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THE END TIMES

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Sage's Ruin, Hunger Wood

'Get out, quick! It's crushing me!'

The ribs of the colossal corpse cart shuddered, straining to snap closed on the scarecrow of a man who was holding them open. The nature-priest cried out with the effort of separating the spars of the bone cage for a few more precious seconds. Almost horizontal in his straining crouch, the priest's spine and the soles of his feet were bleeding badly.

Roaring, a barrel of a man with unkempt white hair moved in to reinforce the skinny priest, shoving his shoulder into the gap. Though he was unmistakably past his prime, the big man had the strength of a veteran woodsman. Together, the two men held the cage's ribs open. A fellow captive, a swarthy knight in filthy golden plate mail, took his opportunity and pitched sidelong through the bars between them. As he rolled out onto the damp grass and came up with his longsword drawn, a winged horror swooped down to intercept him, shrieking like a hag.

Around the bone cage's walls, dozens of pale arms covered in suppurating sores pushed through, grabbing and snatching at the robed inhabitants that were still alive inside. The prisoners kicked and battered at the lunging white limbs, the sound of breaking bone punctuating the excited yelps of the ghouls straining to get inside.

Many of the men and women inside the cage were still manacled to its bone walls, but several of them had slipped their bonds and were piling out onto the wasteland beneath. High above them, a large stone carriage descended from the swirling thunderheads, held aloft by a blue-green court of ghosts. The reliquary at the palanquin's rear held something so evil it made even the night air shiver in disgust.

Mordecaul Cadavion commended his soul to Morr, braced himself and pitched through the gap in the prison's osseous ribs.

Three Days Earlier South-west Templehof, The Vale of Darkness

Mordecaul awoke from his uneasy slumber, wincing as the bone prison hit another rut in the rough Sylvanian road. The cloth of the priest's black robes tugged at the scabbing welts across his back, the legacy of his merciless whippings at Castle Sternieste. As if in sympathy, the gaping wound in his opened wrist gave another dull pulse.

Around him, slumped on a bed of dead bodies, were nine men and women shackled to the enormous rib cage structure that formed the cage at the arcane carriage's rear. At its fore was a complex yoke of bone and sinew that was yanked along the road by six corpses clad in lacquered black plate. They were the remains of knights who had confronted the fiend von Carstein outside Castle Sternieste, resurrected to serve him in death where they opposed him in life. Mordecaul could just about make out von Carstein himself riding through the gloom at the head of the strange procession, an armoured silhouette mounted upon a skeletal stallion.

Mordecaul's fellow prisoners were mired in a morass of disembodied limbs and opened torsos. Their heads nodded in silence as the prison trundled and bumped along the path. Each bore the same ragged wound as the priest, red-black and in many cases burning with infection. Most of their number were leaning their backs against the osseous bars of their prison. Some, like Mordecaul, were snatching infrequent moments of sleep in the hope of regaining some strength.

Yet true rest was all but impossible. The stink of the cadavers lining the bottom of the bone cage was tremendous. Plump flies buzzed and frolicked in slit guts, blood-pooled eye sockets, even in the wounds sustained by the captives themselves during their attempts to break free.

The young priest knew that he was going to die, used for whatever foul purposes Mannfred had in mind and then either abandoned far from Morr's embrace or – worse still – resurrected to serve the vampire in death. When he had first been snatched from the renovations at Vance's temple of Morr, the thought had been terrifying and agonising in equal measure. Now Mordecaul almost welcomed the dire truth of his predicament. It fed his anger – anger he could use as fuel to stay alive, and courage to act when the chance came close.

Mordecaul pulled at his bunched robes, scratching through the cloth at the lesions on his back, trying in vain

to find a shred of comfort.

'Don't keep picking at them,' hissed the round-faced matron shackled across from him.

The Shallyan priestess ripped another strip of cloth from the wimple she had tucked in the crook of her arm, winding it into a bandage that still had a semblance of cleanliness. Mordecaul had watched her pure white habit turn filthy brown over the last few days as she worked tirelessly to heal those of their number she could reach. Forgoing sleep altogether, she had prayed and prayed to the goddess of healing and mercy, but to no avail. In the end she'd had to resort to battlefield triage and whatever treatments she could administer.

An elderly Sigmarite priest lay slumped unconscious at her side. Though he wore manacles like the rest of them, he had not been bound to the cage's walls. His bloodied bronze cuirass and heavy belt lay discarded in the muck nearby. The priestess had been right to treat the Sigmarite first, for his wounds were without doubt the most severe. Mordecaul could have sworn he'd seen the man's brain glistening greyish-pink through the jagged wound in his skull. Dark with gore, his bandages uncoiled slowly in the Shallyan priestess's lap.

'If you keep picking at those whip-wounds,' she muttered crossly as she fussed with her patient, 'they'll be infected in no time.'

Mordecaul let his good hand fall back down, his expression sullen.

'What does it matter, sister?' he asked.

She ignored him, tying fresh cloth around her patient's split skull.

'The boy's got a point, Elspeth,' said the bearded brute at the foremost point of the carriage. 'We'll all be food for the ravens before long.'

The big man was an Ulrican priest – Mordecaul recognised the wolf-sigil branded into his forehead. He sat with his back to his fellow captives, watching the horizon for a deliverance that no one truly expected to come.

'Then answer me this, Olf Daggert. Why are we still alive? He's already used our blood for that damned ritual at Sternieste, and somehow drained the faith out of this place. So why hasn't he killed us?'

'He needs us for more of the same, I reckon,' replied Mordecaul, darkly. 'Together we're too valuable to let out of his sight. These von Carsteins will stab each other in the back just to pass the time.'

'Perhaps,' offered Lupio Blaze, grinning weakly, 'perhaps the goddess Myrmidia lets us live, so she can find out how many we can take with us into the grave, no?'

The Tilean knight made half-hearted stabbing motions, though his sword was long lost. The man was still clad in his golden armour, though the plate was caked with filth and the proud reliefs of his goddess were smeared with blood. Mordecaul avoided his gaze. The knight's indestructible bravado was hollow as his tone, a bad joke that had long ago turned sour.

There was a grating shriek from the blackening skies and Mordecaul looked up with a start. Above the grotesque carriage wheeled the Swartzhafen devils: a pair of bat-winged vargheists, massive in frame, yet sunken and sly like ogres on the point of starvation. Mordecaul hated them, perhaps more than he hated any other breed of gravebeast, and that was a high claim indeed. Priests of Morr considered resurrection the worst of all sins, for the unliving were direct blasphemies against the death god and the eternal peace he represented. Vampires were the worst of their kind, and vargheists arguably the most hideous of them all.

Mordecaul's tutors had taught him that the bloodsucking beasts represented the true form of the vampire, a creature of purest evil with all pretence of civility or humanity stripped away. The two fiends wheeling above them now were von Carstein's pets, obedient to his every whim. They had opened Mordecaul's wrist in the dread tower of Castle Sternieste. They had forced their captive's blood to stream out as part of the apostatic ritual that had robbed the power of faith from Sylvania.

The grating, clicking outbursts of the vargheists played on Mordecaul's nerves; their hisses sounded a little too much like laughter. Yet they were certainly not the worst of the sights he had seen in the weeks since his capture.

The clouds above the vargheists glowed red with a dull but ever-present threat. Mordecaul knew what lurked up there in the darkness: an ironbone palanquin bearing an unholy relic of immense power. He shuddered at the thought, his back aflame at the involuntary motion. He was glad he could not see it now, even if the memory of its dark grandeur waited behind his eyelids for whenever he tried to sleep. Sometimes a great black claw appeared in his mind's eye, limned with green fire and beckoning slowly.

There was a murmur from up ahead and something half-growled by von Carstein. It sounded to Mordecaul like half of a conversation, though not in any tongue he recognised. The priest shot a baleful glare at his captor. Clad in ancient, blade-ridged armour, the vampire's pallid scalp glowed grey-yellow in the gloom under a large crown that shimmered with ghostlight.

Mordecaul looked away, his eyes cast down. He dared not look upon the vampire for long. The last time he had, the fiend had sensed the attention on him and turned to meet his gaze. Mordecaul shuddered at the

memory of the evils he had seen in von Carstein's eyes.

'What's he saying up there?' asked Olf Daggert.

'Bad things,' said Blaze, unhelpfully.

'He's talking to the crown, I think,' said Mordecaul.

'The crown?' asked Elspeth, doubtfully.

'Yes. No less than the Crown of Sorcery, if my order has it right,' said the young priest. 'There are etchings in my temple's underground vault. It's an ancient artefact, and it's supposed to be under magical guard beneath the Temple of Sigmar.'

'Supposed to be,' said Blaze. 'But the vampire, he stole it. We came from Altdorf with Grand Theogonist Volkmar to get it back.'

'The Crown of Sorcery...' said Olf, his brow furrowed. 'Like the one worn by that orc, the one they called the Slaughterer?'

'The same,' replied Mordecaul. 'Legends say it has part of the Great Necromancer's power inside it. That he speaks to those who wear it, guiding them from the spirit realm.'

Silence stretched out for a few long moments, each of the captives lost in their own dark thoughts.

Von Carstein's voice filtered back to them again as he muttered a phrase that sounded to Mordecaul more like a Morrite psalm than part of a conversation. Suddenly, the bed of dead limbs and torsos underneath him twitched and convulsed, broken fingers clutching and intestines writhing like snakes. Mordecaul could feel worm-like motions under his legs.

On the other side of the cage, a scarecrow-thin priest Mordecaul believed to be a worshipper of the nature god crawled backwards up the bone spars. His manacles clanked around the raw flesh of his wrists and ankles, but he extricated himself from the twitching limbs of the undead below with admirable dexterity.

Most of the other captives flinched, but rode it out, expressions of distaste etched on their faces. Mordecaul shook his head in frustration and flung a disembodied forearm across the carriage. The limb's twitching fingers caught onto the bone spars and it flopped down into the lap of the maiden sitting cross-legged opposite the priest of Morr.

Mordecaul's throat tightened in acute embarrassment, but the gruesome gift did not awaken her from her trance. The elf maiden was so beautiful that Mordecaul could hardly bear to look at her. Gold-wound tresses framed a tapering face, pale and shapely. Her perfect lips mouthed a silent chant. She had not opened her eyes since she had been shackled with the rest of them inside Castle Sternieste.

Mordecaul was grateful in a way. He must hang on to his anger and hatred, not soften it with feelings of awe and admiration. It was the only thing keeping him alive. Instead he focused on the wound at the elf's wrist, the blood-matted tiara dangling from her hair and the disembodied limb in her lap. It was like looking at a rare and beautiful rose that had been trampled into the dirt.

'For winter's sake, stop staring, boy,' sighed Olf Daggert, looking over his shoulder. 'She's one of them Ulthuan lot, and by the look of the jewels, she's royalty, too. You aren't getting under her skirts, not in a thousand years. And if you so much as touch her, Sindt,' growled the Ulrican priest, 'I'll break these manacles off just to wrap 'em around your head.'

'I've not touched a hair on her delicate little head,' said the rangy acolyte opposite Mordecaul, his tone acid. Sindt had spent the first few days pretending to be asleep with his head slumped and his wrists resting on his knees, but on the third night he had finally introduced himself, grudgingly unveiling his allegiance to the trickster god Ranald. Mordecaul had hated him from the moment he had first spoken. He was the sort of man who would steal Morrpennies from a dead man's eyes.

Sindt looked sidelong at Mordecaul through his curtain of long, black hair. 'The old wolf's right, my little grave-grubber. Whatever the hell that elf thinks she's doing, she don't need the likes of us distracting her.'

Mordecaul narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

'She's seeking aid,' said the tall Bretonnian woman standing shackled to the bone prison's rear. Her tone was courtly, imperious even. Though she was undoubtedly very beautiful, in Mordecaul's eyes she was nothing compared to the elf princess. 'I recognise the cadence of the chant,' she said. 'She summons the beasts of the wild.'

'I should like to see that,' said the nature-priest, a mad light in his eyes. Everyone in the carriage lifted their head towards him, surprised that the skinny vagabond had finally spoken. Mordecaul was unnerved by the way he hung halfway up the cage's bars with his long fingers and toes locked like talons around the curving spars. More like a beast than a man, he thought. As if the Old World didn't have enough of that sort of thing already.

Uncomfortable under the sudden attention, the tangle-haired hermit hissed like a cat and dropped back down to land on all fours on the corpse-bed.

'So it can speak, then,' said Olf, his bushy white eyebrows raised as he turned back to stare at the horizon.

The bone prison clattered on, rattling along the scree-strewn path. The resurrected knights lashed to its multiple yokes moaned and clanked in their battered plate as they dragged onwards through the sharp stones of the Sylvanian road.

On the horizon to the east, Mordecaul noticed Templehof Crag silhouetted against the unhealthy light of Morrslieb. High above the tainted moon was its wholesome twin, Mannslieb, nothing more than a diffuse smudge in the gloomy skies. In the last few weeks the moon's lantern glow had been all but eradicated by the shroud of night that had so thoroughly claimed Sylvania. For one schooled in omens, it was a very bad sign.

'So we *are* heading north, then, if that's Templehof,' said Olf. 'Pay up.'

Sindt snapped the brittle bone splinter that he was using to probe the lock of his manacles and spat an obscenity in frustration. Elspeth tutted and made the sign of Shallya as Sindt kicked over two of the disembodied heads that he and Olf were using as improvised currency in their morbid gambling games.

Olf tapped the symbol of Ulric that scarred his forehead and grinned, exposing wide brown teeth. 'A wolfer's nose is never wrong.'

'Yeah, great,' said Sindt. 'So we're headed for Hunger Wood. I'm thrilled for us all.'

'Hunger Wood?' asked Mordecaul, sitting bolt upright. He drew in breath through clenched teeth as the weals on his back opened again. 'You're sure about that?'

'Aye, that I am,' said Olf. 'Sure as winter's bite.'

'That means ghouls,' growled the nature-priest on the bars above, baring his uneven yellow teeth.

'Yep,' said Sindt, his tone flat.

'It's worse than just ghouls,' said Mordecaul.

'Something worse than being eaten alive, eh?' said Sindt, rubbing his chin. 'Hmm. Olf, looks like we have a new game. I'll start. How about being ground into sausage and served at a Bretonnian banquet?'

The tall noblewoman, shackled to the ceiling of the prison, shot the trickster-priest such a look that the smug smile melted from his face.

'You don't get it!' spat Mordecaul. Something in his tone captured the attention of everyone in the prison, save the elf maiden, whose tapered eyes remained closed.

'Go on, boy,' said Olf. 'What's got a death-priest so spooked?'

'Hunger Wood,' replied Mordecaul sullenly. 'It... changes people.'

'No, that's not it,' said Sindt slyly. 'He's covering something up. Something to do with our young friend's history, or his order, I'll wager. Am I right?'

Mordecaul said nothing.

'Come on, lad,' said Olf. 'The more we know, the more we cooperate, the better chance we have of getting through this alive. What we're heading towards, is it a specific place? Or perhaps something of value?'

'We're all dead in a day or two anyway,' said Sindt. 'So you may as well tell us.'

The young priest gave a long sigh, looking up at a rare glimpse of sky.

'It's a site,' he said. 'The site of a ruined tower, to be exact. A place where my order has hidden something away from the von Carsteins.'

'So why only go there now?' asked Olf. 'What's taken the vampire this long to claim it?'

'A ritual, of a sort. My order can hide the departed from those who would raise the dead, right? Everyone knows you keep a couple of pennies aside for Morr.'

'Yes,' said Elspeth, making the sign of Shallya. 'When there's nothing more to be done, consecrate them unto the god of the afterlife. That way they cannot rise again.'

'Yes. Well, we hide other things too, sometimes.'

'Go on,' whispered Sindt.

Mordecaul looked nervously past the prison's yoke to the armoured vampire up ahead, but their captor was still muttering to himself, his attention focused on the road ahead.

'In Hunger Wood,' whispered the young priest, 'there's a site where Ghalacryst, an old member of our order, was said to have made a pact with Morr. A pact to keep something he discovered secret, something ancient and evil.'

'Like the thing inside that horrible flying carriage up there?' asked Olf.

'Sort of,' said Mordecaul. 'A grimoire he found in the bowels of Mordheim.'

'Mort-heim!' said the nature-priest, his growl like that of a cornered fox. 'It is cursed.' Sindt shot a look up at him, making a slashing gesture across his neck before motioning for Mordecaul to continue.

'Well, this tome he found,' continued Mordecaul, 'he knew it was of great value to the agents of undeath that

were hunting the ruins. They didn't care for money, nor for wyrdstone. Just for the grimoire. So Ghalacryst hid it away from the sight of the living and the dead alike, deep in Hunger Wood. He's still there now, guarding his find, or so they high priests say.'

'Seven hells, boy,' said Olf. 'Enough mystery. What does the vampire want with this thing? And why wait 'til now to retrieve it?'

'Well, we know that our gods aren't... I mean our devotions aren't being rewarded. None of us wants to admit it, but there it is. Look at us. An acolyte of Ranald, shackled to his own bad luck. A priest of Morr, trapped amongst the undead. A priest of Taal, caught like an animal behind bars. A Shallyan, unable to heal the wounded. Do I need to spell it out for you?'

'Er... Maybe a little bit,' said Olf.

'The powers of the faithful have no meaning in Sylvania, not any more!' hissed Mordecaul, his manacles clinking as he threw his hands up in frustration. 'Not since the ritual in Sternieste. That means that the spell of seclusion worked by Ghalacryst isn't working!'

'And that our host has hence learned of this priceless... grimoire,' said Elspeth carefully.

'Yes.'

'And that's where we're going now,' said Olf. 'To pick it up.'

'Yes!'

'And if he's listening to us now,' said Sindt, 'and *didn't* know about your order's dirty little secret before, you've pretty much just told him all about it.'

The tall Bretonnian woman gave a short trill of laughter, a note of desperate madness in the dark.

A sudden cry came from the south, so pure and high that it instantly drew their attention. Mordecaul spun around to see a great eagle swoop low towards them, its wingspan the width of the winding road.

Plummeting out of the clouds behind it came one of the Templehof vargheists, screeching in outrage as it folded its wings for a killing dive. The great eagle banked hard, lashing out at its pursuer with talons the size of a farmer's sickle. It tore the wing-devil's face clean off, leaving only a flayed, screaming skull.

As the eagle dived low the second of the two vargheists shot out of the clouds, slamming its own claws into the creature's shoulders and pulling up hard. Above it, something writhed in the clouds, looking to Mordecaul like a mass of ectoplasmic figures. The skies pulsed red as the Mortis Engine slowly descended. The ragged nature-priest shrieked, crying out for Taal to save him. Mordecaul had to fight hard not to scream himself, screwing his eyes shut to blot out the thing's unholy glory. A black claw beckoned behind his eyelids, mocking him, drawing out his dreadful suspicions and making them real. He shook his head in defiance and looked up once more.

The aerial battle between the eagle and the vargheists was becoming more and more frantic. The eagle was biting and slashing, banking and swooping, but it could not shake both the vargheists at once. Wherever it struck, the greyish flesh would heal over once more, caressed by the bilious energies of the unholy palanquin. Blood pattered down onto the upturned faces of the captives, each of them silently willing the eagle to prevail as the aerial struggle unfolded.

As if directed by one mind, both of the winged devils dived in at once, catching the eagle and holding it fast in mid-air. The floating reliquary came in close, the ruddy pulse of its raw power washing over the tableau.

The eagle seemed to age, shrinking in on itself, flesh and feather mouldering away as it became thinner and thinner. The great bird shrieked, cawed a coarse bark, then fell silent. The vargheists released it from their grip. It fluttered downwards for a moment, fleshless and strange, before dissolving into a scattering of desiccated bone.

A single long feather of white and gold wound its way down through the air towards the captives, passing straight through the topmost spars of the bone prison and settling just out of reach on the mound of disembodied limbs inside.

Mordecaul felt tears pricking his eyes as the elven princess gave a long, mournful keen of pure sorrow.

Hunger Wood, Vale of Darkness

'Ranald take these infernal... Just... Elspeth, push against that... Yes...'

Across from Mordecaul, Sindt gave a toothy hiss of triumph. With the healer Elspeth Farrier's help, the trickster-priest had finally managed to get his manacled foot free from his tightly-strapped longboot. Mordecaul's stomach growled; he was so hungry he considered hooking the boot over with his own foot and chewing its leather for whatever meagre sustenance it could provide. It was a cruel irony that they were passing through Hunger Wood, with its reputation for forbidden feasts. Even the trees looked like old flesh clad in wrinkled skin,

the branches like dried and elongated fingers. So much meat to hand, rotten and rancid but surely better than nothing, was right there in the corpse-bed beneath them. All going spare for one with the courage to claim it...

The young priest shivered and pulled his attention back to what his fellow captives were doing. With his leg fully extended, Sindt was wiggling his toes through the holes in his stocking. Once the largest two were sticking out, he lowered his foot delicately towards the feather. He strained and grimaced, but was still a few inches short. Mordecaul watched from under hooded eyes, silently hoping the Ranaldite priest would dislocate something in his febrile attempts to snatch his trophy. Sindt stretched again, his face a rictus of effort.

Lupio Blaze puffed out his cheeks and blew a burst of air at the feather, his moustache quivering on either side of his mouth. At first, nothing happened. Then Elspeth caught on and joined in, both of them huffing and blowing like short-changed halflings.

Finally their combined efforts managed to ruffle the feather a few more inches towards Sindt. The trickster-priest grabbed it between his toes and retracted his leg as if he had been stung, quickly curling crosslegged and hiding the feather from sight completely. The vargheist with the red skull for a face swept by overhead, but did not come close enough to notice.

'You can't summon more eagles with just that,' whispered the nature-priest.

'Shut up and watch, Rube,' replied Sindt.

'I'm not Rube,' said the nature-priest. 'I'm Russet.'

Sindt ignored him, hiding the feather in his armpit so that the hollow tip stuck towards his mouth. He bit down into the quill-end with an expression of utmost concentration, nibbling a little here, spitting out a piece there, all the while giving the impression his head was merely nodding with the motion of the bone prison.

'And...' mouthed Sindt, stretching out the word as he finished his work, 'Ranald's your mother's lover.'

The trickster-thief showed the feather's dented tip against his palm for a second, reminding Mordecaul of an Altdorf street sharp showing a Stirland farmer his chosen card.

'Great,' he muttered. 'Now we can write Karl Franz a few strongly-worded letters.'

'No, death priest,' said Lupio Blaze quietly, shaking his head and holding out an admonishing finger. 'You wait.'

As soon as they passed under a canopy thick enough to hide the moonlight completely, Mordecaul heard a faint 'click' of metal, then another. When the moonlight fell on Sindt once more, he sat exactly as he was before, but for the hint of a smug smile on his face.

'So we have a chance, then,' muttered Elspeth. 'If we can get these manacles off... With Shallya's grace, we still have a chance.'

'Not without weapons, we don't,' snorted Olf gruffly. 'They're vampires, woman. There's no way we can take them. And that... that *thing* in the clouds... What's inside it is worse than even the von Carsteins.'

'Just call it what it is, you fat coward,' sneered Sindt. 'You heard the vampire say it, just like the rest of us. It's the Hand of Nagash.'

The woods fell silent. Even the buzzing of insects and rustling of leaves stopped.

The Sigmarite priest in Elspeth's lap stirred in his unconsciousness, crying out. His voice sounded like it came from a great distance away.

'The Hand...' he mumbled. 'It begins... It will bind...the sands... the triplets... the moon... blood and fire... dead gods...'

'Hush, now,' murmured Sister Elspeth, shooting a fierce glance at Sindt as she laid a hand on the old man's brow. 'Try not to move. Be at peace.'

A cackling scream echoed through the forest. Mordecaul felt sweat break out on his forehead. It had not sounded like it had come from a human throat.

His stomach rumbled again. This time he punched it in frustration, but the gnawing sensation was still there.

As the bone prison bumped its way through the twisting paths of the wood, Mordecaul watched in grudging admiration as Sindt went to work. The trickster-priest slumped in feigned sleep over first Olf, then Russet, the odd clink of metal lost under the trundling clank of the carriage's wheels. Russet's face lit up when he realised his manacles had been undone by Sindt's clever hands, and it took four sets of glaring eyes to convince him not to spring up and attempt escape straight away. Sindt whispered something into the nature-priest's ear, and a slow, guileless smile spread across Russet's battered features.

Sindt wasn't done there. Placing the feather in between his toes once more, he extended his leg to its fullest extent and inserted its nib into the lock on the manacles around Blaze's ankles. The trickster-priest's tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth as he wagged his toes back and forth. Mordecaul found himself hoping that, this time, the Ranaldine thief would succeed.

He was not disappointed. Though Sindt was sweating and gritting his teeth by the end of it, his efforts were rewarded with a soft click.

'It won't make any difference, you know,' said the Bretonnian lady at the rear of the carriage. 'We're all dead already.'

'Nonsense. We'll see you out of here, alive and well,' said Olf.

'Oh no you won't,' she laughed softly, her voice like knives on silk.

Mordecaul hoped against hope for the dawn, even for a single shaft of sunlight to give them hope.

In his heart, he knew it would never come.

The woods around the path were getting denser by the hour. The only illumination within the prison was the occasional shaft of light from Morrslieb, and a soft lambent glow that surrounded the elf princess. Other than the occasional despairing moan and the old man's occasional mutterings from Elspeth's lap, the company had fallen silent. Some of their number were pale with loss of blood, and Mordecaul could smell that some of their wounds were turning rotten.

The prison's wheel hit a large root, and the whole carriage shuddered. A disembodied leg fell out of the back of the corpse-bed, rolling to a halt in Mordecaul's line of sight. The young priest sat bolt upright as one of the loping shadows that had started to follow them a few miles back darted forward and snatched it up. A pallid scavenger of little flesh and too much skin, it leered at him over its prize before receding into the gloom. Its expression had been drawn and crazed, but there had been something undeniably human behind its gormless, blood-flecked grin.

'Ghouls...' he muttered.

Mordecaul's order had a special hatred for ghouls. Cannibals who fed on the flesh of the dead, the creatures regularly raided those crypts and graveyards that were not consecrated in the name of the death god. The young priest had seen a fair few of the creatures in his time, even killed a handful in them himself in defence of his sacred sites. Yet these ones were even more starved and disgusting than usual. The unnatural darkness that had robbed the life from Sylvania, driving its people to flee the province or die, had also robbed the vampire counts' minions of their sustenance.

Here and there the prison had trundled past scattered patches of rags and rusted armour that had been gnawed to scraps, the last remnants of mercenaries and adventurers who had trodden these paths. The stories told that sometimes, lost and starving, they had found new lives as cannibals instead.

As Mordecaul watched them approach a large bundle near the middle of the track, Sindt's hand shot out from the bone prison. Quick as a snake he grabbed a sword hilt and yanked it from its scabbard, the bone spars of the giant cage shuddering as if in shock at the sudden motion. Sindt tossed the sword towards Lupio Blaze and folded his arms back into his loose crouch in one smooth movement. The Tilean knight caught the sword with commendable dexterity, plunging it into the nearest torso so that only its hilt protruded in the shadow of his knee.

Drawn by the flash of movement, the vargheist that had been injured by the elf princess's eagle swooped along the forest path and alighted on the top of the cage's bars. The enormous creature scrabbled around until its beady eyes stared right down at them through a mask of red bone. Strings of bloody drool pattered into their midst, but not one of the prisoners was foolish enough to meet the thing's gaze. Eventually it flapped away, shriek-clicking to the wing-devil that hung upside down from the canopy up ahead.

'Not a bad snatch,' said Mordecaul, his voice a little shaky.

'Lucky fingers,' said Sindt.

Sage's Ruin, Hunger Wood

The path grew wider as it wound onwards, turning into a broad oak-lined clearing. Morrslieb's wan green light threw twitching shadows from the ancient trees, their cracked branches grasping slowly at the air. Mordecaul craned his neck to look past Olf's bulk at the front of the carriage, and saw a shattered ruin atop a small hill in the distance.

'Morr's blade,' he said under his breath. 'We're here.'

At the head of the procession, Mannfred von Carstein cried out in jubilation, taking the Crown of Sorcery from his head and stowing it on the horn of his saddle. His skeletal horse broke into a gallop, its hoofbeats unnaturally loud in the cloying quiet of the wood.

The tower up ahead was a many-tiered mass of tumbledown walls and shattered minarets. Its mossy stone walls were veined by creeping, pulsing black tendrils that looked nothing to do with natural vegetation. Stone skeletons stood vigil around its walls, robed in the manner of priests and clutching roses and stylised scythes in

each hand. As the carriage's armoured zombies pulled it closer, Mordecaul could see the sinewy remnants of a corpse dangling from the ruined tower's upper storeys. A thick noose of torn velvet was tight around its neck.

The vampire thundered in close, dismounting from his steed and disappearing from sight into the depths of the ruined tower. As von Carstein descended the stone steps to the basement a cloud of bats were startled from their nest in the corpse hanging high above, revealing that the body still wore the scruffy black robes of a priest. The cadaver's face was a barren mask of bone, though pennies had been pressed deep into its eye sockets, an offering made in the hope of a proper afterlife.

'Ghalacryst,' moaned Mordecaul. 'So it's true. The tome was buried here.'

'One of them, at least,' said the Bretonnian woman archly. 'He still needs three more, I believe.'

'And how come you know so much about all this, my lady?' asked Olf, staring up from under knotted brows.

'You mistake the lady for her messenger,' said the Bretonnian, her hooded eyes glistening with amused contempt. 'And even then, think again.'

'Sindt, look,' said Blaze. 'A helm.'

Lying amongst the scattered debris at the edge of the clearing was a fleshless skeleton, and sure enough, a dented bronze helmet was next to it. As the prison ground forward, it became obvious to Mordecaul that it would pass close by.

Sindt slumped over, his shoulder close to the bone spars nearest the skeleton. As the helmet came within arm's reach, Sindt shot out a pale arm and grabbed for it.

The jagged bone spars closed with a snap, clipping off the trickster's arm in a spurt of blood.

The prison erupted into bedlam. Sindt gave a deafening scream, clutching the ruined shoulder-stump that geysered blood all over Olf's lap. The giant Ulrican stood up with a roar, shrugging off his opened manacles and barging forward to put his shoulder against the gap in the bars. Russett leapt up to wedge himself bodily in the opening, bracing his shoulders and bare feet on either side of the gap and pushing it as wide as he could. Blaze drew the captured sword from its corpse-sheath, muttering prayers to Myrmidia as he tried to lever open his manacles.

Their vargheist jailors shrieked, their oddly angular heads whipping round. Wings snapped wide as the beasts took flight, a pack of ghouls loping from the forest eaves behind them. Ruddy illumination lit the entire clearing as low thunderheads formed a whirling vortex, the reliquary bearing the Hand of Nagash at its centre. The Mortis Engine's spectral guardians emitted soul-splitting shrieks as they lowered its palanquin towards the prisoners. Mordecaul could feel his skin tauten and his scalp tingle as the vile relic came closer.

'Get through the gap!' shouted Olf, his broad face turning an ugly red with the effort of holding the ribs of the cage apart. Above him, Russett's feet were trickling blood down the jagged edges of the bone spars, the nature-priest giving a thin moan as he fought against the unholy strength of the prison's magic. Mordecaul yanked forward, but he was weak with hunger, his shackles still bound tight. The vargheists were nearly upon them, and the ghouls loped in close, arms outstretched and mouth agape.

'Sigmar Unberogen!' shouted the old Sigmarite priest lying amongst the corpses, rearing up from Elspeth's side to bring his discarded metal cuirass down hard upon Blaze's damaged manacles. The blow sent chain links scattering in all directions. Mordecaul's heart filled with hope as he realised the warrior priest was Volkmar the Grim, Grand Theogonist and head of the Sigmarite cult. But rather than banishing the undead clustering around him, the old priest bared his teeth in an atavistic snarl and slammed his jagged cuirass into the pate of one grasping ghoul after another.

Screeching down from above, the faceless vargheist lunged a taloned arm towards Blaze. Its claw grabbed air as the Tilean dived headlong through the gap in the bone cage. The knight landed well enough, tucking into an awkward sideways roll before coming up fast to impale a leaping ghoul on the point of his stolen sword. Sweeping his arm wide, he flung the cadaverous creature from his blade right into the path of the swooping vargheist. The impact knocked the winged monster from the skies in a flurry of leathery flesh.

'Sindt! Help me!' shouted Mordecaul, waving his manacles at the trickster-priest. Grasping hands pushed through the bone spars to grab at the Morrite priest's robe, yanking him closer to the bars. The young priest tasted the bile of true fear as he imagined filthy teeth sinking into the backs of his legs. Volkmar was too far away to intervene, stamping and shouting on the other side of the cage like a man possessed.

Suddenly Elspeth was there, wrapping the chain of her own manacles around the cannibal-thing's throat and drawing it tight. Half-lying, half-kneeling, the matronly priestess braced her foot against its head. She put her hips into it, and broke the creature's spine with a sharp crack.

Sindt scrambled over to Mordecaul, a thin whine of pain escaping his lips as his ruined arm bumped and scraped. The trickster-priest's eyes ran with tears as he fumbled the feathertip into the death priest's manacles with his off-hand. Keeping his arms as still as possible, Mordecaul kicked away the questing claws of the

ghouls that threatened to disrupt Sindt's work.

Nearby, Volkmar struggled to fend off the faceless vargheist, using his broken cuirass as a shield. Badly dazed, the old man was too slow. The bat-devil swatted him across the cage so hard that he crashed into the bars near Olf.

Even in his dazed state, the old warrior priest still had sense enough to roll left, bodily toppling out of the gap in the prison's ribs to crumple into the blackened grass. The winged monster pushed its sharp-mawed head through the cage's bars, snapping at Elspeth's midsection as she fought to scabble away.

Sindt gave a yelp of relief as Mordecaul's manacles clicked open. The young priest grabbed the heavy chain loops as they fell away and whipped them out sideways, smashing into the nearby vargheist's ruined face. The beast screeched and flapped backwards, a bat-winged silhouette against the red light of the descending reliquary.

Mordecaul caught a glimpse of the deadly palanquin hovering at the height of the treetops. In front of him Sindt moaned and cowered as his eyes. Incredibly, the blood pulsing from his shoulder stump began to flow up towards the ironbone construction, a dozen other streams of gore following suit. Thin rivulets of crimson from around the clearing reached up towards the obscene device as it was borne down on its escort of ghosts.

His attention riveted on the Mortis Engine, Mordecaul was powerless to resist as a muscular ghoul grabbed onto Sindt's good arm and dragged him through the corpse-bed to the bars. Three more of the leering scavengers reached in to pull the trickster close. The lanky priest screamed in agony as the pale, wrinkled ghouls bit down into his back and gnawed their way to his spine in a welter of spurting blood.

Horried into action, Mordecaul picked up Sindt's fallen feather-pick and pushed it frantically into the keyhole of the manacles binding his feet. He had to get free, to save the princess from the same fate as Sindt. He felt the feather's nib slip and bend, but it was pliable enough not to break.

Outside the cage, Blaze was fighting hard against the second vargheist. The Tilean darted under its gangling reach to take its throat with the point of his blade, but the creature fought on regardless, slamming the knight's longsword out with a wide backhand blow. It bit down hard onto the Tilean's shoulder, breaking its teeth on his ornate plate armour.

Mordecaul forced himself to concentrate on his manacles as his feet slopped and slid in the corpse-mulch underfoot. Nearby, Elspeth was doing her best to keep the scrabbling ghouls away from the elven princess. She hammered at hands and heads with a skull she had seized from the corpse bed, but there just were too many of them.

One of the ghouls grabbed the elf's robe and pulled hard, only to be blasted apart by a flash of pure and blinding light that took Mordecaul's vision for a second. Some kind of elven enchantment, perhaps, not that really it mattered. A chance was a chance.

Bought a momentary reprieve, the young priest felt the lock on his manacles click open. He cried out in triumph, but his voice was lost under the screeching of fleeing ghouls.

The Morrite priest stumbled blindly across the cage, bumping into Olf and knocking them both out of the cage onto the grass below. He could smell the Ulrican's stale sweat and bad breath. Above him, Russett screamed in frustration as the bone cage's bars snapped back into place, and the nature priest was forced to tumble away in a windmill of bloody limbs to avoid its bite.

As Mordecaul disentangled himself from Olf and scrambled to his feet, his vision began to clear. The ghouls had fled, scared away by the blinding light. Nearby, Volkmar was staggering over to the vargheist that battled Blaze. He raised his manacles in both hands and used them like a chain whip, beating the winged monstrosity's back over and over with a roar of angry despair.

The beast lashed out hard, its razored claw slashing into Volkmar's guts and straight up into his chest. The old man was hurled backwards, slit from navel to breastbone. Gasping, Mordecaul rushed to help him, ripping off a sleeve of his robes and binding the wound as best he could. From inside the cage the Bretonnian noblewoman called out a phrase, quick and strange, and the Theogonist's wound clotted closed in a shimmer of crimson light.

'Thanks!' blurted Mordecaul.

The caged aristocrat sketched a curtsy, her smile strangely mocking.

Nearby, Olf had flung himself bodily at the wing-devil that Blaze was hacking into with his longsword. The Ulrican grabbed the thrashing creature around the neck in a wrestler's grip.

Mordecaul saw his chance. Picking up a jagged splinter of bone that lay nearby, he lunged forward and buried it deep in the monster's heart. It gave a thin screech of pain and denial, flapping its wings and jerking away. Olf was flung to the ground. The creature staggered, cried out with an almost human sound of despair, and collapsed.

His features set in a grimace, Russet picked up a fallen branch and ran at the faceless vargheist staggering blindly around the side of the carriage. As the nature-priest was about to thrust the point of his improvised stake into the creature's back, a pale hand shot out from the bone cage and caught it with a dry slap.

Hollow laughter echoed across the clearing, a sound that told Mordecaul they had already lost.

'Morgiana, my dear,' said Mannfred, riding up close on the back of his undead steed. He held a giant, flesh-bound grimoire, still covered in a thick layer of dust. 'Why not join the celebrations? You certainly deserve it, having kept my latest investment alive, if not well. The old man still has enough life left for my purposes. And my compliments on having put up with these godly fools for so long in your... how shall I put this...' the vampire savoured his own wit for a moment like a fine wine, '*unladylike* condition.'

Von Carstein made a flicking motion with his hand. The bone cage's spars opened wide with a grinding creak, and the Bretonnian woman's manacles fell open into the corpse-mulch. She deftly dropped down out of its rear and in one smooth movement stepped up to Russet, biting down hard into the nature-priest's neck. Russet screamed and thrashed, but Morgiana held on tight, her eyes wide with dark delight. The nature-priest struggled on for a moment, twitched, and fell still.

The Bretonnian woman took a silk kerchief from her ruined finery and dabbed at the blood trickling from her mouth, smiling at Mordecaul like a predatory cat. The young priest spotted elongated fangs amongst her perfect white teeth. She held a finger to her lips, crimson sparks dancing in her eyes. With a jolt, Mordecaul remembered the stories of a telepathic bond between a vampire and its kin, and realised she had likely been passing their plans to her von Carstein master all along.

There was a clatter of hooves as Mannfred rode in close, his cursed palanquin drifting down towards him. Mordecaul could feel his skin writhe in disgust at the thing's nearness.

A terrible tiredness flowed through him. Nearby, Olf stumbled and fell to the ground, lying with his unfocused eyes staring at the red glare of the unholy reliquary.

'A noble effort, my deluded friends,' said the vampire. 'But not nearly enough.'

The last thing Mordecaul saw before the ruddy light swallowed his consciousness was Mannfred stroking the dusty tome, cradling it in his arms like an infant and chuckling softly to himself.

'Nagash... will rise.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Kelly is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 *Damocles* novella *Blood Oath* and the Warhammer titles *Sigmar's Blood* and *Dreadfleet*, as well as a number of short stories. He works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham.

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Published in 2014 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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ISBN: 978-1-78251-256-1

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