

*‘Death had been banished,
chased away into the darkness from whence it came.
The children of the gods looked about their new inheritance,
and found the gods were less often at their side.
Our kind, confident in their new-found power,
began to turn the great wheel to their own purposes.’*

As the troupe-master spoke the dancers of the troupe moved seamlessly into various groups. Some sketched airy towers of light with their movements, others fell into stylised depictions of study or discourse, others explored the hall and passed among the audience peering at various individuals as if at something newly discovered. Some of the troupe continued to dance seemingly only for the sake of dancing while others made music to accompany them simply out of the joy of playing.

At length Isha and Kurnous reappeared in the wings before moving from one group to another. Each time they were ignored. Now the gods were apparently unseen and unheard by their children. Isha wept and Kurnous attempted to comfort her but to no avail. As the sorrowing gods exited, Olthanyr Yegara

reappeared in his pool of radiance. Cylia and Lo'tos's display of easy grace made him look even more clownish and uncomfortable by comparison.

As Olthanyr spoke his next stanza, miniature tableaux popped into existence and disappeared all over the hall almost before they could be registered. Each showed a gruesome death being enacted: a lone traveller set upon by assassins, a lord in his hall choking on poisoned wine, two lovers clasping passionately together as one drew a blade behind the other's back, a flailing form tumbling from a high window, and more, many more.

*'So it went,
blood demanding blood,
vendetta breeding vendetta,
until only Qu'isal's progeny remained.
But too few lived on to enjoy the victory.
The house of Yegara became a diminishing thing,
Worn down by time as a cliff is worn away by the sea.'*

The scenes of violence sputtered to a halt leaving just Olthanyr standing alone in his circle of light. Around its periphery the smooth-skinned, saucer-eyed natives watched inscrutably as by some sleight their numbers slowly yet inexorably increased. Now it seemed that Olthanyr was hemmed in by the light, trapped within a shrinking circle.

*'Qu'isal saw what end would come, unavoidable now.
Clear-eyed as before, he was the first to perceive,
in the Onyx wing he took his final breath,
bringing all to fire and destruction about him.
His sacrifice worthless and unmourned,
his last gasp a curse against the ruin he had made.'*

Behind Olthanyr a lone figure walked away down a corridor into inky blackness. Before the figure disappeared entirely from sight, a curtain of flames sprang into being behind it. A hoarse, keening cry could be heard before a rumble of stones and crackle of fires obliterated it. Silence fell across the hall and Olthanyr seemed to struggle for breath. Moments drew out into long seconds before a new voice prompted him to continue the story, laughing and seemingly full of humour at the grim tale.

*'So help was needed?
New friends found?
Into portals, quick my friends!
Off to where such things abound!'*

Olthanyr blinked at the slight grey figure that squeezed between the smooth-skinned natives and invaded his little circle of light. Motley grinned widely at him and bowed before him, gesturing for the last Yegara to continue his tale. Olthanyr licked his lips nervously and then nodded.

‘B’Qui had once barred the portals, but with Qu’isal’s passing new portents shone,

None could see but I what must be done.

A lingering death and then extinction, or the intercession of a higher power.

I chose the latter and gathered my knowledge carefully,

I went forth to the eternal city to trade my secrets for my heart’s desire.’

Olthanyr spoke with shaky bravado as if he were the hero of the piece. However behind the last Yegara an exaggerated simulacrum of himself – ably played in this instance by Lo’tos – gave lie to his words through its actions. This false Olthanyr crept forth like a thief in the night: listening at keyholes, peering through windows, digging through piles of detritus in forgotten chambers. At length this creeping, snivelling figure was seen in silhouette before a webway portal and then vanished.

To the watching audience it seemed as if they no longer stood in Windgrave’s stuffy hall. The horizon became distant, jagged with razor-edged spires and barbed steeples. High above them limp, poisoned suns swam slowly past, dripping their corpse-light across the dark landscape below. In the foreground Olthanyr was now on his knees before a coven of pale-skinned, black-armoured Commorrite nobles. Olthanyr hid his face in his hands so Motley spoke again, his clear voice full of rich irony.

‘No fun, these friends.

And no help either.

Yet a show of weakness was all it took,

To bring them rushing hither.’

The Commorrites smiled cruel smiles and menaced the quailing Yegara with evident pleasure. They pushed and pulled his cringing body between them, squabbling at times like a flock of vultures over a choice piece of carrion. At length the Commorrites seem to tire of their sport and gradually drifted away until only one remained. This lone noble had sharp and predatory features, the face of none other than the Shrike Lord – Vyle Menshas.

The landscape of spires silently shattered before the viewers’ eyes. The shards flew apart and reassembled into a new scene while the figures of Vyle and Olthanyr remained unmoving. Now they stood on the rugged coastline of the

Sable Marches as shadowy ranks of Commorrite warriors marched past in the background. Motley spoke again.

*‘Not to aid,
Not to help
But to claim a weakling realm,
The Shrike Lord spread his sable wings
And the Marches all fell down.’*

Olthanyr surged to his feet, his face flushed and his eyes filled with tears. He stared about wildly as if seeking an escape route but there was none to be seen. A cacophony of wailing, shrieking, pleading voices suddenly burst across the scene from invisible lips – although Olthanyr evidently recognised the speakers. It was his whole clan, each and every one of his relatives being wiped out of existence by the Shrike Lord’s torturers. Olthanyr pressed his hands over his ears but the voices still resounded inside his skull. The performance, the Harlequins and even Vyle Menshas were completely forgotten now. As the last Yegara reeled in horror Motley stepped smoothly forwards to continue speaking.

*‘A whole clan consumed
Burned root and branch.
Save one that kept his life
By surrendering all he had ever known
To survive the coming strife.’*

The vision of the Sable Marches and Vyle’s troops had faded away. Only Olthanyr was left, shuddering alone in the darkness, and for a long time no one moved or spoke. Then an arid breeze swept through the wall and brought with it the smells of burning. Red flames kindled in the distance and by their sullen light a ghastly form was illuminated. Olthanyr recognised it at once as the corpse of Qu’isal Yegara as it had been found after the fire in the Onyx wing. It was eyeless and blackened with charred strips of flesh hanging from its scorched bones. The dreadful apparition raised an accusing finger at Olthanyr and intoned in a dry, parched voice:

*‘Last among us and last to die.
Damned forever by word and deeds.
Be judged now and forever, you worthless cur.
As a warning of where too much self-interest leads.’*

Perhaps Olthanyr’s mind broke in that instant. Cylia had noted that it was already a fragile thing held together only by self-delusion and pride. The last member of the Yegara clan staggered in a circle and gibbered incoherently

before making a break for the entrance to the Confluence. He careened sightlessly from scenery and audience members alike. Voices were raised in anger against him as he reeled blindly from the hall. The servants of the old Yegara clan now understood how their lives had fallen so easily under the sway of Commorragh and they hated Olthanyr for his betrayal. The last Yegara was cursed and vilified until he disappeared from sight. His despairing shrieks could be heard getting fainter until they were abruptly silenced.

In the Amber hall the lights slowly brightened until the audience could see enough to look at one another in some bemusement. Kassais turned to Vyle and found himself unaccountably relieved to find that the Shrike Lord was still present. All trace of the Harlequins, the chorus, the dancers and their stage sets had completely vanished. Seemingly, for the first act at least, the performance was over and in a dream-like manner it now seemed questionable whether it had happened at all.

‘Was it a fair portrayal of events?’ Kassais asked. Vyle arched his brows in response and picked at some food before deigning to respond.

‘Of the toad’s coming to Commorragh? I suppose after a fashion,’ the Shrike Lord admitted. ‘Although we didn’t *literally* pull him around like that. Vect had the final say over who would benefit from the new realm on offer, I merely had to prove myself to be the most loyal and able of the archons suitable to be granted control.’

‘Yes, I would love to know how you did that,’ Kassais purred. ‘Our beloved Supreme Overlord is so notoriously hard to please.’

‘You may live several lifetimes and never become privy to that information,’ Vyle retorted.

‘I wonder if Yegara really has gone mad,’ Kassais mused, ‘or was that just part of the act?’



CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SECOND BANQUET

+A failure then.+

+A success, now we know that Olthanyr Yegara is not the one we seek.+

+Must we blindly continue until we stumble across the answer?+

+Rejoice! The pure pursuit of our art will, of itself, bring the wrongdoer to justice.+

+Regardless of collateral damage done?+

+Accidental judgment may also fall upon other guilty parties along the way, 'tis true.+

+We should shed no tears over that, I believe we serve a higher force in this regard.+

+So po-faced! Can't you see the humour in the situation?+

Kassais found Vyle on the battlements the next morning. The old stone walkway was windswept and rain-soaked in the aftermath of the previous night's storm, but Kassais found something agreeably fresh about it after being cooped up in the musty keep with its monochromatic halls. The prospect of spending an entire week in the place was already beginning to feel like an unnecessarily oblique form of torture.

Vyle was poised with a long-barrelled splinter rifle in his hands, aiming at something down in the forest. As Kassais approached he heard the high-pitched crack of the rifle's shot and then Vyle curse like a spitting gyrix. Evidently a miss.

‘Bad luck,’ Kassais called amiably. ‘Want me to take a try?’

Vyle turned and gave him a dark look, but then relented and thrust the splinter rifle towards him with evident disgust. ‘Go ahead,’ the Shrike Lord said. ‘It’ll give me a chance to see whether the rifle is at fault or me.’

Kassais shrugged and took the rifle in his hands. It was a beautiful piece, evidently of Commorrite manufacture. The delicate fluting on the barrel and microscopic filigree-work on the grips reminded Kassais of work from the Street of Knives. In truth it might have come from any one of a few thousand armourers in Commorragh that served the higher echelons of the city. It was a hunting rifle with an extended barrel, cushioned stock and a multi-spectral viewing scope. Kassais brought it to his shoulder with well-practised precision and began to scan the treeline.

What he saw caused him to lower the rifle again so that he could check it with his own eyes. Beyond the short-grassed lawn outside the keep the forest shook its leafy head in the gusting breeze. Yesterday it had seemed ancient and immovable, but now the whole damn thing seemed to be on the move like a slow, green sea.

That was not what had surprised Kassais, however. All along the edge of the forest he could see saucer-eyed faces peering back and groups of smooth-skinned bodies crouching between the thick boles of the trees. There were several hundred natives in view and the forest could have held an army of them out of sight. All of the ones he could see were doing nothing aggressive, indeed they were barely moving at all. They all seemed to be staring expectantly at the keep.

Kassais raised the rifle to his shoulder again and sighted on one of the faces beneath the trees. The viewing scope reacted to the tiny muscle movements around his eye and zoomed in until its targeting icon was squarely between the creature’s bulbous, unblinking eyes. Whatever toxins Vyle was using in the splinter rifle’s ammunition would probably be deadly enough to kill with the merest scratch, but Kassais was a fan of finesse even – or rather especially – when it was unnecessary. He wanted a head shot.

When he was satisfied that the rifle could not miss the designated target, he touched the activation stud and felt the tiniest push of recoil as it fired. At the same moment the distant native unaccountably ducked out of sight and the hypervelocity splinter the rifle had fired arrived in the now-vacated space a fraction of a second later. Kassais cursed with the self-same vitriol that Vyle had expressed a few moments earlier.

‘It’s the rifle,’ Kassais said in disgust, and tossed it back to Vyle. ‘It must be out of alignment.’

‘I thought you’d say that,’ the Shrike Lord responded bleakly.

‘What’s happened to the toad? I’d expect him to be here and dutifully sucking up to you by this hour.’

‘Yegara has vanished,’ Vyle said disinterestedly as he raised the rifle to his shoulder again and scanned the treeline. ‘My guards are looking for him, they found blood but I doubt they’ll find anything else. I suspect Yegara’s slaves have already murdered him and disposed of the body.’

Kassais smiled at that. In Commorrhagh being killed by one’s own slaves was taken as a sign of an individual plumbing the very depths of bumbling incompetence. It was an event that was generally greeted as a welcome weeding out of the gene-pool. It was not too surprising an outcome given the revelations of the preceding night’s banquet but it was a little unsatisfying. Kassais had been looking forward to the point where Vyle’s offhand bullying of Olthanyr Yegara would ferment into some serious torment. There had been something naive and virginal about the last Yegara that Kassais had longed to see broken. Now he was to be denied that pleasure and he felt more than a little cheated.

‘We should round up all the suspects and question them,’ Kassais said ruminatively. ‘Grab a few of those goggling natives on the outside too – I’m sure they had something to do with it.’

‘I’m sure you’d like that, Kassais,’ Vyle responded tetchily, ‘but my resources are not infinite. Those gawking locals are out there precisely to tempt us out of the keep. Our predilections are certainly well-enough known for them to be taken advantage of.’

‘May I say that as a host you’re proving to be no fun at all,’ Kassais complained as Vyle looked through the rifle’s sight again. ‘We could at least bring some lances up here and set the forest burning...’

The way the Shrike Lord stiffened caused Kassais to spin and look out at the trees with some alarm. The sudden movement provoked a twinge in his shoulder that reminded Kassais his flesh was still not fully healed from his encounter with the reszix the day before. Kassais looked and he saw nothing different. The natives were still out there, the only unmoving things in a constantly shifting tapestry of green. Trees, grass, sky.

As Kassais turned to ask Vyle what he’d seen he caught the faintest distant flicker of white from the corner of his eye. He turned back in time to see a pale, suspiciously cat-like shadow slink between two tree trunks.

‘It’s still out there.’ Vyle nodded grimly. ‘Now it’s had a taste of you it surely wants the rest...’

‘Oh, very funny.’ Kassais grimaced and rubbed his neck. He sought to quickly change the subject to something less uncomfortable. ‘Do you think the Harlequins will come back tonight after getting such a tasteless reception last time?’

‘I’d wager your life on it,’ Vyle grunted. ‘They warned Yegara of the dangers and he went ahead anyway. In terms of a performance they probably rate a participant going insane as a rousing success – they say it’s all about evoking strong emotions after all. You should rest and gather your strength, perhaps.’

‘Come now, Yegara was weak and I am not,’ complained Kassais as Vyle led the way inside. ‘It’d take more than stage ghosts and provincial melodrama to unseat my reason.’

‘No doubt, and I shall keep that in mind at the banquet tonight. I’m not telling anyone which hall it’s in until the last moment so the little turds can’t pick their costumes to match the wall colours again. It’s time to learn to adapt.’

Perched in the top of the trees Ashanthourus, Cylia, Lo’tos, Hradhiri Ra and Motley watched the distant figures of Kassais and the Shrike Lord disappear into the brooding bulk of Windgrave keep. Cylia let out a little sigh as she relaxed from reading the splinter rifle’s target from moment to moment and nudging its intended victims aside.

‘A random venue could make things distinctly awkward,’ opined Motley. ‘I’m a great fan of improvisation, but it’s always nice to have a plan to fall back on.’

‘It will make no difference,’ said Ashanthourus with an air of finality.

‘Getting Kassais to spill his metaphorical guts won’t be hard to achieve,’ whispered Hradhiri Ra. ‘He’s a warrior and he loves to boast. It’s his literal guts that will be harder to bring to the table.’

‘Pfft, pish posh, and other such nonsense,’ exclaimed Motley. ‘I think I may say without indulging in flattery that I’m quite confident of our collective ability in that regard.’

‘Don’t be too quick to dismiss Hradhiri’s concern,’ replied Ashanthourus in a strained voice. ‘Conjuring Olthanyr Yegara’s entire life’s history from his mind and then interpreting it without his realising was no parlour trick. I am already weary and I sense that Cylia and Lo’tos are worse off than I.’

‘Make no exceptions on my account,’ Cylia said firmly. ‘I do not wane so easily as our Sun-King, it seems.’

Lo'tos lowered his head and whimpered for a moment before rolling on his back to offer his belly to Cylia. When she indulged him with a tickle the Master Mime sprang back to life and began rapidly brachiating from branch to branch like a spindly primate. Ashanthourus seemed unmoved by the antics of his troupe.

‘Brave words, my Moon-Queen, yet I know you better than you know yourself. We are barely a third of our way through this Masque and I fear for the ability of our troupe to complete it.’

‘But we must be brave, Ashanthourus, all the performances and Masques we undertake in different circumstances are only rehearsals for occasions like this. These are the times when Cegorach truly tests our art because we *must* perform come what may.’

If Ashanthourus was convinced by the Shadowseer's words he gave no sign of it. The High Avatar turned his grinning mask to gaze gloomily towards the keep and silently waited for nightfall.



CHAPTER EIGHT

APOGEE / A MEMORABLE VICTORY

The Confluence was packed to capacity. Many of Vyle's guests were perforce squeezed into the entrance hall to wait while he made his decision of where to hold the night's banquet. Vyle Menshas stood in the centre of the octagonal Confluence chamber apparently deep in thought. He was surrounded by rings of guards and slaves bearing polished metal platters, ornate salvers and fat-bellied tureens emitting delicious-smelling steam. They had already been kept waiting for over an hour.

Kassais stood discreetly to one side trying to read his cousin's mood. This was one of Vyle's little tests and everyone present knew it. Who would be foolhardy enough to try to prompt their archon into making a decision? Kassais could almost feel them all silently willing him to say something. No one else had the guts to try. The set of the Shrike Lord's shoulders and the long, basket-hilted blade he was wearing at his hip tonight implied a degree of danger to Kassais that was sufficient to make him hold his tongue and wait with the rest.

After a seeming eternity Vyle finally looked up and glanced around the expectant faces surrounding him. The Shrike Lord's brooding gaze fell on an elderly servant somewhat more finely dressed than the others, with a high collar and long, pointed shoes.

'You. You were the Yegas' major-domo or chamberlain or some nonsense, weren't you?'

'I had that honour, my lord,' the ancient one replied querulously. 'I served five generations of the clan first as a guard, then as a scribe and finally as steward. If there is any help I can give or knowledge I can impart to assist your lordship's

ruminations I stand ready at your command.’

‘You can assist me by shutting your mouth and dying, you decrepit blowhard,’ Vyle sneered as he slowly drew his blade. The old steward blinked in surprise and then howled in alarm as the Shrike Lord slashed him across the chest without another word. The ranks of servants behind the steward scattered as best they could in a clattering deluge of falling trays and tumbling silverware.

Vyle ignored the endless cacophony as he pursued the old servant over the slippery piles of dropped food. Those of Vyle’s guests beyond the immediate reach of the fracas smiled and craned their necks to watch his cruelty with voracious appetite. Those at closer quarters, including Kassais, took care to avoid being on the wrong end of one of the Shrike Lord’s murderous strikes.

The Shrike Lord attacked expertly to prolong his victim’s agony, slashing and thrusting at extremities where no major veins or arteries lay. The old steward staggered to and fro trying to get away from the stinging, jabbing pain, but Vyle was merciless as he circled his victim. Inevitably the steward slipped in his own blood and fell to his knees. Still there was no mercy as Vyle cut again and again.

Gasping, the old steward began crawling away towards one of the mouths of the Confluence in a desperate, animal instinct to escape. Vyle followed at a leisurely pace and periodically stood astride the prone form, jabbing it again as its movements slowed down like worn-out clockwork. The steward finally shuddered and became still. After a moment Vyle looked up at the entrance that now stood before him. Tall doors inlaid with emerald, peridot and jade greeted his gaze. He nodded with satisfaction.

‘We’ll eat in here,’ the Shrike Lord muttered before pushing the doors open and proceeding inside. Kassais stepped sharply to catch up with him while the guards and servants were left behind to unravel the chaos created by Vyle’s impromptu murder-lust.

The hall beyond was rendered in a thousand different variations of the colour green. Jade flagstones beneath their feet were inset with olivine and green agate, polished pillars of dark green obsidian marched away along both walls. The roof was pierced by rosettes of pallid green crystal, swallow-tailed banners of viridian silk floated lazily in the breeze created by Vyle’s entrance.

‘That was an amusing way of making a choice,’ Kassais said airily, ‘if a little on the messy side.’

‘Daemon’s teeth, the drudgery of it,’ the Shrike Lord grumbled. ‘I find it hard to credit that this place is even worse than the last. But it is.’

Files of slaves were now entering behind them carrying the surviving victuals.

The distant shrieks of less fortunate individuals could be heard as they were whipped back down into the kitchens and sculleries below the Confluence to secure replacement dishes. No proper banquet table was present in the Emerald hall so furniture was dragged in from adjoining chambers to furbish it in a haphazard fashion.

A claw-footed throne of verdigris bronze caught Vyle's attention and he had it set upon an impromptu dais before moodily taking up residence in it. Kassais secured a high-backed chair for himself and positioned himself close by. More guests and guards were entering the hall on the heels of the harried-looking slaves. They looked warily about and tried to find seats that were not too close to their lord and master but not too ostentatiously far away either. Kassais, on the other hand, was amused by their antics. He judged that the bloodletting and the ongoing chaos had raised the Shrike Lord's gloomy spirits somewhat so he ventured to speak again.

'Why not simply have the place gutted if it offends your sensibilities so?' he asked innocently.

'There's a hundred other more pressing things to think about than interior decoration,' Vyle sneered. 'That's the kind of hysterical nonsense that cost the Yegaras their inheritance in the first place.'

Kassais shrugged. 'I simply mean that if this place displeases you we can provide a swift remedy for that issue.'

Vyle rewarded Kassais with a fierce grin. 'Always ready to take pleasure in violence for violence's sake, eh, Kassais? We'll see how we fare after tonight and perhaps you'll get your wish.'

As the guests and guards spread through the hall, Kassais could see that Vyle's prophecy had been fulfilled. The varied costumes present clashed chaotically with the confines of the Emerald hall. There was none of the muted unity of the night before, rather the assembled company had the look of a pirate gang marooned in an undersea cavern seated on flotsam and jetsam. As they settled into place Vyle accepted a goblet and drank from it, signifying that the others could begin to partake of the feast. The tense atmosphere relaxed a little and quiet music struck up in the background to cover any hesitant gaps in the guests' conversations.

'And when do you think our other guests will arrive?' Kassais mused.

'Who's to say they aren't already here?' a cheerful voice said in his ear.

Kassais twisted around – with another excruciating jerk of his injured shoulder

– to see the Harlequin they had called Motley standing close enough to touch. The slight figure in his black and white diamonds and domino mask was incongruously propping up a long golden staff that seemed much too tall for him. Kassais realised with a start it was the same staff that had been carried by Ashanthourus in the previous night's performance.

‘Where is your leader tonight?’ Vyle asked sharply. ‘I’m accustomed to dealing with the master, not his minions.’

Motley smirked and did not answer the Shrike Lord immediately, instead addressing himself directly to Kassais. ‘Are you ready for your performance tonight? Are you still willing to undertake it? Are you still able to do so?’

Kassais glanced over at Vyle and then nodded. ‘But first tell me what became of Olthanyr Yegara after the performance last night? I’ll wager you people know what happened to him.’

Motley frowned and cocked his head quizzically to one side. ‘Why would we know anything? He fled the hall and then we left immediately afterwards. Has he disappeared or some such? Vanished entirely from mortal ken?’

‘It seems so,’ grumbled Vyle from his verdigris throne, determined not to be ignored. ‘You snapped his fragile mind, Harlequin, something I had been careful not to do – it was very careless of you to break my slave.’

Motley bowed at the waist, the golden staff in his hand wobbling alarmingly as he did so, before launching into a lengthy declamation.

‘Our apologies, but I believe that I can say without contradiction that Ashanthourus gave warnings not once but several times on matters of precisely this nature. A possibly impertinent observation on my part would be this – if, as master of the slave, in the face of such warnings you permitted his performance to go ahead then the responsibility for his breakage also surely falls upon you? As I understand it the slave is commonly relieved of such tiresome burdens as self-determination and choice.’

‘You talk too much,’ sneered Vyle dangerously. ‘As if words will protect you if you pile enough of them together. I can tell you that they won’t.’

‘Duly noted, my lord,’ Motley responded sadly with a level of enforced brevity that obviously pained him.

‘So get on with it, Kassais has already said he’s willing. You’re keeping me waiting and that’s never a good plan.’

Motley shrugged, raised the golden staff and struck it on the jade flagstones at his feet. As he did so an ethereal shock ran through the banquet eliciting gasps of surprise from the guests. The walls of the Emerald hall shimmered as if in a heat

haze while its roof seemed raised to impossible heights. Kassais looked up; it seemed as if he were gazing into a night sky with a scattering of stars. As he watched, the stars seemed to brighten as they descended, resolving into the forms of glowing people drifting majestically through the air.

Kassais smiled to himself at the Harlequins' mummery. They must have been hiding in the eaves of the hall silently waiting for Vyle and his coterie to enter. That meant the Shrike Lord had also been play-acting all along. He glanced at Vyle for confirmation of the fact, but his host's face was as immobile as a statue.

They were clad in multi-coloured light and held poses associated via myth and legend with the ancient eldar gods – the hunter, the smith, the maiden, the crone, the warrior. Motley began to speak, naming the gods as Ashanthourus had done on the previous night. Motley's voice was higher and quicker than the troupe-master's steady recitation, but it had an indulgent warmth that his predecessor had lacked.

*'Great Asuryan and his paramour Gia,
wise Hoec and Cegorach the trickster,
far-sighted Lileath, deadly Khaine,
industrious Vaul, the crone Morai-Heg...
and two that loved us best of all,
two from whom we sprang;
Isha of the harvest and Kurnous of the hunt.'*

As they were named each of the Harlequins playing the different gods broke their pose and began to dip and soar over the audience's heads. Their performances were more acrobatic than those of the previous night. They often came together in tight orbits and joined hands to spin like binary stars, twisting and tumbling fantastically around their shared centre of mass. The gods passed overhead as they surged from one end of the hall to the other, seemingly entirely engrossed in their intricate interactions. The combined effect they created was a scintillating tapestry of wonder.

Kassais saw not gods but eldar with personal holo-fields and grav-harnesses. He had seen both kinds of devices used on many occasions but seldom with the design merely to entertain and make spectacle rather than to intimidate and destroy. Some wych gladiators favoured grav-harnesses to assist in their more fantastically acrobatic fighting styles, while others eschewed them as inhibiting true artistry with the blade. Kassais found himself wondering how the Harlequins would fare in combat – they had certainly cultivated a fearsome reputation.

Two of the glittering airborne figures often dipped low and hovered above the Shrike Lord and his immediate guests. The masks of Kurnous and Isha gazed down on them beneficently as they passed overhead. They seemed to take pleasure in the comings and goings of the mortal eldar below. After a pause spent watching the distant gyrations of the other gods Isha drifted lower still and began to sing. The song lacked words but was conveyed as strains of pure emotion that shivered along the listeners' nerves and echoed in their minds. A song of love and growth, a maternal desire for her offspring to prosper.

Even Vyle Menshas's sharp, predatory features softened a little as he listened to the song of Isha. Kassais, who as befitted a trueborn Commorrite had never known unconditional love, felt for the first time in his life an inkling of what it was to be cherished. He found himself standing unbidden, the high-backed chair crashing back unheeded behind him. He was filled with the urge to share his deeds, to tell a tale that would impress the goddess floating before him, to prove his worth to her.

'I'll tell you of a mighty harvest I once took, great goddess!' Kassais called lustily. 'It's an epic tale, grisly and uplifting by parts but with a fine outcome – for me at least!'

The audience chuckled appreciatively in anticipation and he began to warm to his task. Kassais felt a presence beside him and realised that Motley had sprung to his side, the great golden staff in his hands dipping drunkenly like a mast in a storm. The Harlequin spoke even more rapidly than he had before, the words virtually tripping over each other. It was almost as though he were desperate to get his line out before Kassais could say anything else.

'Against this time of triumph, hear now one tale of cunning, perseverance and endeavour from a later age. Hear of one who has crossed the stars and returned with a story to tell. Heed his words and ask yourself if you would have acted differently!'

Kassais grinned broadly at the idea that he had somehow thrown the Harlequin's performance into disarray by acting too early. Good, let them work around him. Only then did it strike him that Motley's rushed and formulaic introduction had sounded like a joke – a joke being made at Kassais's expense. He glared around at the little clown but Motley had already skipped back out of reach, the golden staff in his hands wagging ludicrously above his head. Isha's song drew Kassais's attention back upwards and the momentary vexation with Motley was forgotten.

'We sailed through the ether, three ships together spearing the blackness,'

Kassais called out to Isha. ‘We set forth to snatch a few delicacies, a few slaves and entertainment from here and there before we turned our keels back for Commorrhagh and home. But then we found a prize worthy of our efforts. Full-bellied with glittering flanks like a fat golden sow, she was. An ungainly beast of burden sent floating hither by the slave races and virtually begging for our knives.’

Beyond Isha’s comely shoulder the complex skeins of light described by the orbits of the other gods were drifting closer. Kassais could see the gods’ masked faces increasingly turned towards him with seeming disapproval. He cared not at all, he had the full attention of lovely Isha and desired nothing more than to continue his story of piracy.

‘She had two guard dogs with her, so valuable was the prize. They were as lean and grey as winter but no match for our hard-driven cannon. As the hounds fell away in flames Akir Heliaq rushed in to be first onboard and she tore the belly from his ship with neutronium fangs. Myself and Dhorun of the Broken Circle nipped at her heels and pulled her teeth until we could more cautiously approach.

‘We chased and she fled hopelessly, unthinkingly before us. Soon she was brought to bay and we grappled her like an unwilling lover. Her crew fought but they were children, mere babes in arms, compared to our hard-driven blades. The decks ran red... and the screams! Oh! How they echoed in those tight metal confines of the sow! We made such music as we slew that some of those we fought went mad at the sound of it. I—’

Kassais’s tale was cut short by a giant blade of gleaming fire that swept down between where he stood and where the moon-goddess floated. Part of him knew that it must be another one of the Harlequins’ illusions; light, given the appearance of substance as it flashed past his eyes. But by now Kassais was thoroughly enmeshed in the psychic weavings of Cylia and her chorus of fellow Shadowseers. Also the faint, exotic spice of hallucinogen gas was in his nostrils; so he *heard* the blade rushing down and he *felt* the heat of it on his skin.

Kassais sprang back and looked up to see the armoured helm of Khaine, the war-god, glaring down on him from above the blade. For all his bravado Kassais quailed in that moment as any mortal must quail before a god. Yet the fiery sword was withdrawn and Kassais looked up again to see the god Kurnous remonstrating with Khaine while the armoured warrior-god laughed in his face. Beyond them both Isha was floating away, with many a backward glance, to join the court of other gods. Kassais was bereft.

‘Don’t be sad,’ Motley whispered in his ear. ‘She can’t help it – see there, Asuryan, the Phoenix King in the centre of it all, he’s ruled that the gods can have no more contact with mortal kind.’

‘But...why?’ Kassais cried. ‘I had barely begun my tale!’

‘There, there. You’ll get to finish it, I promise you,’ Motley said consolingly. ‘As to why – you see the Maiden up there beside Asuryan? Lileath, she had a dream that the eldar would be responsible for the destruction of Khaine one day. On hearing that, Khaine swore to destroy the eldar race in its entirety. He only relented when Isha pleaded with Asuryan on our behalf. The price of our survival was that there could be no more contact between gods and mortals. Now watch what happens next.’

The majestic skeins of light being described by the gods’ gyrations resumed. They were perhaps more straitened or chastened than before and definitely more distant. Over time the courses of Isha, her paramour Kurnous and Vaul, the smith-god, intersected more closely. Kassais watched without comprehension as Vaul withdrew to hammer at his anvil for a time before returning to bestow some sort of gift on Isha. On the moon-goddess’s next circuit she scattered gleaming lights in her wake that resolved into bright snowflakes drifting down to each eldar in the hall.

Kassais watched in fascination as one of the glimmers sailed serenely to him. He could sense a thread of Isha’s presence even as it approached and he held out his hand palm upwards to allow the flake to settle in it. It vanished in a tiny flash and a smooth, blue gem was left in his hand. The stone was warm to the touch and felt in some way alive. The sense of connection with the goddess intensified as he held it. With a flash of insight Kassais knew that when he held this stone, something he knew must be one of the fabled Tears of Isha – she could converse with him!

More importantly he could now converse with Isha. Kassais immediately continued to recount his story and was conscious that the other eldar in the hall were attuned to it too through their own spirit stones. It was as if he stood on a vast stage with only shadows beyond the brightness of the lights of Isha’s gaze, the spirit stone as warm as flesh in his hand. Quiet murmurs and susurrations implied an unseen audience just out of view but Kassais cared nothing at all for them and plunged on with his tale as if he had never been interrupted.

‘We ran them to ground, my divine goddess! The sow’s crew soon fled squeaking through their metal mazes and we hunted them down like vermin. Most of them I kept alive – for later of course – and when I found what they

carried in their holds I had questions for them too. Their cargo bays were fairly groaning with the weight of plunder: precious metals and rare woods, polished stones from a thousand different worlds, a million pigments and dyes, the brightest feathers, scales and shells from across the void. It was a barbaric treasure trove, certainly, but made up of such objects that sufficiently trained artisans and craftsmen can put to great use.

‘So we questioned the crew and under my tender ministrations they told me everything that I wanted to know. They gave me their secret destination for these goods, and told me of the curious inhabitants of the place. In that moment I knew that I must go there, that all through my long life this particular adventure had been waiting for me. The only difficulty was the extreme length of the voyage, for we were provisioned only for a brief sojourn and not an odyssey – though that was easily remedied by consuming Dhorun and his crew before proceeding–’

Kassais became aware that the war-god was sweeping past above him with increased frequency. The fury of Khaine’s gaze was almost palpable, as was the delectable sense of indulging in a forbidden act by continuing to commune with Isha. He spoke on, more urgently now as he had an ominous feeling that circumstances were about to change for the worse.

‘So I set the prow of my ship into the void and we trekked to this hidden worldlet of the slaves. What I found exceeded my wildest dreams... It was an entire realm of devoted craftsmen who spent all their days and nights crafting icons of their dead God-Emperor. Their homes were crusted with dour representations of their carrion lord. Their walls were carved with pious proclamations in their deity’s name while honorific statuettes and commemorative triptychs stood in every corner. There were warehouses filled with hand written tracts detailing His comings and goings with interminable detail. It was one of those rare jewels of a slave enclave where blind faith in a higher power is poised ready to be shattered overnight. After dispensing some lessons in who was now in control I told these industrious little slaves that they could live to continue their life’s work only if they obeyed my will.’

Kassais could see the artisans in his mind’s eye as he communed with Isha through the spirit stone. Row upon row of dirty, ugly, tearful faces looking up from where they kneeled in the dust of a distant world. They hadn’t believed him, of course, but they had thought that they could perhaps save their families if they complied. He smiled at the memory and then felt a pulse of urgency from the stone he held in his hand that prompted him to continue.

‘So I set them to work re-sculpting every dour face and maudlin icon on that world into something more pleasing. I drove them relentlessly as time was short before we must away and return to Commorragh. Because of this many of the slaves did not survive their labours, which is a shame because they excelled themselves. They began by re-carving the glowering visage of their God-Emperor into a rendition of my own handsome physiognomy wherever it occurred. Then the workers swarmed across every inscribed lamp stand and devotional wall, every prayer-banner and sheaf of vellum blotting and rewriting, obfuscating the truth and promoting the most outrageous lies.’

Kassais was laughing by now. Tears of mirth rolled down his cheeks as he recalled the anguish he had caused the slaves. They were such simple, primitive creatures and had given themselves over entirely to devotion to their dead god. Demonstrating to them that the application of pain and fear could so thoroughly overrule their higher selves had been one of the most pure and fulfilling acts of Kassais’s long, cruel life. He wiped his eyes and tried to control himself to finish with the sting in the tail.

‘At the end of it all I made a final judgement before I flew away. I actually kept my word and let them live on in their misery. I took a hand and an eye from each survivor so that they would always remember my brief period of rule and not hurry too quickly to restart their icon-carving. I told them that I would return in a year and a day to punish anyone that transgressed my laws. I’ve returned twice since.’

Just as Kassais completed his tale the spirit stone in his hand pulsed red-hot. He cursed in confusion and dropped it. There were shrieks all around him as other guests echoed his gesture. For Kassais all sense of being in Vyle’s hall in the Sable Marches had vanished. He drifted in something akin to a waking dream where there were gods above him, distant and yet so close that he could see their actions. All that he knew was that his connection to Isha had been cut off as if with a red-hot knife. He looked up uncomprehendingly and saw the armoured figure of Khaine dragging Isha and Kurnous before Asuryan for judgement.

Motley was invisible behind him as he whispered in Kassais’s ear. ‘See? Khaine has caught Isha breaking the rules by listening to the mortals and he’s demanding that Asuryan dispense punishment. Sadly the Phoenix King has no stomach for such savagery and elects to place Kurnous and Isha into Khaine’s custody instead. The war-god decides that this means he may do as he wishes, so he imprisons the pair and tortures them grievously.’

Hideous, heart-wrenching cries split the heavens. The complex interweaving skeins of the gods' passage now included fire and blood in plenty as Kurnous and Isha suffered in Khaine's orbit. Kassais stumbled forwards a few paces without thinking, shouting his outrage at the distant, unhearing figures. He was aware of pandemonium around him as others joined in with his cries. He became aware, too, of those around him who remained silent in apparent support of the war-god's actions and a spark of hatred for them sprang into being in his heart.

'Calm yourself, my lord!' Motley hissed. 'All is not lost, many of the other gods feel as you do! The smith, Vaul, by all accounts is a friend to Kurnous and Isha and wants their suffering to end. He is bold enough to confront Khaine and make any agreement. The war-god demands a hundred of Vaul's fabulous blades delivered within the year to secure the couple's release! What choice does Vaul have? Perhaps he feels guilt over his part in making the spirit stones. The task is nigh-impossible, but he accepts it!'

The performance of the dancers switched to focus around Vaul at his labours as he worked feverishly to complete the hundred blades Khaine had demanded. Tears streamed down Kassais's cheeks again as he urged the smith-god onwards with his monumental task. At times the other gods secretly interceded to help or hinder with materials or advice: Morai-Heg, Hoec, laughing Cegorach, even Lileath. The Harlequins darted and weaved about the labouring god and his pile of finished swords grew higher until, with the slow inevitability of death, the time approached when Khaine would demand his payment.

Kassais felt a cold hand close around his heart. He knew that the smith-god had failed in his task. Ninety-nine swords lay complete, but the last sword was unfinished! Kassais looked around for Motley, expecting some explanation of this dreadful happenstance. He saw only Vyle sitting on his clawed throne looking suspiciously pleased by the outcome. Vyle's hawk-like features radiated smug approval of the war-god imprisoning Isha and continuing to torment her. The spark of hate in Kassais flared up into a slow-burning flame as he looked grimly upwards to see the outcome of the meeting of Khaine and Vaul.

Kassais barked with laughter as, with the war-god virtually at his door, Vaul hid the unfinished blade among the rest. Swaggering and victorious Khaine took possession of the hundred swords without examining them in detail. The war-god freed Kurnous and Isha immediately and the pair soared away from him so swiftly they seemed to temporarily vanish from view. Vaul, too, withdrew and the chorus of Harlequins now moved around Khaine as their lynchpin as the war-god began to test the swords.

Khaine whirled the blades around his body with fantastic skill, hurling them into the air and catching them before sending them spinning outwards to orbit, point first, around his floating figure. Soon a halo of spinning swords had formed about him, a hedge of steel that Khaine added to with ever more death-defying feats of swordplay. Now a great wheel of moving blades spun with intricate precision around the war-god and he hefted the last of Vaul's blades to test its worth...

The shattering roar of Khaine's anger swept through the hall like a psychic shockwave. Kassais's instincts were honed by a lifetime of bloodshed and murder in Commorragh. He knew what was coming next. His sword was in his hand and he yelled a rallying cry for his warriors as he lunged at Khaine's minions. It was a fight to the finish between Khaine's myrmidons and the supporters of the ill-starred lovers Kurnous and Isha. Hot blood jetted amid bestial roars as the eldar fell upon one another with murderous intent.

A burst of splinter rounds careened sparks off Kassais's breastplate and he rushed to gut the shooter with a sweep of his blade. Another of Vyle's guards came screaming at Kassais with his rifle's combat blade held low for a disembowelling sweep. Kassais punched the point of his sword into the guard's open mouth and ripped it upwards to split the screaming face in two. Shouts, pleas and the high-pitched, hysterical crackle of weapons fire came from all sides. Above the embattled hall Kassais could vaguely sense two titanic figures, Khaine and Vaul, struggling just like their followers beneath their feet. Khaine's hands were red with blood, he had become Khaela Mensha Khaine – bloody handed Khaine – and now he had set upon the annihilation of the eldar race.

There were greater intricacies at work among the other gods but Kassais had scant time to grasp them as he led his handful of warriors against Vyle's guards. The Shrike Lord was nowhere to be seen but his minions were boiling into the hall like a swarm of angry ants. Kassais came to a lightning decision – they were too few to prevail. In an instant he had turned his path and cut his way over to a side chamber with a stairway that appeared to lead beneath the hall. As the last of his warriors fought ferociously to prevent any pursuit Kassais darted down the stairs without a backward glance.



CHAPTER NINE

THE FINAL BANQUET

+A reaction beyond expectations.+

+We knew that Kassais was a creature of passion, we could imagine what beasts might be lurking in his breast.+

+But still... not the one we seek.+

+With only one left the mystery is solved, we have our bird.+

+If the trail that led us here isn't a false one. This could all be for nothing.+

+I would hear his story anyway, for the nonce.+

+I'll grant a morbid fascination for that but cleaner to simply do away with him, surely?+

+He won't allow us to perform again. Not after this.+

+He has no choice just as we have no choice, the path is set.+

+The cycle must be completed, there's no turning back now.+

'That's him all right,' spat Vyle Menshas. 'That's the traitor.'

The guards had brought lights with them, but they seemed to only push the darkness back and not eradicate it in the troglodytic environs. The low, vaulted tunnel they had followed was pierced by so many archways it became little more than a row of pillars in some sections. The dust and cobwebs softening the hard edges of the worked stone gave mute testimony to how infrequently the Yegaras or their servants had traversed this part of the keep.

Before the Shrike Lord was a darker, vaguely circular area a few strides across that glistened in the wavering light. His nostrils could detect a strong coppery

odour of fresh blood mixed with the dungheap stink of spilled viscera. In the middle of the area was an angular, black heap that constituted all that was left of the torn remnants of Kassais's magnificent armour. Closer inspection revealed that it was still occupied by the torn remnants of Kassais himself, as denoted by a few cracked bones and shreds of flesh hanging from the cuirass, greaves and vambraces.

Vyle furrowed his brow and looked distractedly away through the arches as he gathered his thoughts. Nothing but a random collection of boxy, dust-covered shapes between him and yet another arch greeted his gaze. His guards were nervous, understandably so given the debacle of the previous night, and they kept glancing around as if they were on a raid into enemy territory. The Shrike Lord mused that while you could probably hide a whole army down here if you wanted to there was no indication that anyone other than Kassais had passed this way. Well that was not entirely true, Vyle corrected himself; Kassais and whatever had killed him.

Kassais had not been easy to kill, Vyle knew. Many had tried in the past and discovered the high price of failure as Kassais laughed off their killing blow and returned it with interest. From the very earliest days of his reaving, Kassais had been careful to cultivate close connections with the Prophets of Flesh, a Commorrite haemonculus cabal of consummate skill. With their help Kassais's flesh had learned to re-knit itself and recover from all but the most grievous injuries, his bones had been laced with hardened metals and his vital organs rendered duplicate and, in some cases, triplicate. Vyle had never learned the price the Prophets had extracted from his cousin for their services but it had undoubtedly been impressively high.

None of that had saved him from whatever had stalked him down this tunnel last night.

The guards were becoming more nervous. One of them forgot himself so far that he had the temerity to speak.

‘What do you think killed him, my archon?’

Vyle looked at the fellow coldly for a few moments before the guard broke eye contact and lowered his head in shame. On a different day Vyle would have gutted the guard for his impudence and as a simple lesson for his minions not to ask stupid, unanswerable questions. Today he could not so indulge himself and that fanned his cold fury further. He calmed himself with a conscious effort. The question was a valid one, after all. The Shrike Lord stepped closer and looked again, the pool of coagulating blood sucking obscenely at his boot soles.

He decided that he was definitely meant to think that the cat-creature had done the deed – the rezix. The rents in the virtually unbreachable black metal of Kassais's armour had the unmistakable look of claw marks. The cuirass was split open as if it had been crushed between mighty jaws and the tasty morsel inside it appeared to have been messily consumed, triplicate organs and all. Perhaps it was even true and the rezix had somehow been down here hunting him. It had been an unlucky chance encounter for Kassais if that were the case.

‘Clearly the rezix we hunted a few days past somehow got into the keep and lurked until it found him,’ Vyle pronounced confidently. ‘I’ve heard that once they have a blood-taste they are indefatigable in their pursuit of quarry.’

The guards looked unconvinced but Vyle didn't care what they thought. It scarcely mattered what had killed Kassais – the important thing was that he was dead and Vyle's opponents were leaderless.

None of Kassais's warriors seemed to have escaped from the Emerald hall after their treacherous attack although there was still some confusion on that point. When Kassais had made his coup attempt, the Yegaras' old servants had suffered an outbreak of divided loyalties. Some had joined Kassais, some had stuck with Vyle and some had tried their utmost to form their own faction opposed to both parties. During the confused melee some individuals had shifted their allegiances not once but several times.

Vyle was minded to impale every last one of the Yegaras's former servants on the battlements and have done with it. Sadly Kassais's warriors had proven to be exceptionally well-trained and exacted a considerable toll from Vyle's own troops before they were wiped out. The casualties meant that he had barely enough to guard the walls. Holding the keep at all now rested on a knife's edge.

The natives were massing in ever greater numbers outside as the hunger set in. They still had not dared to approach but they watched and waited, thousands of patient eyes glittering in the forest waiting for... what? Not Kassais's treachery or they would have attacked last night. No, they waited for something that was yet to occur, something that Vyle was determined to forestall.

Vyle sneered and spurned the riven armour with his foot. ‘Bring this mess with you,’ he instructed. ‘We have our feast tonight and Kassais's shade can sit in gloomy residence with us while we revel.’

‘Yes, my archon,’ the guards replied automatically.

‘Best break out your prettiest black garb,’ Vyle muttered derisively. ‘Tonight we feast in the Onyx wing.’



CHAPTER TEN

PENUMBRA

That evening, as the watery light of the Sable Marches faded away into dusk, Vyle took his place of honour at the banquet table in the Onyx wing. Unlike the other wings the Onyx wing didn't seem to have a central hall, rather it comprised a series of larger and smaller chambers that interconnected via twisting corridors that had no trace of overarching logic in their layout. In lieu of a proper banqueting hall Vyle had appropriated the largest surviving chamber in the wing even though it had partially collapsed. Gaping rents in the outer wall showed glimpses of fast-darkening skies and a chill, knifing breeze blew in from outside. Vyle grimly reflected that the part-ruined, smoke-blackened place was well-fitted to his mood.

He had been careful to ensure that the energy fields in the keep's entry hall were properly activated. He even had the servants unlock the primitive pit traps that were ranged along it just to complicate matters for any intruders. Guards were posted on the battlements and at the entry, but most of their numbers were ranged about the walls of the banqueting chamber with splinter rifles, disintegrators or dark lances in hand. Vyle kept his own blade naked at his side and his fingers were never far from its well-worn pommel.

There was a palpable sense of fear in the darkened chamber. Vyle's diminished coterie of slaves and courtiers eyed the remaining Yegarans with obvious signs of mistrust. The two groups quickly settled into mutually antagonistic islands around the handful of tables that had been dragged into the chamber. The heavily armed guards made them fear they had all been brought here to be massacred. Vyle glowered at them from his throne and did nothing to alleviate their fears.

Eventually Vyle drank slowly from the goblet at his elbow to give the sign that his guests might do likewise. Some were hesitant, no doubt fearing poison, but none of them had the courage to defy him and spurn his feast. Vyle watched and waited. Before long the banquet warmed itself a little as the food and drink served to lift the spirits of those present. Presently low conversations and muted, nervous laughter fluttered through the gathering.

It was instantly silenced as Vyle rose to his feet.

‘So... here we are,’ the Shrike Lord said menacingly as he began to pace slowly through the blackened chamber, his fingertips tapping on his sword hilt. ‘Our so-called entertainers have seemingly abandoned us after two nights of revelry, and now I must make my own entertainment...’

Vyle paused for a long moment, his eyes travelling to the shadowed corners of the chamber expectantly. The only sound to be heard was the rush and hiss of the waves crashing against the cliffs below. The Shrike Lord shrugged and continued speaking, although his gaze continued to rove back and forth constantly in expectation of some manifestation from the Harlequins. They were listening, he knew they were.

‘A tale was begun two nights ago by poor, un-mourned Olthanyr Yegara that deserves a proper conclusion. That fool only ever knew half of the story in which he was so instrumental. When he crept into Commorrhagh to bargain for his own worthless hide he did not suspect that his miserable little sub-realm held the keys to something much more valuable. Had he but known, he could have dictated his terms and I would have gladly seen them fulfilled. In truth, I would have given him my own concubines just to gain access to the Sable Marches.’

Vyle returned to his goblet and drank, finding so much talk to be thirstier work than he’d anticipated. As he drank he looked out through the torn gaps in the outer wall where the last, dying light of the day was flushing the undersides of the clouds a nacreous pink. Still no performers took advantage of the natural break to slip themselves into the scene. Vyle shook his head ruefully and carried on with his story.

‘I have little doubt that he sensed his error by the end. He must have realised he had given up a principedom for the laughably low price of his own miserable existence. There are doors, you see, and doors, and doors in Commorrhagh. It is a place of a million portals. There are doors that open onto palaces of wonder, realms of stunning artistry, undiscovered treasures, hellish pits, unrestrained Chaos and much more...’

‘I’ve heard the young and the ignorant say that you can reach anywhere and

everywhere using the portals in Commorragh, but that isn't the truth. The truth is that some of those doors have long since been broken, some have been forgotten and some have not been opened in ten thousand years with good reason. What lies beyond the doors has been broken too, whole sections of the webway are gone and more of it unravels with every cycle. I have no doubt that soon there will be nothing left.'

Even this jibe failed to raise a response as Vyle had expected it would. Harlequins were nomadic citizens of the webway, this much he knew. They were supposed to know all kinds of hidden backdoors and secret paths through it. He'd thought they wouldn't be able to resist gainsaying him about his knowledge of the medium. He gazed around again at his guests, all watching him fearfully and wondering what he would do next, and his guards, all poised and ready for action. Perhaps the Harlequins had fled after all. Vyle drank again and continued his efforts to draw them out as he warmed to his tale.

'Anyway, I digress. My bloodline, the Menshas, have reaved and explored from Commorragh since before the Fall. We know a great many secrets. One such, just a whisper of a rumour from my grandsire's days, spoke of a hidden portal leading from here to a faraway place in the void. This singular prize was alleged to be a world-ship lost among the Ghost Stars and left untouched by the Fall, its crew out of contact, naive and vulnerable as they awaited a sign that it was safe to return. The custodians of this knowledge – those who were to give the signal – first dwelled here, hidden in the Sable Marches, but they were driven out and had the misfortune of running into my illustrious forebears long ages past.'

There was a definite sensation of being watched and listened to now. It was not the guests nor the guards; something *else* was listening. Vyle could virtually feel the invisible eyes upon him. They were here all right. He licked his lips and gave a wry smile of satisfaction. He spoke more loudly now, his voice rising.

'We kept this secret in the Menshas line but it was useless to us. As long as the Sable Marches remained unreachable the world-ship remained unreachable. So now you may understand my enthusiasm on hearing of Olthanyr Yegara's arrival. I undertook the journey to High Commorragh, to Sorrow Fell, to the Core Spur, to abase myself before Asdrubael Vect and beg his favour...'

Vyle's voice momentarily deserted him as he recalled the dark majesty of the Core Spur and its circle of giant, screaming statues of the Supreme Overlord. The memories evoked a sense of dread that surprised him with its immediacy. He swallowed and spoke on. His proud, hectoring tone was gone and his final

whispers were more akin to a confession.

‘It was hard for me... I’ll admit that. The hardest thing I have ever done. I value my pride, but to speak with Vect my pride had to be... humbled, crushed before the great tyrant. I entered with thoughts of making a deal, of coming to a mutually beneficial arrangement for access to Yegara and the Sable Marches. Before I was permitted to leave I promised Vect everything – a vast plunder in wraithbone and spirit stones. In exchange I asked only to be permitted the honour of extending his rule over the Sable Marches as its appointed suzerain.

‘And so here we are,’ Vyle concluded, more to himself than to any listeners real or imagined. ‘Besieged, beset, belaboured by Fortune, with enemies without and within. I’ll see an end to it, I will...’

He stiffened and whirled at the sound of hands clapping politely behind him. The small, grey-clad Harlequin was there, the one they called Motley. Vyle smiled grimly and made a slight gesture. Immediately his guards stepped away from the walls and began to close in around the slight figure.

‘My colleagues believe the performance is unsalvageable,’ the small Harlequin said equably. ‘That the third act must remain incomplete, given the appalling auspices of the previous two.’

Motley smiled broadly and cocked his head at the closing circle of guards before raising empty hands in surrender. ‘I feel otherwise and I see that you agree with me, Archon Vyle Menshas.’ Motley grinned. ‘We’ve come this far, we have to see it through. Do you intend to capture me?’

‘Perhaps,’ grated Vyle as he levelled his long, straight sword at Motley. ‘I see now that you came here expressly to ruin me, you and your pack of players. You must be here for vengeance over the world-ship.’

‘Me personally?’ Motley shook his head vigorously. ‘No. I’m here for you, Vyle Menshas, you might say that you’ve summoned me here. Your lust and your cruelty called me into being as an inevitable consequence of your actions. It’s a fine irony don’t you think? Quite perfect in its conception if you connect all the dots. Don’t you see? We are the third act, you and I, in Ursyllas’s tale of the Fall. You’re the eldar race, and I’m She—’

‘Where are the rest of your troupe?’ Vyle interrupted. ‘Answer quickly or it will go hard for you, little clown.’

The guards had stopped a respectful distance from the Harlequin with their weapons aimed directly at him. Motley grinned and kept his hands up. ‘Would you believe that they’re right behind you?’ he replied innocently as he reached to remove his mask.

With his nerves already stretched tauter than steel wires Vyle could not prevent himself from reacting, nor could his guards. Their attention wavered for only a split second but in that instant the grey-clad Harlequin exploded into action. His solid-seeming image fractured into a blinding kaleidoscope of colours. The guards fired almost in unison, slashing the glowing cloud into fragments, but their splinters and beams passed through empty space.

The avalanche of glowing motes swirled and reformed for an instant to show Motley at one side of the ring. His hands were reaching out to touch two of the guards on the forehead, almost in an act of benediction. Vyle cursed and lunged at the Harlequin's back but the little figure spun away again before his blade could connect, the laughing image disintegrating into a darting whirlwind of sparks.

The two guards began to slump but then straightened again, apparently unharmed. Vyle saw that they had a blazing, brand-like mark where the Harlequin had touched them. He also saw that their armour now swirled with sickly colours as they levelled their weapons at their comrades. Vyle slashed one of them down in an instant, but the second got off a rippling burst with his disintegrator cannon before he could be killed. Guards, guests and chunks of wall flashed into momentary incandescence before they exploded into spurts of grey dust beneath the unleashed power of stolen suns.

Amid the confusion Vyle saw two more guards reeling with the branding mark on their foreheads. Motley reappeared then vanished again and again, each time leaving two more victims in his wake. His loyal guards had grasped the situation and fought back furiously, yet each time the laughing Harlequin struck, the odds shifted against them. There was pandemonium in the chamber and Vyle caught sight of the same swirls of sickly colours and branding marks among the guests. The Shrike Lord felt fear shiver down his spine as he realised the situation was rapidly spiralling out of control. A familiar, mellifluous voice suddenly called to him out of the chaos.

'Archon Menshas! Come quickly! We can protect you.' It was Ashanthourus, the Harlequin troupe-master still clad as he had appeared last night in the guise of the Laughing God, Cegorach. Behind him were ranged the other gods Vyle had seen in the previous performance: Asuryan, Isha, Lileath, Vaul, bloody-handed Khaine and others were all there. The Harlequins brandished weapons and fought back-to-back to defend themselves against the rising tide of corrupted guards and guests being created by Motley's rampage. After a moment of hesitation Vyle darted into the protection of their ranks.

‘The cursed one has gone mad, She Who Thirsts has consumed his soul,’ Ashanthourus called out to him, his voice edged with desperation. ‘Your only hope is to escape while you still can!’

‘So you’re still trying to play me!’ Vyle snarled in response and raised his sword. ‘Damn you and your games!’ In the same moment the whirlwind of sparks that had been spinning around the chamber returned and swept through the assembled troupe.

For an instant Vyle had the impression of Motley – no longer small and slight but a bloated and monstrous shadow – engulfing the goddess Isha. The other gods swarmed in to do battle with the entity but it swatted them aside like children. The first Harlequin it had grasped fell to the ground rippling with sickly colours, no longer the image of a god but a corrupted, mewling plaything.

Within seconds the ground was littered with writhing forms. Khaela Mensha Khaine, the god who had been namesake to Vyle’s bloodline, survived a little longer than most by wielding a great two-handed glaive with desperate vigour. Crouching behind the war-god, Ashanthourus was momentarily protected and the High Avatar turned to Vyle, shouting.

‘Believe what you will but go! For the love of Isha, get out of here if you don’t want to share our fate!’

Khaine crashed to the ground like a falling statue, his armour crawling with worms of vile hues before he shattered into a million blood-red shards. Ashanthourus darted to one side with an impossible twist and evaded Motley’s first rush. The two of them leapt and spun around one another with dizzying speed, each movement anticipated and countered before it could be begun.

Vyle watched the whirling conflict for a second, took two paces backwards then turned and ran for the exit. He was pursued every step of the way by the sound of Motley’s insane, daemoniacal laughter.

Vyle emerged, panting, into the Confluence to find it strewn with corpses. The energy fields that should have been barring the entrance hall were down. At the end of the entrance hall, almost at the outer doors, Vyle caught sight of a figure limping away from him. The figure only shuffled away faster in response to Vyle’s hoarse challenge so the Shrike Lord gripped his sword and ran in pursuit of it.

At the doors the figure twisted around and for an instant Vyle caught sight of Olthanyr Yegara’s agonised face. The last Yegara was hunchbacked and broken. He had four ornate jars hanging from his flesh like obscene grapes, their buried

heads seeming to suckle at him. With a mad cry Olthanyr heaved the outer doors open and ran out with Vyle hard at his heels.

Immediately outside Olthanyr vanished into a wall of smooth-skinned bodies as he was dragged in by the hooked claws of the waiting natives. Hundreds of saucer-like, unblinking eyes stared at Vyle as the shrieks of Olthanyr Yegara began to rise to an unbearable pitch. Vyle seized the door and heaved it shut in their faces. He experienced another cold chill at the nape of his neck as he realised that someone had used the distraction to get behind him.

‘And darkness and decay and death held illimitable dominion over all,’ whispered Hradhiri Ra as his thrust took the Shrike Lord through the heart.

As the life rushed from Vyle Menshas’s body he felt the unholy pull of She Who Thirsts waiting to consume his soul. Dimly he saw his skull-masked killer was holding something bright and hard before his eyes.

It was a spirit stone.

A tear of Isha, a sanctuary for his departing essence. A blessing.

Vyle Menshas almost wept with relief until he saw something approaching over the Death Jester’s shoulder. It was the slight, grey figure of Motley, no longer a flashing cloud but returned to his old self with his full, red smile. Vyle struggled for words, for a warning to shout, but he had taken his last breath. All that was left of Vyle Menshas was being drawn into the spirit stone. In his dimming sight it swelled to encompass his universe...

‘A quite stunning performance, don’t you think?’ Motley laughed wildly. ‘Very convincing. It’s a shame there’s no one left alive to appreciate it. Oh well, we’ll always have the troupe and each other, I suppose.’

Hradhiri Ra let the Commorrite’s corpse slide to the ground as he looked at the dimly glowing stone in his hand. He spoke to it softly, whispering the words.

‘Such a little thing, a soul, and all the same when reduced to this.’

‘For better or for worse we are judged by our actions, my skeletal friend,’ Motley said more soberly as he reached for the stone, ‘not for our potential. If the universe has one message to relate to us about universal justice it is surely that one. May I?’

Hradhiri Ra surrendered the spirit stone to Motley’s nimble fingers readily enough. However he chose to look away as, with an indescribable look of pleasure in his eyes, the slight Solitaire consumed the stone containing Vyle Menshas’s soul.

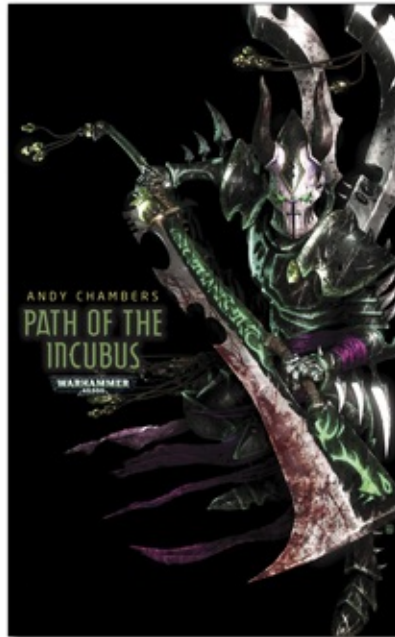
This was the price the Harlequins must pay to evade She Who Thirsts – one of their number already promised to her unrelenting hunger. Legend had it that

when a Solitaire's soul was parted from his body Cegorach might appear and try to cheat She Who Thirsts of her prize. Until then Motley's pre-ordained doom protected the entire troupe from extinction – but only at a price.

After a moment Motley tittered, belched and excused himself comically. The Death Jester's skull mask grinned sardonically, but inside it Hradhiri Ra could not escape the feeling of sick horror that crept over him.

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Author of the dark eldar series, along with the novel *Survival Instinct* and a host of short stories, ANDY CHAMBERS has more than twenty years' experience creating worlds dominated by war machines, spaceships and dangerous aliens. Andy worked at Games Workshop as lead designer of the Warhammer 40,000 miniatures game for three editions before moving to the PC gaming market. He now lives and works in Nottingham.



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