



WARHAMMER
THE END TIMES

THE LORD OF THE
END TIMES

JOSH REYNOLDS

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The world is dying, but it has been so since the coming of the Chaos Gods.

For years beyond reckoning, the Ruinous Powers have coveted the mortal realm. They have made many attempts to seize it, their anointed champions leading vast hordes into the lands of men, elves and dwarfs. Each time, they have been defeated.

Until now.

The Three-Eyed King has come. With the Empire in flames, Archaon Everchosen has marched south with all the armies of ruin at his heels to claim his birthright and usher in the Age of Chaos. The city of Middenheim, one of the few bastions remaining to men, dwarfs and elves, is his target, for buried deep in the mighty rock upon which it sits is an ancient weapon with which he will bring about his ultimate victory.

The last hope lies with a few heroes. With the great vortex sundered, the Winds of Magic have been freed, and each has found a mortal host. Only the power of these 'Incarnates' can prevent the cataclysm that Archaon seeks to unleash. But they are scattered, and even if they can be gathered, they may not be able to work together.

The winds of Life, Light, Shadow and Fire have gathered in Athel Loren, in the bodies of high elves and dark elves, now united under the rule of Malekith, the Eternity King. Two, the Celestial and Metal winds, have inhabited men, who will stand alongside their old allies. The wind of Death has found its home in Nagash himself, but none can say how the Undying King will choose to act. And the wind of Beasts is lost, its host unknown.

As Archaon's plan comes to fruition, destiny draws the Incarnates together, and the final battle approaches, with the fate of the world hanging in the balance.

These are the End Times.





PROLOGUE

Autumn 2527

 *The Drakwald Forest*

The runefang slid from its sheath with a dreadful hiss. The blade shimmered crimson as it bit into the squealing ungor's neck and removed the beastman's verminous, almost-human head from its scrawny shoulders. The unlucky creature's comrades scrambled to avoid a similar fate, but the sword rose and fell in a display of red butchery, spattering the trunks of nearby trees with gore. The blade's wielder gave a harsh cry and his horse reared, one iron-shod hoof snapping out to catch a fleeing beastman in the back, snapping the wailing creature's spine.

Boris Todbringer, Elector Count of Middenheim, Marchlord of the Drakwald, twisted in his saddle, laying about him with the runefang. The sword, called 'Legbiter', seemed to hum with joy in his hand as it went about its work. It, like its master, took pleasure in the simple things in life and the shedding of blood was the simplest thing of all for such a weapon. Ungors screamed and died to blade and trampling hoof, and Todbringer roared with pleasure as each new carcass struck the soft loam of the forest floor.

'Come on then, come and die, filth,' he bellowed. 'Let Khazrak hear you scream.' An ungor leapt at him, a spear clutched in its hairy hands. The blade drew sparks as it scraped across his cuirass and he brought his shield edge down on the creature's skull, splitting it.

Todbringer smiled fiercely, despite the close call. He felt more alive now than he had for many years. He'd at last shifted the weight of responsibility to stronger shoulders, and was free to do as he wished. And what he wished was to hunt down the foe whose shadow had blighted his life for too long. The creature which had claimed the lives of his sons and taken his eye. The beast which had massacred his people and challenged his authority.

Khazrak would die. Even if the world was coming to an end, even if the Emperor himself fell, Khazrak would die. The beast must die. That certainty drove Todbringer on, and lent strength to his aching limbs as he hewed and slashed at the enemy like a man half his age – or one possessed. The world had narrowed to that singular point, and nothing else mattered. In some part of his mind, Todbringer wondered if killing the beast might not reverse the course the world had taken in the fraught months since the second fall of Altdorf.

The Empire was in flames. Even the most sceptical of men could see that the great kingdom which Sigmar had built was now turning to ash on its death-pyre. The plague-ravaged remains of Marienburg crawled with maggots and rot. Nuln was a rat-gnawed ruin, reduced to a blasted crater by the vermin which even now laid siege to Middenheim. Talabheim was a stinking shell, so poisonous and foul that it was avoided even by the armies of the Three-Eyed King. Even Altdorf, which had weathered the plague-storm that had consumed Marienburg, had fallen at last to the chattering hordes of the ratmen. The Emperor had fled south to Averheim, while others had come north, to the City of the White Wolf. His city.

A crude axe bounced from his shield and he urged his horse forwards into the press, trampling the beasts as they tried to form a ragged phalanx. His runefang, the sign of his authority, of his right of rule, sang a woeful song as he swept it out in a precise arc, lopping off spear heads and malformed limbs alike. 'Fight me, beasts,' he roared. 'Come and die, you spawn of a six-legged goat!'

Even nature itself was in rebellion. The skies roiled with crackling, magic-laden clouds and the birds and beasts had fled. The Drakwald was empty of all life save the mutated aberrations who now died beneath his sword. It was the End Times. That was what Gregor Martak had claimed, when he'd arrived alongside the so-called Herald of Sigmar, Valten – a former blacksmith, of all things! Martak might have been the Supreme Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic, but deep down he was still a country lad from Middenland, with soil in his ears and gloom in his heart, and Todbringer wouldn't have put much stock in his mutterings save for the evidence of his own eyes.

Martak and Valten had come, bringing men and news, and their army of stragglers, refugees and flagellants had breached the zigzag trench lines and burrowed encampments of the ratmen which had ringed Middenheim. Todbringer had welcomed them, though not the news they'd brought. Not at first, at least. They spoke of the fall of the great cities and more besides, of the collapse of the dwarf empire and the slow dissolution of Bretonnia. Tilea, Estalia, all of the great southern states were ashes as well, burned to cinders by the conflagration which even now pressed in on the remnants of the Empire.

The End Times. The thought was enough to send a shiver of uncertainty through him, even as he chopped down on a shield of wood and animal hide. The ungor brayed in fear as the runefang sought its heart. Todbringer grunted and sent the body slewing into its fellows with a flick of one thick wrist. The End Times. That was why he had heaved his responsibilities onto Valten's broad shoulders, and named him Castellan of Middenheim. Let the Herald of Sigmar fight the war to end all wars. Todbringer had his own war: a smaller war, but of the utmost importance. If the world was coming to an end, then he had one last matter to attend to. One last debt to settle.

It was a pure, just thing in a time when the foundations of the earth seemed to be eaten away and the sky gaped wide and hungry. That was what he told himself. One valorous act to stem the tide of brute corruption which sought to envelop everything. Kill the banebeast, and break the warherds. With the beast-tribes broken, the war in the north could be won easily. Without their fodder, the armies of the Three-Eyed King would find themselves bereft of their numerical advantage. That would be enough to turn the tide. It would be enough. It had to be.

A pulse of guilt shot through him. It wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last, he knew. A small but insistent part of his mind constantly whispered that he had left his city, his people, in the hands of strangers. Only a Todbringer could weather the storm that had come to engulf Middenheim, it said, and he felt determination fade to doubt, and that doubt became a certainty that he had made a mistake.

At least until the band of ungors he was now rampaging through had trampled out of the undergrowth, and doubt had at last given way to the rough joy of vindication. After days of searching, days of threading through the tangled trails of the Drakwald, he had been overjoyed to find the enemy at last. When he'd spotted the semi-human beastmen, he hadn't been able to resist the urge to slake the bloodlust that had steadily built up in him over the weeks of his fruitless hunt. Deaf to the alarmed yells of his entourage, he'd spurred his horse into a gallop and charged right into the midst of the enemy.

Now ungors surrounded him on all sides, shrieking and snarling, and his horse reared, lashing out with its hooves even as Todbringer smashed his runefang down on hideous faces and primitive shields. He roared and cursed as he fought. From behind him, he heard the howl of the Knights of the White Wolf who made up his bodyguard as they laid about them with their brutal hammers, and the rising curses and war cries of the threescore huntsmen who had accompanied him into the baleful recesses of the Drakwald. The battle swirled about the muddy trail, in the shadows of sour-rooted trees, and twisted bodies fell in heaps. At last, the ungors broke and began to stream away. Some dived back into the undergrowth they had emerged from, while others broke into lurching flight along the trail. Todbringer was tempted to pursue the latter at once, but he jerked on his steed's reins, turning about to face the slaughter that was occurring behind him. 'Leave one alive,' he roared, as he watched his men butcher those creatures too slow or frenzied to flee. 'Damn your hides, I need one of the beasts breathing, so it can tell me where its one-eyed master is lurking.' If any of his warriors had heard him, however, they gave no sign.

He cursed himself, as he finally recognised the ruin he had inadvertently wrought. The orderly column of soldiers he had led into the Drakwald had devolved into a disorganised mass of men, milling about in a wild battle beneath the trees. The Drakwald ate men as surely as did the beasts it sheltered beneath its dark boughs, and staying within sight of one another was the only way of not losing men to the shadows and false trails that blighted it. Even

then it was no sure thing. How many men had he lost to the Drakwald over the course of his time as elector count? A thousand? More? How many good men had he fed unwittingly to the hungry dark?

The forest seemed to press close to either side of the rutted track. The path was a narrow, muddy thing, barely wide enough for three men to march abreast. There was no space to form lines, no room for a proper charge. He was suddenly aware of how stifling the silence was, beneath the crash of arms, and how thick the dark beneath the trees was. It was as if the Drakwald were holding its breath. Unease strangled his eagerness and he kicked his horse into motion. He needed to restore order, and swiftly.

I hope you're satisfied, old man, he thought bitterly. *You know better!* He began to bellow orders as he rode, trying to shout over the din of battle. In his youth, he'd had one of the best parade-ground voices in the Empire, but age had dimmed his volume somewhat. The flush of combat was fading from him, and he felt tired and old. Every joint ached and the runefang felt heavy in his grip, but he didn't dare sheathe it. Not now.

The enemy was close. He saw that now, and he cursed himself for not thinking about it earlier. How often had his men been led into just such an ambush? How often had they done the leading themselves? He'd allowed his need for vengeance to blind him, and he could feel the jaws of the trap grinding shut about him.

A long, winding note suddenly rose from the trees. The sound of it speared through his recriminations and struck his gut like a fist. He jerked on the reins and turned his horse about, scanning the forest. More terrible groaning notes slithered between the trees and rose above the canopy, piercing the stillness. Brayhorns, he knew. The hunting horns of the warherds. Then, with a suddenness which defied reality, the forest, so still before, was suddenly alive with the sounds of tramping hooves, rattling weapons and snorting beasts.

Arrows hissed out from between the trees, punching men from their feet. Todbringer yanked his horse about. He had to reach his men – if they could form a shield-wall, they might manage an organised defence, long enough perhaps to escape the trap he'd led them into. But even as he galloped back towards his warriors, the beastmen burst through the trees on all sides at a run, slamming into the scattered column like a thunderbolt. There were hundreds of them, more than any shield-wall or line of hastily interposed spears could hold back, and men and horses screamed as they died.

Todbringer howled in rage as he spurred his horse to greater speed. He crashed into the mass of snarling beasts and the force of the impact sent the foe rolling and squealing as his horse trod on those too slow to get out of the way. His runefang quivered in his grasp as he swept it out and chopped down on upraised maws and clutching hands. For a moment he was adrift on a sea of snarling faces, jagged tusks and rusted blades. He cursed and prayed and screamed, matching them howl for howl, as he hewed about himself. Blood hung thick on the damp air, and it dripped into his armour and from his beard. Still they swirled about him, a never-ending tide of bestial fury. He glimpsed his men falling beneath filth-splotched blades one by one, dragged down and reduced to bloody ruin.

The trees nearby exploded outwards in a spray of splinters as a minotaur charged into battle, its bull-like head lowered and its great hooves trampling man and beast alike. The monster roared and swung an axe in a wide arc, cutting a Knight of the White Wolf and his braying opponent in half in a spray of gore. Todbringer kicked his horse into motion and charged towards the beast even as it turned to meet him. The minotaur lurched towards him through the press of combat, its eyes bulging with blood-greed. It swung its axe and the notched blade caught Todbringer's stallion in the neck, killing the poor beast instantly. The animal sagged and the count toppled from the saddle.

He rolled away, avoiding the horse's death-throes. The minotaur lumbered towards him, froth dripping from its champing jaws. Todbringer forced himself to his feet, even as the monster dropped its axe towards him. The runefang shuddered in his grip as he caught the blow, and the crude axe blade shivered to fragments. The minotaur reeled back, shocked from its fury by the loss of its weapon. Todbringer lunged, and his sword opened the brute's belly. The minotaur shrieked and clutched at its guts as it grabbed for him awkwardly. Todbringer avoided its clumsy attack and brought his blade down on its forearm. The runefang bit through flesh and bone with ease, and the severed arm flopped into the mud at his feet.

The minotaur collapsed like a felled tree, its blood steaming as it pumped across the ground. Beastmen pressed in around Todbringer, and he found himself beset on all sides. His breath rasped harshly in his agonised lungs as he moved and fought harder than ever before, seeking to wrestle just a few more seconds of life from the talons of what seemed to be his preordained fate.

Some part of him had always known that it would end this way, with him surrounded by braying herds, his standard trampled in the mud. Martak had been right; this was the End Times. The time of the Children of Chaos, when the cities of man would burn and be torn apart stone by stone. The world would belong to the mewling, goat-faced freaks which gibbered and snarled around him. He set his feet and heaved back against them, using his shield to batter the closest to the ground, where they were easy prey for his runefang.

For a moment, he stood alone. His heart ached with sorrow as he heard the sounds of the last of his men being put to the sword by the milling beast-kin. *Your fault, old man*, he thought. He stared at the snarling faces that closed in around him. These, then, were the inheritors of the world. He snorted and couldn't restrain the laugh that forced its way out of his throat. It rang out hard and wild over the track, and silence fell in its wake.

He swept his arms out as he glared at the beasts that milled about him, inviting them to attack. 'Come on then, beasts. Dogs of abomination, whelps of darkness – curs by any other name. A Todbringer yet stands. Middenheim stands. Come and feel the White Wolf's bite!'

The beastmen lunged forwards. They came at him from every side, remorseless and hungry. Todbringer slashed, hacked and chopped at the horde, and they returned the favour, their barbaric weapons scoring his armour and gashing his exposed flesh. Soon, he could hear the rumble of his heartbeat in his ears and the world seemed squeezed between ribbons of black as he wheezed and staggered. His foot slid in the mud, and he sank down to one knee. The beasts crowded around, and he readied himself for the end.

Horns blew, loud and low and long. The sound shivered through him, and the beastmen pulled back, whining and griping like hounds denied the kill. Something pushed through their ranks and came into view. 'I knew it,' Todbringer murmured.

Khazrak the One-Eye had come to claim his due. The banebeast of the Drakwald was large, and bulky, heavy with muscle and old scars beneath a suit of piecemeal armour. Yellowing skulls hung from his leather belt, and he carried a barbed whip in one giant paw, and a blade covered in ruinous sigils in the other.

The trees rustled in a sudden breeze, and it sounded like laughter. Khazrak spread his arms and the beastmen backed away, making room. Todbringer felt his heart speed up. Khazrak hadn't just come to watch him die. The banebeast had come to kill him.

Mortal enemies, brought together by fate. The thought brought a mirthless smile to Todbringer's face. He glanced up. The clouds resembled vast faces in the sky, leering down through the canopy of branches: like gamblers watching a dog savage rats in a pit, he thought. 'Well,' he croaked, 'here we are again, old beast.'

Khazrak hesitated. The beastman's good eye narrowed. For the first time, Todbringer noticed how much white there was in the other's hair, and how carefully the beast moved. Like an old warrior, conserving strength. Like Todbringer himself. He felt a pang of sadness. For all that the monstrosity before him deserved death, it had been the closest thing he'd had to a friend these past few years. Knowing that Khazrak was out there had given him a sense of purpose. It had given him a reason to live, after his wife's death, even if that reason was for hate's sake. And in a way, he was grateful to his enemy for that, for all that he intended to take Khazrak's head. *Some things are just meant to be*, he thought grimly. Then, he laughed. *At least now I can stop chasing fate.*

Khazrak's thick wrist flexed, and the barbed whip uncoiled. Todbringer took a breath. 'How long, old beast? A decade? Two? It seems a shame to miss the end of the world, but we've never been showy, have we?' he asked. 'No, best to let them get on with it, eh? We know where the real war is, don't we?'

The caterwaul of the gathered beastmen dimmed as he raised his sword. They were no longer important. They never had been. Only Khazrak mattered. The others were animals, and no more or less dangerous than any beast of the forest. But Khazrak was almost a man, and he deserved a man's death. Preferably, a long, lingering one.

Slowly, the two old warriors began to circle one another. 'Oh yes, we know,' Todbringer murmured. 'You took my sons, and I took your whelps. I took your eye, you took mine.' He reached up to trace the scar that cut across the empty socket. Khazrak mirrored the gesture, seemingly unthinkingly. 'The world is on fire, but our war must take precedence. We have *earned* this, haven't we, old beast?'

Khazrak met his gaze, as the question lingered on the air between them. 'Yes, this is our moment. Let us make the most of it.' Todbringer took a two-handed grip on his runefang. Khazrak raised his blade. It might have been a salute, but Todbringer doubted it. No, Khazrak knew nothing of honour or respect. But he recognised the totality of this moment, as Todbringer did. Strands of destiny bound them together, and as the world ended, so too would their war. It was only appropriate. Todbringer brought his sword back and closed his eye. *Guard my city, Herald of Sigmar. May the Flame of Ulric burn bright forevermore, and may its light guide you to victory, where I have failed*, he thought.

Khazrak bellowed, and Todbringer's eye snapped open as the beast lunged for him. Their blades slammed together with a sound that echoed through the trees. The two old enemies hacked and slashed at one another ferociously. They had fought many times before, and Todbringer knew the creature, even as the beast knew him. Blows were parried and countered as they fell into an old, familiar rhythm. Two old men, sparring in the mud, surrounded by a circle of monstrous faces and hairy bodies.

He flashed his teeth in a snarl, and Khazrak did the same as they strained against one another. The faces of his sons, his wives, his soldiers flashed through his mind – all of those he'd lost in the course of his war against the creature before him. He wondered if Khazrak was seeing something similar –

how many whelps had the banebeast lost over the course of their conflict? How many of his brutish mates and comrades had Todbringer's sword claimed? Did he even feel love, the way a man did, or did he know only hate?

The mud squirmed beneath his feet, and his heart hurt. His head swam, and his lungs burned. He was old, too old for this. He could smell Khazrak's rank perspiration, and the creature's limbs trembled no less than his own. How many challenges to his authority had Khazrak faced, in his long life? Todbringer recognised some of the beast's scars as his handiwork, but the rest... 'Did they toss you out, old beast? Is that why you're here, and not with the rest, laying siege to Middenheim? Or did you refuse to go, did you refuse to bow before the Three-Eyed King until our score was settled? Were you waiting for me?' he gasped as he leaned against his sword, pitting all of his weight against that of his opponent.

Khazrak gave a bleat of frustration as they broke apart for a moment, and the whip hissed and snapped as the beastman sought to ensnare Todbringer's legs. An old trick, and one that had caught Todbringer unawares many years before. But he was ready for it now. He avoided the lash and stamped down on it, catching it. Even as he did so, he lunged forwards awkwardly, slashing towards Khazrak's neck, hoping to behead the beast. Khazrak staggered back and parried the blow.

Off balance, Todbringer jerked back as Khazrak snapped the whip at his good eye. The tip of the lash tore open his cheek. Khazrak pressed the attack. The beast's sword hammered down once, twice, three times against Todbringer's guard. One blow tore the shield from Todbringer's grasp and sent it rattling across the ground, the second and the third were caught on the runefang's length, but such was the force behind the blows that Todbringer was driven to one knee. Thick mud squelched beneath his armour, and he felt his shoulder go numb as he blocked another blow. Khazrak was old, but strong; stronger than Todbringer. And fresh as well. He had saved himself, gauging the best time to strike. Even as he reeled beneath his enemy's assault, Todbringer felt a flicker of admiration. *What a man you would have made, had you been born human*, he thought. A fifth blow slid beneath his guard, and he felt a pain in his gut. He shoved himself back, and saw that Khazrak's blade was red to the hilt.

The gathered beastmen scented blood and began to bray and stamp in anticipation. Todbringer was nearly knocked off his feet by Khazrak's next swing. He sank back, rolling with the blow. Khazrak charged after him, snorting in eagerness. Todbringer lashed out, and felt a savage thrill of joy as his blade caught Khazrak in the shin. Bone cracked and Khazrak gave a cry. The banebeast fell heavily, and Todbringer hurled himself onto his enemy, knocking the weapons from Khazrak's fists. He raised his runefang over Khazrak's pain-contorted features. 'For my sons,' Todbringer hissed.

Khazrak's good eye met his own. The beastman blinked, just once, and stilled his thrashing, as if in acceptance of what was about to transpire. Then Khazrak snarled, and the runefang descended, piercing the creature's good eye and sinking into his brain. Khazrak's hooves drummed on the ground for a moment, and then were still. Todbringer leaned against the hilt of the runefang until he felt the tip sink into the mud beneath Khazrak's skull. 'This time, stay dead,' he wheezed.

The gathered beastmen were silent. The Drakwald was quiet. But Boris Todbringer was not. He rose wearily, his strength gone, only stubbornness remaining. He was wounded, weakened, and surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands of beastmen. He would die here.

But he had won.

Todbringer tilted his head back and laughed the laugh of a man who has shed the last of life's shackles. For the first time in a long time, he felt no weight on his heart. He had won. Let the world burn, if it would, for he had made his mark, and done what he must.

He looked down at Khazrak, spat a goblet of blood onto the death-slackened features of his old enemy, and ripped his sword free, even as the closest of the beastmen began to edge forwards, growling vengefully. He was going to die, but by Ulric, they'd remember him, when all was said and done.

'You want the world?' Boris Todbringer growled. Claspings his runefang in both hands, the Elector Count of Middenheim, supreme ruler of Middenland and the Drakwald, raised the blade. He smiled as the enemy closed in.

'You'll have to earn it.'



ONE

Middenheim, City of the White Wolf

Gregor Martak, Supreme Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic, took a pull from the bottle of wine and handed it off to the man standing beside him atop the battlements of the Temple of Ulric. The temple, fashioned as a fortress within a fortress, dominated the Ulricsmund and the city of Middenheim itself, and was the highest point of the Fauschlag. Martak's companion – clad in the dark armour of a member of the Knights of the White Wolf, albeit much battered and in need of a good polishing – took the bottle grudgingly, after the wizard shook it invitingly. Martak scratched at his tangled beard and looked out over the city. From the temple battlements one could see further than anywhere else in Middenheim, almost to the ends of the horizon. And what Martak saw now chilled him to the bone.

Rolling banks of black cloud had swept in from the north, and hung over the city, blotting out the sun. Every torch and brazier in the city was lit in a futile effort to hold back the dark. Sorcerous lightning rent the clouds. The crackling sheets of lurid energy lit the streets below with kaleidoscopic colours, and mad shadows danced and capered on every surface. But the darkness was no barrier to what now approached the city.

The pounding of drums had been audible to Martak and the rest of the city for some hours before the arrival of the horde which now seethed around the base of the Fauschlag in an endless black tide. The wind had carried the noise of the drums, as well as the guttural roars and screams of the damned who made up the approaching army. Flocks of crows had darkened the rust-coloured sky, and the roots of the mountain upon which Middenheim stood had trembled.

The front-runners of the horde had emerged first, from the edges of the forest to the city's north. Trees were uprooted or shattered where they stood, the groans and cracks of their demise joining the cacophony of the army's arrival as they were battered aside by hulking monsters the likes of which Martak had hoped never to see. Behind the savage behemoths came numberless tribesmen from the far north clad in filthy furs, armoured warriors and monstrous mutants. They poured out of the forest like an unceasing tide of foulness, and the thunder of the drums was joined by the blaring of war-horns and howled war-songs, all of it rising and mingling into a solid roar of noise that set Martak's teeth on edge and made his ears ache.

Now, the horde stood arrayed before Middenheim, awaiting gods alone knew what signal to launch their assault. Thousands of barbaric banners flapped and clattered in the hot breeze, and monstrous shapes swooped through the boiling sky. Beastmen capered and howled before the silent ranks of armoured warriors. The horde's numbers had swelled throughout the day, and even the most sceptical of Middenheim's defenders had realised that this was no mere raiding band, come to burn and pillage before fading away like a summer storm. No, this was the full might of the north unbound, and it had come to crack the spine of the world.

'I hate to say I told you so, Axel, but... well,' Martak grunted. He swept back his grimy fur cloak and gestured with one long, tattooed arm towards the walls beyond which the foe gathered in such numbers as to shake the world. Or so it seemed, at least, to Martak. His companion, despite the evidence of his senses, didn't agree.

Axel Greiss, Grand Master of the Knights of the White Wolf and commander of the Fellwolf Brotherhood, used the edge of his white fur cloak to wipe the mouth of the bottle clean, and took a tentative swig. 'What is this swill?' he asked.

'A bottle of Sartosan Red. Some fool had hidden it in the privy,' Martak grunted.

Greiss smacked his lips, made a face, and handed the bottle back. 'It's a rabble out there, wizard. Nothing more. You've spent too much time amongst the milksops of the south if that's your idea of a horde. I've seen hordes. *That* is no horde.' He sniffed. 'Middenheim has withstood worse. It will withstand this.' He gestured dismissively. 'Ulric's teeth, they've even chased off the ratmen for us.'

Martak took another pull from the bottle. 'Have they?' The skaven who had been besieging the city prior to the arrival of the horde had abandoned their siege-lines, like scavengers fleeing before a larger predator. Some of the ratmen had gone south, Martak knew, while others had surely scampered into the tunnels below the Fauschlag. Not that he could get anyone to listen to him on that last score. It was Altdorf all over again. What good was being the Supreme Patriarch if no one listened to him? Then, it wasn't as if the Colleges of Magic still existed, he thought bitterly.

Greiss, as if echoing Martak's thoughts, eyed the Amber wizard disdainfully. 'They're gone, wizard. Fled, like the cowardly vermin they were. Do you see them out there?'

'Doesn't mean they aren't there,' Martak grunted. It was an old argument. He had ordered scouts sent into the depths of the Fauschlag, despite the vigorous protestations of Greiss and his fellow commanders. What they had reported had only confirmed his fears of an attack from below. The skaven hadn't fled. They'd merely given over the honour of the assault to Archaon. No, the ratmen were massing in the depths, preparing to assault Middenheim from below. He could feel it in his bones.

'Doesn't mean they are, either,' Greiss said. He shook his head. 'And if they are, what of it? Middenheim stands, wizard. Let the hordes break themselves on our walls, if they wish. They will fail, as they have done every time before. As long as the Flame of Ulric burns, Middenheim stands.' Martak made to hand him the bottle, but Greiss waved it aside. 'Stay up here and drink the day away if you will, wizard. Some of us have duties to attend to.'

Martak didn't reply. Greiss's words stung, as they had been meant to. He watched the Grand Master descend from the battlements, his armour clanking. Greiss didn't like him very much, and if he were being honest, Martak felt the same about the other man. He didn't like any of his fellow commanders, in fact.

Men of rank and noble birth from Averland, Talabheim and Stirland, as well as Middenheim, were all somewhere below in the city, jockeying for position and influence. The world was collapsing around them, shrinking day by day, and men like Greiss thought it was just another day. Or worse, they saw it as an opportunity. The world was ending, but men were still men. Martak upended the bottle, letting the last dregs of wine splash across his tongue. *Men are still men, but not for much longer*, he thought.

He shuddered, suddenly cold, and pulled his furs tighter about himself. He'd thought, just for a little while, that victory was possible. Just for a moment, he'd seen a ray of light pierce the gathering dark, and a spark of hope had been kindled in the ashes of his soul.

He'd seen that light – the light of the heavens – ground itself in the broken body of Karl Franz, and restore him to life in the ruins of Altdorf. He'd seen the foul gardens of plague and pestilence scoured from the stones of the city, and the monstrous things that had grown within them struck down. He'd seen more besides... The broken body of Kurt Helborg, his proud face stained with blood; the regal figure of Louen Leoncoeur, King of Bretonnia, as he stood against daemons in doomed defence of a realm not his own; the shattered statue of Sigmar, weeping blood. The light had washed it all away, in the end.

But only for a moment. Then, the dark had closed in once more. With the Auric Bastion no more, and Kislev turned to ashes, the armies of Chaos had swept south, burning and pillaging. Names out of black legend had returned to bedevil an Empire that had thought itself free of them. And not just the Empire. Bretonnia was shattered into warring fragments; Tilea had been erased by the chittering hordes of ratmen; Sylvania had swollen from boil to tumour, and the unbound dead roamed the land, attacking the living.

Martak stuck a finger into the mouth of the bottle, feeling around for any remaining droplets. Altdorf had survived one assault only to fall to another. Now it was a haunt for scuttling vermin. Karl Franz had fled to Averheim, the only city other than Middenheim yet remaining to the Empire. *And soon it'll be down to one, unless Averheim has already fallen*, Martak thought sourly. Greiss's overconfidence aside, Martak knew a losing battle when he saw one. He'd lived most of his life in the wilderness, and Middenheim reminded him of nothing so much as a wounded stag, surrounded by hungry wolves. Oh, the stag would gore a few. It'd put up a good fight, but in the end... the outcome wasn't in doubt.

Regardless, he had his own part to play. He would see to the tunnels beneath the city, since no one else thought they were worth defending. He could do some good there, he hoped. He had ordered barricades to be pulled into place at the top of the winding stairs that led down into the guts of the Fauschlag, and had demanded, and received, a levy of men from the walls to guard key tunnel junctions. Soon enough, he would go down to join them, in the dark, to wait for the attack.

There were thousands of skaven massing in the depths, whatever Greiss thought. That was where they had all gone when Archaon arrived, but they wouldn't stay below for long. And when they decided to come up, there would be little Martak could do to stop them.

He stuck a finger in his mouth and sucked the liquid from it. He'd never been much of a drinker before all of this, but now seemed as good a time as any to develop a few bad habits. Martak hefted the bottle in preparation to hurl it out over the city, when something made him stop. A voice, strong and sonorous, rose from somewhere below him. He could not make out the words, but he recognised the timbre easily enough.

Valten.

The Word made flesh. The Herald of Sigmar, come to light their darkest hour. He had been a blacksmith once, they said. Martak's father had been a swineherd, and he saw no shame in humble beginnings. Especially when the end result was so... impressive. He lowered the bottle and set it on the battlement. Then, picking up his staff from where it lay, he made to descend. As he headed for the steps, he heard a soft growl behind him.

Martak stopped. He turned, heart thudding in his chest. Something that might have been a wolf, or the shadow of a wolf, sat where he'd stood only a few moments before. It regarded him steadily for the span of a single heartbeat, and then, like a twist of smoke, it was gone. Martak stared at the spot, mouth dry, hands trembling. He was suddenly very, very thirsty. He turned away and left the battlements as quickly as his legs could carry him.

When he at last reached the main rotunda of the temple, Valten's speech was coming to a close. His voice swelled, momentarily blotting out the noise from outside the walls. Martak moved through the large crowd of refugees that had occupied the main chamber of the temple, towards the main doors and, beyond them, the steps that led down into the close-set streets of the Ulricsmund. The huddled masses gave way before him, and whispers of worry preceded him, as well as murmurs of disgust for his unkempt presence. Even the basest peasant had standards, Martak supposed; standards which he obligingly failed to meet as often as possible.

Valten had given some version of this same speech several times since the arrival of Archaon's forces outside the walls. The streets were thick with panicked citizens, and frightened refugees crowded every temple and tavern. But where Valten passed, Ghal Maraz balanced across his broad shoulders, calm ensued. He spoke to crowds and individuals alike, with no preference or bias for province or station. His voice was measured, his words soothing. *Be at peace, for I am here, and where I stand, no evil shall prevail*, Martak thought as he trudged out towards the vast steps of the temple. It was an old saying, attributed to Sigmar. From what little Martak knew of the man behind the myth, he doubted the veracity of the phrasing, though not the intent.

He watched the tall, broad figure of Sigmar's Herald speak words of comfort to the massive crowd of soldiers and refugees occupying the steps, and felt the burden on his heart lift, if only slightly. Valten was taller than any man Martak had met, but he moved with a grace that an elf would have envied. He'd grown a beard since the fall of Altdorf, and now looked more at home in Middenheim than even an old wolf like Greiss.

That was the trick of him, Martak had learned. Valten simply... fit. Wherever he went in the Empire, he found a home. Talabeclanders, Averlanders, Middenlanders, they all claimed Valten as one of their own. He spoke their dialects, he knew their history; he could even sing their songs. It was as if the burly, bearded young warrior were the Empire made flesh and bone. He was everything that was good and pure about the land and its people incarnate.

As he spoke, Valten seemed to shine with an inner radiance that warmed a man better than any fire. His voice rose and fell like that of a trained orator, and he spoke with a passion that would have put even the late Grand Theogonist, Volkmar, to shame.

Martak paused in the entrance to the temple, so as not to interrupt the speech. The great iron-banded doors had been flung wide at the start of the ratmen's siege, and they yet remained open, welcoming any who sought sanctuary. The entrance itself was a vast stone archway carved in the shape of a wolf's upper jaw, complete with great fangs, and as it rose over him he thought again of the shadow-shape he'd seen on the battlements, and shivered. It hadn't been a daemon; that much he was sure of. While the Flame of Ulric burned, no daemon could set foot inside Middenheim.

He glanced at the Flame, where it crackled in the centre of the immense temple rotunda. The fire burned silver-white, casting its light throughout the main chamber of the temple, warming the crowd and illuminating the enormous bas-reliefs depicting Ulric's defeat of the bloodwyrms, his breach of the stormvault and countless other deeds of heroism performed by the wolf-god. More and more people had begun to seek the comfort of its presence as the unnatural darkness fell. Martak couldn't fault them for it. It was the embodiment of Ulric's strength and rage, and for that reason it provided a beacon of hope to the wolf-god's chosen people. It was said that should the fire go out, winter unending would grip the world.

As the thought crossed his mind, he caught sight of a low, lean shape prowling through the legs of the crowd. The shadow-wolf had followed him, it seemed. Its yellow gaze met his own briefly and then it vanished into the forest of humanity. He was about to follow it, when he heard a voice say, 'It's beautiful, isn't it?'

Martak turned, and looked up at Valten. He grunted and shrugged. 'One fire is much like another, to one used to doing without.'

'I grew up in a forge,' Valten said, simply. 'There's a strange sort of beauty in fire, I think. It is all colours and none, it provides comfort and light, but can kill or blind the unwary. A tool of both creation and destruction... rather like a hammer.' He hefted Ghal Maraz for emphasis. 'Sigmar built an empire with this weapon, and destroyed the works of his enemies.'

Martak smiled sourly. 'Very pretty. Will that homily go in your next speech?'

Valten chuckled. 'I doubt there'll be time for one. Otherwise, you wouldn't have come to tell me that you're about to go below.' He looked at Martak, and the wizard shifted uncomfortably. Valten had a way of staring right into a man's soul. He never judged what he saw there, though that only made the feeling worse.

'Yes, it's time,' Martak said, leaning on his staff. 'Scouts have reported that there are ratmen massing in the depths. And Archaon's rabble didn't walk all the way here just to sit outside and look menacing.'

'I know,' Valten said. He looked up, and closed his eyes. 'It's almost a relief.'

'Not exactly how I would put it,' Martak said.

Valten smiled. He looked at the wizard, and put a hand on his shoulder. 'No,' he said. 'Then, you're a gloomy old bear, and there's no denying it.'

Martak snorted. 'And you're a cheerful lamb, is that it?'

Valten's smile faded. 'No. No, I can feel the weight of this moment, Gregor, as well as you. It has pressed down on my soul and my mind since I first swung my father's hammer in anger at the Auric Bastion. It has sought to forge me into the shape it wishes, the shape it requires, but sometimes... I do not think it will succeed.' He dropped his hand and hefted Ghal Maraz. 'This is part of it, I think. Burden and blessing in one,' he said, turning the ancient warhammer in his hands. 'Sometimes, this hammer is as light as a feather. Other times, I can barely lift it. I am not certain that it is my hand which is meant to wield it.' He looked at Martak. 'Sometimes I wish Luthor were still here, to tell me that I am wrong, and that my course is set.' He smiled sadly. 'No offence, Gregor.'

'None taken,' Martak said, waving aside the apology. 'I wish Huss were here as well. And while we're wishing, I'll add the Emperor, Mandred Skavenslayer and Magnus the Pious. Because Taal knows that we could use them now.'

Valten's smile turned fierce. 'We shall just have to act in their place, my friend. We can do no less. Middenheim stands. The Emperor and Graf Boris charged me to keep this city and her people safe, and I will do so or die in the attempt.'

Martak was about to reply, when he felt something stir in him. He clutched his head, and heard a great cry which seemed to echo up from every stone in the temple. It was as if a legion of wolves had howled as one, and then fallen silent. Valten grabbed him as he stumbled. 'Gregor, what is it, are you—'

Wordlessly, Martak moaned. He felt as if there were something missing in him, as if someone had carved a portion of his heart out. He heard Valten gasp, and blinked blearily as he tried to clear his head. As he forced himself erect, he saw that the crowd had moved back from the Flame of Ulric. Men and women were wailing and moaning in fear. Valten raised his hands, trying to calm the growing panic. Martak pushed away from him and staggered towards the Flame, staring at it in disbelief.

As he watched, the Flame of Ulric guttered, flickered and died. The chamber was plunged into darkness, and the crowd began to stream away, seeking safety elsewhere. He heard the screams of the trampled, the wailing of lost children, and Valten's voice, rising above it all, trying vainly to impose order on the chaos. And beneath it all, beneath the cries and the shouts, beneath the fear... *laughter*. The laughter of the Dark Gods as Middenheim's hope faded, leaving behind only ashes.

Martak closed his eyes. Something itched at the back of his mind, like someone speaking just at the edge of his hearing, but he couldn't catch it for the

laughter that echoed in his head. He gripped his staff so tightly that the wood creaked in protest. He felt cold and hot all at once, and his skull felt two sizes too small as images crashed across the surface of his mind's eye. There were shapes squirming in the dark behind his eyes, impossibly vast and foul, and they were scratching eagerly at the roof of the sky and the roots of the earth. He saw a shadowy figure confronted by wolves of ice, and heard the moan of a god as the Flame dimmed. He heard the bray of horns and the rumble of drums, and felt his guts clench in protest as the moment he'd feared came round at last.

A hand gripped his shoulder, shaking him out of his fugue. 'Gregor – it's time. The enemy are advancing,' Valten said. 'I must go to the walls.' 'And I must go below,' Martak croaked. He looked at Valten, and as he did, the daemonic laughter crowding his thoughts suddenly fell silent. There were some things that even daemons could not bear to look at. 'The gods go with you, Herald.' 'I know that one, at least, walks with me,' Valten said. He lifted Ghal Maraz and saluted Martak. 'Middenheim stands, Gregor. And so do we.' 'But for how long?' Martak murmured, as he watched the Herald of Sigmar depart.

Northern Gatehouse, Grafsmund-Norgarten District

'That, my friends, is nothing less than a bad day wrapped in fur,' Wendel Volker said, indicating the army that was on the march on the plain below, as he upended the jug and gulped down the tasteless Kislevite alcohol. It was the last of its kind, since Kislev no longer existed, and he intended to enjoy every foul drop in the hours before his inevitable messy demise. He only wished he had a bottle of good Tilean wine to wash it down with.

He stood atop the gatehouse, having shooed the men who were supposed to be on duty back down into the structure. He stood on the trapdoor, so that he could have a few moments of uninterrupted drinking. The taverns were packed, and every wine cellar and beer hall in the city had been drunk dry three days ago. He'd managed to squirrel away the jug of Kislevite vodka, but it was almost as bad as being sober.

Volker had come up in the world since his days as a captain in the fortress of Heldenhame. Now he wore the armour and regalia of a member of the Reiksguard, given to him by Kurt Helborg himself as a reward for salvaging what was left of Heldenhame's garrison and bringing it to Altdorf just in time to bolster the city's defences. It wasn't exactly the sort of reward that Volker had hoped for, but one couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. Especially in times like these. And the armour had come in handy more than once, for all that it was dratted heavy and rubbing him raw in all the wrong spots.

Volker handed the jug off to one of his companions, a big man clad in sea-green armour, decorated with piscine motifs where it hadn't been battered into shapelessness. 'A bad day, Wendel, or *the* bad day?' the latter said, as he took a swig. Erkhart Dubnitz was the last knight of an order that wasn't officially recognised by anyone with any sense. The Knights of Manann had fought to the bitter end when the plague-fleets had sailed into Marienburg's harbour, but Dubnitz alone had escaped the freistadt; he'd been sent to Altdorf, bearing tidings of warning that had, sadly, not been heeded until it was far too late. Now he was a man without a country, fighting to preserve a nation not his own. It was in Altdorf that Volker had made the acquaintance of the Marienburger, and found a kindred spirit, of sorts. At least where it concerned spirits of the alcoholic variety.

'What's the difference, Erkhart? Either way, we're the ones it's happening to,' the third man standing atop the gatehouse said. He waved aside the jug when it was offered to him. 'No, thank you. I'd rather die with a clear head, if it's all the same to you.' Hector Goetz had the face of a man who'd seen the worst the world had to offer, and hadn't come away impressed. His armour bore the same hallmarks of hard fighting that Volker's and Dubnitz's did, but it was covered in the signs and sigils of the Order of the Blazing Sun. As far as Volker could tell, Goetz was the last templar of the Myrmidian Order left alive. Most, it was said, had died with Talabheim. Goetz had been there, but he refused to talk about it. Volker, a native of Talabecland himself, resisted the urge to press him.

In truth, he wasn't sure that he wanted to know. He'd left his parents, his kin, and several enthusiastic and entertaining paramours behind in Talabheim when he'd been given a commission in the Heldenhame garrison. That they were all likely dead had yet to pierce the armour of numbness which was the only thing protecting his sanity at this point. It was either numbness or madness now, and Volker had seen too much to think that there was any sort of relief in madness these days.

'Suit yourself, Hector. More for me and young Wendel,' Dubnitz said, with a grin. He passed the jug to Volker, who took another swig, and then gave a mournful burp.

'It's empty,' he said. 'Dubitiz, be a friend and go get another one.'

'There isn't another one,' Dubnitz said. 'Gentlemen, we are officially out of alcohol. Sound the retreat.'

Volker cradled the empty jug to his chest. 'Why bother? There's nowhere to go.'

'Nonsense. The horizon is right over there.'

'He's right, Erkhart. There's nowhere to go. The gods are dead,' Goetz said softly. His expression became wistful. 'I thought, for a moment, that they were still with us.' His face hardened. 'Then Talabheim happened, and I knew that they were gone.'

Dubitiz's grin faded. He sighed. 'It's a sad thing, when a man outlives his gods.'

'Aye, and we're soon to join them,' Goetz continued. He glanced at Volker. 'Unless, of course, that Herald of yours has some divine trick up his sleeve.'

'Not that he's shared with me, no,' Volker said. When he'd first seen the Herald of Sigmar in the flesh, he'd been duly awed. The man was everything the priests of Sigmar had promised. A demigod, come down amongst mere mortals to fight at their side and lead them to victory against the enemy. That awe had not faded, in the weeks since, so much as it had matured. There was something about Valten that chased away despair and neutered fear. But he was a man like any other, Volker knew. A good man, a just man, but a man all the same. He was about to elaborate, when Goetz suddenly stiffened and cursed.

'Well... here we go,' Dubnitz breathed softly. 'Time's up.'

Volker saw a flash of polychromatic light below, rising above the horde. The air took on a greasy tang, and he tasted something foul at the back of his throat. He recognised it easily enough, though he wished he didn't. The clouds began to thicken and twist, and howling gales of wind rippled across the city. Goetz's face was pale as he backed away from the ramparts. 'Daemons,' he whispered hoarsely. 'They're calling daemons.' He clutched at his side, as if in memory of an old wound. 'I can hear them screaming...'

'That's not all,' Dubnitz said. He pointed out across the city. 'Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that where the western gatehouse is?'

Volker turned and saw a column of smoke rising over the city to the west. His mouth felt dry. 'Oh, gods,' he rasped. He twisted about as a dull rumble filled the air, and saw a second cloud, this one a sickly greenish hue, rise over the city's eastern gatehouse. Then, a half-second later, the world gave a sickening lurch as the whole gatehouse shook, nearly knocking him from his feet. He heard screams from below, and thin trickles of green smoke began to creep around the edges of the trapdoor. 'What the devil—?'

Dubitiz suddenly reached out and grabbed the back of his cuirass, hauling Volker back, even as a blade hissed through the air where his head had been. 'That's the devil,' Dubnitz said conversationally as a strange apparition, hunched and wrapped in black, landed on the rampart and sprang towards them, a serrated blade clutched in its verminous paws.

Volker acted instinctively, bringing the jug up and catching his attacker in the skull. The clay jug exploded and the creature fell twitching. 'Skaven,' he said dumbly, staring down at it.

'Really, and here I thought it was a halfling with scabies,' Dubnitz said, drawing his sword as more of the creatures appeared, scrambling over the edge of the ramparts. 'Where are the blasted guards?' he growled, as he hacked down a leaping ratman.

'Dead, if that gas is what I think it is,' Goetz said. He had his own blade in hand, and effortlessly blocked a blow from one of the black-clad skaven. 'It's poison. Don't let it touch you.' As he spoke, he moved away from the trapdoor, which was fuming steadily.

'That'd explain why the vermin are wearing masks,' Volker grunted as he booted a skaven in the chest and off the rampart. He swung his sword about in a tight arc, driving his opponents back. He heard the muffled squeal of chains and cranks, and knew that the gas had only been a means to an end. 'They're lowering the drawbridge. They're going to let the northmen into the city!'

'Well, sod this for a game of sailors, then,' Dubnitz said. He rushed towards the inner rampart which overlooked the courtyard of the gatehouse below, and, in a rattle of armour, vaulted over the edge, taking a squealing skaven with him. Volker looked at Goetz, and then, as one, both knights followed their companion over the rampart, leaving the astonished skaven staring after them.

Volker screamed until he struck the hay cart, and from there it was curses. He rolled off the cart, every limb aching, and hit the cobbles with a crash. The body of the skaven that Dubnitz had caught up flopped to the ground beside him. The big knight grinned down at him, and offered him a hand. 'On your feet, young Wendel – we've got unwelcome visitors on the way, and our swords are needed.'

Spitting hay, Volker allowed Dubnitz to haul him to his feet. 'Did you know this hay cart was here the whole time?' he asked.

'Of course,' Dubnitz said. 'You learn a lot, being a drunkard. For instance, always make sure you have a soft place to land handy, just in case. Now help me extricate Goetz, before we're knee-deep in murderous daemon-fondlers.'

'Horvath, have you ever wondered about the choices that brought you to this point in your life?' Canto Unsworn rumbled to his closest companion in the press of Chaos warriors, northern tribesmen and howling beastmen moving steadily up the viaduct. There were hundreds of them, moving in a slow but steady lope towards the gatehouse above. An ugly green smoke rose from the ramparts of the wall and the drawbridge had thudded down not a handful of moments before, a sign that their verminous allies had delivered on their promise to knock out the gates.

That the Three-Eyed King had seen fit to trust such creatures was still a matter of some disbelief among the gathered warriors who had flocked to his banners. That the skaven had, in fact, followed through on their promises was even more unbelievable, at least as far as Canto Unsworn was concerned, and it made him wonder what further marvels awaited him, should he survive the carnage to come.

'Blood for the Blood God!' Horvath roared, echoing the cry of the men around him. He glanced at the other and frowned. 'What are you nattering about now, Unsworn?'

'Never mind,' Canto said.

Horvath eyed him suspiciously. The two warriors were a study in contrasts. Both were big, as befitted men who had survived the numberless dangers of the Chaos Wastes, and clad in baroque armour too heavy to be worn by any man not touched by the breath of the Winds of Change and the light of the Howling Sun. Horvath's armour was the hue of dried blood, and bedecked with grisly sigils of murder and ruin. A trophy rack wobbled on his back, cradling an intact skeleton, every bone of which was carved with a blasphemous litany. Canto's black armour, while as heavy and imposing as Horvath's, bore neither sign nor sigil, and he carried no trophies save for the yellowing skulls with strange marks carved into them which hung from his pauldrons and cuirass.

'Why must you always talk, Unsworn? Why must you chatter like a nurgling?' Horvath growled, shaking his head.

'The gods gave me a voice, Horvath. Blame them,' Canto said. 'Crossbows.'

'What?'

'Crossbows,' Canto said and raised his shield as crossbow bolts punched into the front rank of warriors moving up the viaduct. Dozens of men and mutants fell. One, however, remained on his feet. Crossbow bolts jutted from his all-encompassing and faceless armour, but still he staggered on, dragging his sword behind him. As he neared the gatehouse, he seemed to gain strength, and he swung his sword up to clasp it with both hands. With a hoarse cry, he began to run towards the enemy. 'That one is looking to catch the eyes of the gods,' Canto muttered as the lone warrior charged towards the smoky ruins of the gatehouse.

'He already has, Unsworn,' Horvath grunted, plucking a bolt out of his arm. 'Don't you recognise him?' He snapped the bolt in two. 'That's Count Mordrek.'

'The Damned One?' Canto murmured. 'No wonder he seems in such a hurry.' Mordrek the Damned was a living warning to all those who vied for the favour of the Dark Gods. He walked at the whim of the gods, never knowing rest, oblivion or damnation. Mordrek, men whispered, had died a thousand times, but was always brought back to fight again. He was the plaything of the gods: beneath his ornate armour, his form was said to change constantly, as if he were the raw stuff of Chaos made flesh.

'He just wandered into camp last night. He wasn't alone, either. We wage war accompanied by the heroes of old, Unsworn. Aekold Helbrass might be content to play in the ashes of Kislev, but others have come in answer to the Three-Eyed King's challenge – Vilitch the Curseling, Valnir the Reaper, a dozen others. All rallying to the banner of the Everchosen,' Horvath continued. He slammed his axe against his shield with every name he rattled off. 'To march in Mordrek's wake is an honour, Unsworn. We follow in the footsteps of legend!'

Horvath's cry was swallowed up by the roar of the warriors around them. Mordrek's charge had roused the horde, and Canto found himself carried along as the warriors around him and Horvath began to press forwards up the viaduct once more. As they moved, hatches banged open on cannon embrasures to reveal the hollow muzzles of guns ready to fire. Canto felt his heart quicken with anticipation of the noise and fury to come. He was not afraid; not precisely. He knew what cannons could do. He'd seen the war-engines of the *dawi zharr* first-hand, and knew that these guns were but a pale shadow of those terrible devices. Men would die, but not him. Not if his luck held, as it had so far.

Canto had fought his way south with the rest of Halfgir's Headsmen, as they called themselves, when the thrice-damned sorcerous bastion the southerners had erected had come down at last. He'd fought living men and dead ones, and rival champions seeking the favour of the gods as well. The sky was the colour of blood and the moons were crumbling, and sometimes, when he looked up quickly enough, he could see vast faces, leering down at the world from whatever lofty perch the gods regularly crouched on.

The thought gave him no pleasure. They were just watching now, but if it truly was the end of days, if the Last Hour was finally upon them, then the gods might start taking a more direct hand in the affairs of mortals, and Canto didn't want to be around when that happened. The gods were unpredictable and malignant, and no man could survive their attentions.

Middenheim's walls came alive with blossoms of fire. Bolts, bullets, cannonballs and mortar shells fell among the throng. Canto saw a bouncing cannonball carom off Count Mordrek, knocking the Damned One from his feet. A moment later Mordrek was shoving himself upright, the buckled plates of his armour reshaping themselves even as he staggered back into motion. 'He is truly blessed,' Horvath said.

'Don't let him hear you say that,' Canto grunted. All around them, blood and torn flesh sprayed into the air as cannonballs and mortar shells struck the massed ranks of men moving up the viaduct. Canto grimaced as blood splattered across his armour. He'd counselled the others against this, but they hadn't wanted to hear it. No, they wanted the glory, the honour of first blood. And he'd had no choice but to go along with it; to do otherwise was to risk death. They would have cut him down where he stood, and then gone anyway. *Story of your misbegotten life, Canto*, he thought.

Despite the barrage from the walls Mordrek reached the gatehouse intact, Canto and the others dogging his heels. The Damned One struck the defenders like a wolf attacking sheep. His sword arched out, lopping off limbs and opening bellies. Even as the wounded men fell, their bodies began to writhe and change. New, monstrous limbs erupted from them as the newly awakened things within them shed their human flesh. Monsters sprang up in Mordrek's path, and launched themselves at their former comrades.

Monsters within, monsters without, Canto thought, as he broke into a run. He beheaded a whey-faced halberdier, and then he was inside the walls of the City of the White Wolf, an army of the lost and the damned at his heels.



TWO

The Depths of the Fauschlag

Beyond the flickering light of the torches, beady red eyes gleamed. Gregor Martak peered into the dark and frowned. He reached out with his mind, grasping the strands of Ghur which inundated the tunnels. The Amber Wind flowed wild throughout Middenheim, rising from the god-touched stones. The Fauschlag seemed to reverberate with the howling of wolves that only Martak could hear, and he felt a wild, terrible power settle into the marrow of his bones.

'Well, wizard?' Axel Greiss grunted, hefting his hammer. Greiss had come to observe the defence of the tunnels, and had brought reports of enemy contact at the other junctions. A cadre of armoured knights surrounded him, each one a glowering, bearded beacon of Ulric's favour. The presence of the knights and the Grand Master had done much to stiffen the resolve of the common soldiers. Rumours about what had happened in the Temple of Ulric had spread like quicksilver through the city, and Middenheim was in turmoil as priests and templars of Ulric sought to calm the panicked citizenry and soldiery both.

'Hush,' Martak said absently. 'I need to concentrate.' Greiss flushed and growled something, but Martak ignored him. He set his staff and pulled that savage influence into himself, drawing it up, and with a whisper he set it flooding into the packed ranks of troops standing before him, granting courage and strength where there was a deficit of either. As the power flowed out of him, he thought he saw something low and white slink through the legs of the soldiers before him. He felt a wash of hot breath on his neck, and something growled softly in his ear. He shuddered, and the feeling fled.

The skaven poured out of the darkness, a chittering, squealing mass of mangy fur, rusted armour and jagged blades. Men recoiled in instinctive horror, but the whip-crack of a sergeant's voice, loud in the confines of the tunnel, was enough to steady most of them. A second order saw crossbows clatter. A volley of bolts tore through the rapidly diminishing space between the defenders and the encroaching enemy. At such close range, in the narrow tunnel, it was impossible to miss. 'Ha! That's the way,' Greiss bellowed.

Martak watched as the front rank of skaven were punched from their feet. Their bodies, some still twitching, vanished beneath the talons of the next rank as the horde pressed forwards. A hurried second volley proved no more an obstacle than the first, and the skaven ground on, over their own dead and dying, until Martak could hear nothing save their squealing. An order rippled up and down the Empire line and shields were hastily locked, even as the enemy reached them.

'Now you'll see, wizard,' Greiss said. 'This is how a true son of Middenheim fights. With iron and muscle, not sorcery.'

His words stung. Martak looked away. Born in Middenheim he might have been, but he was as much a stranger here as Valten. More so, in fact. Valten wasn't a sorcerer. In the City of the White Wolf, there was no such thing as a good wizard. There was only Chaos, and anyone who practised magic was destined for a fiery end, tied to a witch's stake in a market square, unless the Colleges of Magic got to them first. Even now, they looked at him with suspicion. Even now, they thought he was as bad as the enemy battering at their gates.

If I had my way, I'd tell you to go hang, and take this cesspool with you, Martak thought, watching the battle unfold. He'd always hated cities, and as far as he was concerned, there was no difference between Middenheim and Altdorf. Let them fall. The world would be the better for it. He leaned against his staff, letting it support him for a moment. *But who are you to decide that, eh?* he thought, not without some bitterness. *The gods decided your lot long ago, Gregor Martak. They might be dead and gone to dust, but the course they set for you still holds true. And you'll follow it to the bitter end, because there's no other way out of this trap.*

Screaming ratmen crashed into the shield-wall, and paid a deadly toll. Snouts were smashed to red ruin, and furry bodies were impaled or hacked down by thrusting spears and jabbing halberds. Martak saw a frothing skaven scramble up the surface of a soldier's shield and fling itself onto the man behind him in an effort to escape the deadly press.

Everywhere Martak looked, men and skaven strove against one another. The press of battle swayed back and forth, but the ratmen could not break the shield-wall. Soon, they began to falter. Martak gestured and strengthened flagging sword arms. Unbloodied state troops moved in to bolster the line, and Martak stepped back, pulling his cloak tight about himself, grateful he'd had no cause to enter the fray directly. Ever since the winds of magic had begun to blow so strongly, he could feel the boiling rage that accompanied the Wind of Beasts – a need to tear and bite, to eat and eat and eat. He closed his eyes and shivered. When he opened them, he could see Greiss looking at him sidelong, though whether in concern or disgust, he couldn't say.

Pushing the thought aside, he turned his attentions to the battle. As glad as he was that the skaven were being held at bay, he wondered at the absence of the strange weapons which they had used to such devastating effect during the battle for Altdorf. Where were the gas weapons, the warpstone-fuelled lightning guns? Where were the rat ogres, or even the armoured, black-furred elite of the chittering horde?

'Chaff,' he muttered. 'They're throwing chaff at us. Why?' He stepped back as more troops flooded into the tunnel. Over-enthusiastic commanders were throwing their men into battle with the skaven, stripping them from the garrisons above, trusting in the walls of Middenheim to hold the enemy without while they destroyed the enemy within. And that hadn't been an unreasonable assumption, while the Flame of Ulric had burned. But the fire that stirred the blood of the men of Middenheim and kept daemons out of its streets had been snuffed. 'It's a trick,' he grunted.

'What?' Greiss asked.

'These are the dregs,' Martak said, gesturing. 'They have better troops than this. So where are they? Now is the perfect time to strike, but they are not here.' He looked at Greiss. 'Was it the same in the other tunnels?'

'What's the difference? One rat is much like another,' Greiss said.

'It's a trick,' Martak said. 'They're bleeding us, drawing our eyes away from something else, some other point of attack.' He hesitated. 'We need to fall back. We'll strip men from the reserves in the tunnels above, and bolster the defences along the walls. They're up to something, and we can't let ourselves get trapped down here.'

'Don't be daft,' Greiss said dismissively. 'This is no trick. You said it yourself, man... They're attacking from below, as Archaon attacks from without.' He looked at Martak. 'You were right, wizard,' he said, grudgingly.

'Then how do you explain it?' Martak demanded, knowing that whatever he'd thought earlier, and whatever Greiss now believed, there was more going on than he could see. He could feel it in his bones.

'I don't have to,' Greiss snarled. He hefted his hammer warningly. 'They attack. So we must defend. Middenheim stands, and while it does, we fight.'

'But what if you're defending the wrong spot?'

'What other spot would you have me defend, wizard? Here is where the enemy is, and— Eh?' The tunnel shuddered violently, interrupting Greiss's outburst. Dust drifted down. Martak looked up. The northern gatehouse was somewhere above them. He blinked dust out of his eyes. Cracks ran along the roof of the tunnel, and his eyes widened.

'By the horns of Taal,' he muttered, as he realised too late what had occurred. He looked back towards the skaven hurling themselves on the swords and

spears of the state troops, distracting them, occupying them. He looked back at Greiss. The old knight looked confused. 'Don't you understand? I was wrong! This is a feint! The enemy is in the city,' Martak snarled. 'If you would save your city, Greiss, then you'd best shut up and follow me.'

Northern Gatehouse

Smoke filled the courtyard. Not the greenish cloud from earlier, but black, greasy smoke which vented from the gatehouse and its attached structures. Someone had set fire to something somewhere. The skaven had vanished as quickly as they had appeared. *Small favours*, Wendel Volker thought, as he followed Dubnitz and Goetz across the courtyard. He could still feel the echoes of the drawbridge thudding down in his bones. The sound of it had reminded him of a death-knell, but whether it was for him, the city or the world, he didn't know and feared to guess.

O Sigmar, please take some other poor fool today if you must, but not me, Volker thought as he coughed and staggered towards the raised portcullis that marked the way to the drawbridge. The gatehouse was, in many ways, a small fortress in its own right, and it was far bigger than it first looked. It would take the enemy several minutes to traverse it. He could hear the thudding of feet on the drawbridge, and the creak of the outer portcullis as the enemy sought to rip it from its housings. Stone buckled and burst with a shriek, and men roared in triumph and fear. 'At least we're not alone,' he rasped, drawing his sword.

Those soldiers who had survived the skaven attack on the gatehouse had apparently mustered in the inner causeway between the portcullises, and he could hear some unlucky sergeant screaming for them to hold fast, even as the enemy butchered them. He heard shrieks and cries, and the roars of monsters. Handgunners and crossbowmen on the walls above fired down into the melee. Volker took some comfort in the belch of gunfire, though there was precious little of it to his ears. Where were the reinforcements? Why wasn't anyone coming?

'Probably heading for the eastern gate,' Goetz said. Volker blinked. He hadn't realised that he'd spoken aloud. 'That stuck-up wolf's hindquarters Greiss stripped half the garrison to reinforce the tunnels.'

'Now is that any way to talk about the Grand Master of our honoured brethren in the Order of the White Wolf?' Dubnitz asked. 'What would he think, if he were here to hear you?'

'I wish he was here,' Goetz shot back. 'It'd be one more body between us and whatever is bloody well coming across that gods-bedamned drawbridge.' He plucked a shield from the lifeless grip of one of the bodies littering the courtyard and ran the flat of his sword across its rim with a steely screech.

'I'll tell you who I wish were here – a priestess I knew by the name of Goodweather. That woman and her magic shark's teeth would come in handy right about now,' Dubnitz said. His smile faltered for a moment, and his eyes tightened, as if he were seeing something he'd rather not. Then he shook himself. 'Ah, Esme,' he said softly. He shook his head. 'No use wishing, at any rate. We're what's here, and we'll have to make do.'

'Or we could leave,' Volker muttered. 'Make a strategic redeployment somewhere else – preferably Averheim.' Despite his words, he didn't mean it. Not really. He wasn't a coward, though he felt like one at times. He simply wanted the world to slow down, for just a moment, so he could catch his breath.

Unfortunately, the world didn't seem to care what he wanted. Men began fleeing through the courtyard, past Volker and the others. They were bloodied, and looked as if all the daemons of the north were on their heels. Which, Volker supposed, they were. Clawed, incandescent flippers abruptly emerged from the gateway and gripped either side as something squamous and bloated squeezed itself out and gave a deafening screech. A multitude of colourful tendrils moved across its oily skin as it flopped after a fleeing swordsman and scooped him up with an eager grunt.

Before the knights could move, the unlucky man was stuffed kicking and screaming into the monstrous thing's wide maw. Scything fangs reduced the man to silent ruin, and the orb-like eyes of the beast rolled towards them. 'Chaos spawn,' Goetz spat. He swatted his shield with the flat of his sword. 'Come on, ugly. Come to Hector. Come on!' Sword and shield connected again, the sharp sound drawing the monster's attention.

'Goetz...' Volker began.

'Stay back,' Goetz said warningly. He spread his arms, as if inviting the creature to attack. It duly obliged, bounding towards him with a thunderous croak. Its jaws spread like a hellish flower as it flung itself towards him. 'Chew on this,' Goetz snarled as he rammed the rim of his shield into the creature's mouth. He hacked at its protoplasmic flesh, ignoring the lashing tendrils that sought to pull him apart. It grunted and moaned as his sword bit into it. Volker moved to help him, but Dubnitz grabbed his arm.

'Don't worry about Goetz, my friend,' Dubnitz said. 'He once killed a troll with nothing but a broken shield and harsh language. Man was touched by the gods – when there were gods, I mean.' He snatched two fallen shields from the ground and tossed one to Volker, who caught it and slid it on just as the first of the enemy exploded out into the courtyard.

Volker's shock and fear fell away from him as he blocked an axe-blow and brought his sword around and down on the northman's skull. For a moment, the world shrank to the weight of the blade in his hand and the sound of metal biting flesh and bone. He remembered Heldenname and the long, gruelling march to Altdorf; the retreat north, with roving warbands of skaven and beastmen dogging their heels; the promise of safety which was never quite fulfilled; the faces of friends who'd died on the way.

He stamped forwards, ramming his shield into a marauder's chest, shoving the man back. He drove his heel down on the man's instep, and caught him in the throat with the tip of his sword as he jerked back. In his mind's eye, he saw bodies left lying in the snow and the mud. He heard the crying of children without parents, and the screams of parents without children. And above it all, he heard a booming laughter which he wanted to believe was simply distant thunder, but in his heart knew was anything but.

Nearby, Goetz backhanded a screaming tribesman with his shield, knocking the warrior flat. His sword was a blur of steel, and for a moment, Volker thought that the last Knight of the Blazing Sun might throw back the hordes of Chaos on his own. But more of the howling, wild-eyed northmen slipped past him and charged towards Volker and Dubnitz, the names of their vile gods spilling from their lips.

'There are too many of them for us to hold here,' Volker said. 'Not alone – we can't do it without reinforcements.' He looked around, hoping to hear the tramp of boots or the clomp of hooves, but all he saw were the bodies of the dead, and all he heard were the blasphemous cries of the enemy as they made their way over the drawbridge and through the gatehouse. Volker realised with a sinking sensation that he and his fellow knights were the only defenders left. 'This isn't fair,' he whispered, his guts roiling as he lifted his shield to block a wild blow from a frothing beastman. He thrust his sword out instinctively, gutting the creature. He'd come all this way, survived so much – just for it to end here?

'Way of the world, my friend,' Dubnitz grunted, hewing at a Chaos marauder. Blood spattered the big man's face and glistened in his wide, spade-shaped beard. He thrust his knee up between another opponent's legs and opened the warrior's skull from pate to chin.

'What world?' Goetz said, his bronze-hued armour dulled by dust and blood, as he whipped his blade out in a tight arc and opened the throats of three of the shrieking warriors pressing towards them. 'Everything's gone, Dubnitz, and we're fighting over the damned ashes.'

'Speak for yourself,' Dubnitz growled. 'I'm fighting for that last bottle of Sartosan Red I've got chilling in the privy. I'll be damned if one of these barbarians gets to enjoy it before I do. I didn't fight my way out of what was left of Marienburg with it stuffed down my cuirass, just to miss out now!'

'I'm sorry, did you say Sartosan Red?' Volker asked, as he caught an axe-blow on his shield. 'What year is it, then? And you told me we were out!'

'Does it matter?' Goetz asked. 'It's not like any of us will get the chance to drink it.'

'Pay him no mind, Wendel, he's a Talabeclander. Got the taste buds of a radish,' Dubnitz said. He snagged the braided beard of his opponent and jerked the northman towards him. Their heads connected with a dull sound and the Chaos marauder staggered back, eyes wide. Dubnitz gave a laugh and lunged, spitting the man on his sword. He whirled and smashed aside the shield of another warrior, opening the man up to a skull-splitting blow from Goetz. 'There we go – look at that. Just like old times, my friend,' Dubnitz chortled.

'Erkhard – look out!' Volker reached for Dubnitz, even as the Chaos warrior's blade erupted from the other knight's chest. Dubnitz coughed and lurched forwards, pulling himself off the blade. He sank down to one knee, his hand clamped to the wound. Goetz caught the Chaos warrior a blow on the head, staggering him.

'Get him up and out of here,' he snarled, as he moved to confront the warrior who'd felled Dubnitz. The Chaos warrior came at him, roaring something in a guttural tongue. His sword seemed to drink up the blood that coated it, and it glowed with pale flames. Goetz moved quicker than Volker thought possible for a man in full plate, blocking his enemy's blow and countering with one of his own. The two warriors traded blows in the breach, neither giving ground. Behind the Chaos warrior, more northmen mustered, ready to rush the gatehouse when the contest was over. Volker could see that Goetz was tiring, despite his spirited defence. He felt a grip on his arm and looked down into Dubnitz's bloody grin.

'Second privy from the left,' Dubnitz said.

'What?'

'The wine, Wendel. Just in case you live through this,' Dubnitz wheezed. He levered himself to his feet with Volker's help. 'Fall back. They'll need you out there, and no sense in you dying here. Two will do as well as three. We will hold them here, as long as possible.'

'You'll die,' Volker protested.

'Really? Hadn't thought of that. You're right. You stay, we'll go.' Dubnitz caught the back of Volker's head and gave him an affectionate shake. 'Don't be

an idiot. My guts would trip me up before I took two steps, and poor Hector has been looking for a place to die since Talabheim.' He smiled weakly. 'It's a funny old world, isn't it? I thought I'd die at the hands of an irate husband. At the very least, I'd do it in Marienburg. Still, one place is as good as any other. Like Hector's late, lamented brothers were wont to say, we do what must be done.' He pushed away from Volker. 'Remember – second one from the left. Don't let it go to waste,' Dubnitz called, as he staggered towards the gatehouse. Along the way he snatched up one of the braziers the sentries had used for light, and hefted it like a spear.

As Volker began to back away, he saw Dubnitz give a shout and lurch into the Chaos warrior, smashing the armoured brute from his feet with the brazier. Goetz was too busy to capitalise on his foe's predicament, as the massed ranks of the enemy gave a roar and charged into the courtyard. Goetz hefted his shield and readied himself to meet them.

The first of the invaders reached him, and their shields slammed together. Goetz was shoved back, but his sword slid across the top of both shields and through his enemy's visor. He wrenched the blade free and shoved the body back, even as a number of slaving Chaos spawn bounded towards him and Dubnitz out of the smoke, their jaws wide. Dubnitz shoved himself to his feet, and for a moment, his eyes met Volker's. He grinned briefly, displaying blood-stained teeth, and winked before he swung around, catching the first of the spawn in the side of its malformed head with the brazier.

Volker turned away. He heard Goetz cry out the name of his goddess, and then he was staggering out of the courtyard, chest heaving. A rank of levelled spears awaited him, protruding from within a wall of locked shields. He stopped short, and then turned as a wild scream caught his attention. A northman charged out of the courtyard, axe raised. And then another, and another. Volker backed away, shield ready. He killed the first of them, grief and anger adding strength to his blow. The second slammed into him, and they fell in a tangle. Volker slammed the pommel of his sword against the warrior's head, and then opened his throat to the bone.

Before he could get to his feet, the third was upon him, axe raised for a killing stroke. Volker tensed to receive the blow he knew was coming. *Sorry, Erkhart*, he thought. *I guess that wine will go to waste after all.*

Moments before the barbarian's blow landed, a warhorse interposed itself, and a hammer sang down, driving the warrior to the ground in a broken heap. Volker looked up into the eyes of the Herald of Sigmar himself, and felt the despair of only a few moments before begin to give way before a surge of hope. 'Are you the last?' Valten asked, his voice carrying easily above the din of battle.

'I... yes,' Volker croaked, trying not to think of the others. *I'm sorry*, he thought again.

Valten nodded brusquely, and turned his head towards the gatehouse. 'Then on your feet, Reiksguard. I need every man who can stand. The enemy is coming, and I would welcome them properly.'



Canto Unsworn strode over the tangle of bodies that blocked the way into the gatehouse courtyard. Dead Chaos spawn, tribesmen and the armoured figures of several of Halfgir's more eager Headsmen were in evidence, as were the bodies of the defenders, one clad in bronze, the other in green. *Two men*, he thought. Horvath strode past him, kicking a plumed helmet aside. 'Two men did all of this,' Canto said, keeping pace with him as they headed for the shattered portcullis at the far end of the courtyard at a fast lope.

'Khome will welcome their skulls,' Horvath growled. They stepped out of the courtyard and into a melee. Canto saw Count Mordrek wading through the enemy with casual disregard, his blade shrieking in pleasure as it tore the humanity from its victims.

'Maybe so, but I'm not very keen on this invasion if that's the sort of welcome we can expect,' Canto said as he parried the blow of a desperate halberdier. 'These sorts of things have a way of – well, let's be blunt, shall we? – spinning out of control.'

'Silence, Unsworn,' Horvath growled as he chopped through an upraised shield and into the man cowering beneath it.

'All I'm saying is, this just proves that things could go very badly, very quickly. Pivotal moments, Horvath. They're an unsteady sort of foundation to build future endeavours on.'

'By all of the names of all of the gods, would you be silent, Canto? You've been yammering incessantly since Praag,' Horvath hissed. 'If Halfgir were to hear you...'

'Halfgir caught a cannonball in the gut coming up the viaduct. He's not hearing anything any time soon,' Canto said, not without some humour. 'I suppose that means you're in charge of the warband now – Horvath's Headsmen, they'll call us.'

'I said be silent,' Horvath snarled, slapping a swordsmen aside. 'By the brass balls of Khome, do you ever shut up?'

Canto didn't reply. An Ulrican priest circled him, moving lightly across the blood-slick cobbles, hammer raised, wolf-skin cloak flapping. Canto concentrated on the man's sweaty, snarling features, waiting for that oh-so-familiar tightening of skin around the eyes that would betray his next move. Flesh crinkled, and the Ulrican stamped forwards, hammer whirling. Canto twisted aside at the last moment, and the hammer smashed down, shattering cobbles. Before the priest could recover, Canto drove his sword through the man's side. The Ulrican howled, and Canto twisted his blade and shoved, chopping through the man's spine and out of his back in a spray of blood.

He was already moving forwards as the body flopped to the ground. Swords and spears sought him from every direction, and he chopped and slashed, trying to clear himself room. The Empire troops were beginning to waver. Already the rear ranks were retreating. But there were still enough of them to prove troublesome. *Tilea, Estalia, maybe even Cathay, but no – Kislev. You chose to go to Kislev*, he thought. But that was a lie. There had been no choice. He and Horvath and all of the others, the whole innumerable horde-to-end-all-hordes, were like drowning men caught in a maelstrom. There was no way to break its pull, no way to escape. You could only go with the tide, and hope you drowned later, rather than sooner.

Or, in the case of some men, that you drowned at all.

Count Mordrek lashed out with the flat of his blade and his fist, driving back his own allies. Marauders stumbled back in confusion as Mordrek cleared a space between the two sides. The soldiers of the Empire, in contrast to their enemies, seemed only too glad for the momentary respite. Mordrek whirled about and pointed at a figure on horseback with his sword. 'Herald of Sigmar! I see thee, I name thee and I demand thy presence!' he roared, in archaic Reikspiel. 'Count Mordrek challenges thee, son of the comet.'

Canto lowered his own blade. 'So that's why you were in such a blasted hurry,' he muttered. Around him, Horvath and the others had realised what was about to happen. Gore-encrusted weapons began to smash against shields, or thump against the cobbles. Canto examined the warrior that Mordrek had called to, and felt a stirring of recognition as the man urged his horse through the ranks of the state troops. He'd seen that face before, during the battle at the Auric Bastion. And he recognised the heavy warhammer clutched in his hand, as well. 'Skull-Splitter,' he hissed.

'What?' Horvath grunted.

'That's Sigmar's hammer, dolt,' Canto said. 'The Skull-Splitter itself. I saw it used once, a long time ago. Some self-righteous prig from Nuln was using it to put the fear of his god into the enemy at the battle of the Bokha Palaces. Like a thunderbolt wrapped in gold,' he murmured, lost for a moment in images of the past. That was when he'd first set his foot on the path to immortality and ruin. In Kislev, when another Everchosen had been knocking on the door of the world, Canto had been given a choice. And he'd made the wrong one. *But who knew old Wheezy von Bildhofen would become Emperor? Not me. How was I to know? Not a sorcerer, am I? I did my bit*, he thought, centuries of bitterness welling up as fresh as the day he'd chosen not to slip a knife in the back of his old school-mate, out of some misguided sense of – what? – friendship? Pity? Or something else... Fear, maybe.

And now here we are again, Canto. Part of the Army of the End Times, only this time you're being honest about whose side you're on, aren't you? he thought, watching... Valten, that was his name, riding towards them, carrying the weapon of a god. Unease gnawed at his gut as Valten drew closer. It wasn't just the hammer; it was everything about him – the set of his shoulders, the armour he wore, the look in his eyes. All of it screamed 'danger', the same way von Bildhofen had, so many centuries ago.

'On this day, I at last see clearly. The world is once more real to me. The voices of the gods have guided me to this moment. Time, fate and destiny grow thin, and there is only the now. A chance to feel alive,' Mordrek continued as Valten approached. His voice, rusty with disuse, began to grow stronger as he spoke. 'The gods demand that I kill you, Herald, and then they will free me. But they lie. They always lie, even when it serves no purpose.'

Valten slid from his horse and strode towards Mordrek, hammer in hand. As he drew close, Canto felt a quiver of fear blossom in him. He looked around and saw that he was not alone in feeling out of sorts. A shape, larger than any man, at once ghostly and somehow more real than the world around it, crouched within that husk of flesh, and it was *hungry*. It was so terribly hungry. It hungered for split skulls and splintered bones, for battle and cleansing fire. In Valten's footsteps, Canto could hear the rattle of spears, the roar of warriors, the howl of wolves and, above it all, the dull, ponderous rhythm of a hammer slamming down on an anvil. He'd heard that sound before, at the Bokha Palaces, in the words of a man named Magnus. It rang in his skull like the stroke of doom, and he began to edge back.

'What is that? What *is* it?' Horvath growled hoarsely, eyes wide. 'Is it a daemon?'

'Did you think we were the only ones with gods, you blood-drunk fool?' Canto snapped.

A warrior, unable to control himself, broke from the ranks and charged towards Valten, howling out a prayer to the Skull Throne. Mordrek cut his legs out from under him before he'd gone far, and then beheaded the writhing spawn that erupted from the dying man's tattooed flesh. He spun, arms spread, driving them back with the force of his fury. 'This day is mine! I have been waiting for it always. I will not be denied. Not by gods or men or even the Three-Eyed King himself,' he roared.

Point made, he turned back to Valten, who had stopped some distance away, hammer held low. Mordrek lifted his sword. 'I know the fire which snarls in me, Herald. Even in death, it burns. It cannot be extinguished, not even by the gods themselves. It can only be snuffed by the hand of the one fated to do it. By your hand! Never more to be raised up, never more to be kindled anew. Kill me if you can, Herald of Sigmar,' the tall warrior intoned. 'And Count Mordrek, once-lord of Brass Keep, once-elector, once-son of a forgotten Emperor, shall sing your praises in the world to come.' He struck his cuirass with a clenched fist.

'Gladly,' Valten said. That single word sent a ripple of unrest through the men around Canto, and he could not blame them. The word was a promise, and a prophecy. Mordrek made a sound deep in his throat, like an eager dog, and he sprang forwards.

Cursed blade and godly hammer connected in a shower of sparks. A shriek, like that of a dying goat, echoed through the streets as the daemon trapped in Mordrek's weapon felt the touch of Ghal Maraz. They duelled back and forth, moving almost too fast for Canto to follow.

Mordrek lunged, stamped and thrust, wielding his sword two-handed. Valten blocked every blow but launched few of his own, content to prolong the fight for as long as possible. A moment later, Canto realised why. Past the fight, he saw that the Empire ranks were beginning to thin. He felt a smile creep across his face. *Clever*, he thought. No wonder Valten had agreed to the duel. While they were occupied watching Mordrek work out his frustrations, the enemy were slipping away. He considered bringing it to someone's attention, and then dismissed the thought. He wasn't in charge, and it wasn't as if there were anywhere to go. If those men didn't die here, they'd die somewhere else. At this point, it was a foregone conclusion.

Mordrek's blade screeched as it skidded across Valten's pauldron, drawing smoke from the metal. Valten turned into the blow and his hammer smashed into Mordrek's belly, catapulting him off his feet. Mordrek hit the ground and rolled. Valten stalked forwards as Mordrek levered himself up, one arm wrapped around his stomach. Mordrek, still on one knee, extended his sword towards Valten, holding him at bay.

'Pain,' Mordrek rumbled. 'I have felt so much pain. Pain will not kill me, Herald. My will is strong, and I will not be denied.' He lunged to his feet, sword whirling over his head. Valten ducked aside as the blade snarled down, cleaving a cobblestone in two. Mordrek spun, and his sword lashed out again. It connected with a hastily interposed hammer. Even so, the force of the blow nearly knocked Valten from his feet. 'Fight, damn you,' Mordrek roared. 'Fight me, Herald. I am here to kill you – to spare the Three-Eyed King your wrath, and see that the desires of the gods are not thwarted. But I do not care about Archaon, or the petty wants of fate. What shall be or would have been is not my concern. Fight me. Kill me!'

Valten did not reply. He swatted aside Mordrek's next blow and sent Ghal Maraz shooting forwards through his grip, so that it crunched into the visor of Mordrek's helmet. Mordrek staggered back. The terrible hammer licked out and smashed down on Mordrek's sword arm. His blade fell from nerveless fingers and clattered to the ground, where it screeched and wailed like a wounded animal. Valten stamped down on it and kicked it aside before Mordrek could retrieve it.

The hammer snapped out, and Canto winced as one of Mordrek's knees went. Mordrek sank down with a groan, and the world seemed to shudder slightly, as if it were out of focus. The hammer dropped down, crushing a shoulder, then a clawing hand. Canto risked a look up at the howling sky, and saw no leering faces. The gods had turned away from this battle now. Were they disappointed, he wondered? Part of him hoped so. Part of him hoped that here and now Mordrek would slip their leash. He turned his attentions back towards the duel.

Mordrek knelt before the Herald of Sigmar, head bowed, his armour shuddering slightly, as if what it contained were seeking escape. Mordrek made no move to stand. He looked up as Valten's shadow fell over him.

'I never had a chance,' Count Mordrek said. He sounded happy.

'No,' Valten said.

Mordrek began to laugh. The eerie sound slithered through the air, and even the most slaughter-drunk warrior fell silent at its approach. Mordrek bowed his head again. The hammer rose. When it fell, the mountain shuddered. The sky twisted, and the wind howled. An empty suit of armour rattled to the ground. Thus passed Count Mordrek the Damned, wanderer of the Wastes and exile of the Forbidden City.

The Herald of Sigmar turned to face the ranks of the invaders. In his cool blue gaze was a promise of death and damnation. He raised his hammer, and the closest of them drew back. Their gods were not here, and there would be no help. Canto shivered inside his armour, and wondered if there were any champion among them who was equal to the man before them.

Valten held their gaze as the moment stretched. Then he turned, caught his horse's bridle, and swung himself into the saddle. He turned the animal around without hurry, and rode away, after his retreating troops.

The northern gatehouse had fallen to the enemy.



THREE

 *The Mannrestrasse, Grafsmund-Norgarten District*

Gregor Martak flung out his hand. Shards of amber coalesced about his curled fingers and shot forwards to puncture the dark armour of the Chaos knights charging towards the embattled soldiers. He spun his staff in his hands, his fingers bleeding where they had been scraped raw by the rough wood, and a whirlwind full of amber spears roared across the plaza, sweeping up tribesmen and reducing them to red ruin. But it wasn't enough. The enemy pressed his threadbare force from all sides. The air stank of smoke and blood, and the battle cries of Talabecland and Middenland warred with idolatrous hymns to the Lord of Skulls and the Prince of Pleasure. Courtyards and junctions were swept clear of the enemy by cannonades, only to be filled anew moments later.

Guns boomed around him, banners fluttered bravely overhead, and his own magics threw back the enemy time and again, but it wasn't enough. Still the enemy ground on, showing no more concern for their fallen than the skaven had in the tunnels. Black-armoured figures chanting praises to the Dark Gods poured with undimmed enthusiasm towards the men of the Empire. Mingled among them were the hairy forms of loping beastmen, and the abominable, contorted shapes of mutants and worse things besides.

Rage surged in him and he slammed the end of his staff down. Cruel spikes of amber burst through the street, impaling a knot of snarling, scarred Aeslings. His breath shuddered in his lungs, and he cursed himself for the third time in as many minutes.

Stupid old man. Thought you were so clever, didn't you? Well look at where that cleverness has got you now, ran the refrain. It was, he had to admit, not without merit. After realising what the skaven were up to, he had hurried back to the surface, stripping reserves of state troops from the staging points in the upper tunnels as he went. The way he'd seen it, those men would be more useful on the surface, than waiting for an attack that might never come below.

And they had been. He'd led them up onto the streets, and they'd thrown back the Chaos vanguard. Martak had led the way, flinging spears of sorcerous amber, and bellowing orders in his best imitation of Grand Master Greiss. The halberds and crossbow bolts of those following him had butchered northlander tribesman by the score. Knights of the White Wolf galloped down cobbled streets, hammers swinging, driving entire tribes of the enemy before them. Men from every province fought together as one, united in their desire to drive the northlanders from the city.

Unfortunately, his decision to strip the garrisons had proven to be less than inspired when a fresh wave of skaven reinforcements had driven the token force that remained in the tunnels out. Even now, a seething wave of chattering ratmen was flooding down the broad avenue of the Mannrestrasse towards his lines, driving the remainder of the tunnel garrisons before them. He caught sight of Greiss, as the latter crushed a rat ogre's skull with a brutal blow from his hammer. As the beast fell, the old templar glared at him, fury in his eyes.

'It seemed like a good idea at the time,' Martak muttered, though he knew the old man couldn't hear him. If both of them survived this, Greiss would kill Martak himself, and the wizard wouldn't blame him. He thrust his staff out like a spear and a tendril of amber shot from the tip, plucking a Chaos knight from his mutated steed.

Hundreds of ratmen had followed Greiss and the others into the streets, and these were no fear-crazed vermin, but the elite of that fell race. Bulky, black-furred rats clad in heavy armour marched alongside lumbering rat ogres with belching fire-throwers strapped to their long arms and metal plates riveted to their abused flesh. More skaven, Martak fancied, than even had laid siege to the city before Archagon's arrival. By the time he'd understood the full enormity of his error, the skaven had struck his lines from behind.

Now, they were making a last stand on an avenue named for the Skavenslayer himself as the skaven swept through the city, their forces joining those of Archagon to isolate the remaining gatehouses. While the north and east had already fallen, the south and west gates had remained barred to the enemy. But Martak could see the smoke, and runners had brought him word that the gatehouses were surrounded and cut off.

Middenheim would fall. It was not his fault, but that didn't make it any better. Not everyone agreed, of course. Greiss's horse thrust its way through the fighting towards him. 'Was this your plan, then?' Greiss snarled. 'We're cut off from the rest of the city. The enemy is before us and behind us.'

'As they would have been had we stayed below,' Martak rasped.

'So you say,' Greiss snapped. The old man looked fatigued, and blood streaked his features and armour. 'You've doomed us, wizard. We should never have abandoned the Ulricsmund.' He twisted in his saddle and swatted a leaping mutant from the air. The creature fell squalling amongst a group of halberdiere, who swiftly dispatched it. 'And where is the so-called Herald of Sigmar, eh? Where is Valten, when we need him?'

'Fighting for the city, as we are, I imagine,' Martak said. He felt the winds of magic tense and flex beneath the clutch of another mind. He turned, seeking the source of the disturbance. A cloaked and hooded figure crouched atop a nearby roof, worm-pale hands gesturing tellingly.

Martak shoved past Greiss and shouted a single word. The air before them hardened into a shield of amber even as arrows of shadow launched themselves from the curling fingers of the sorcerer towards the Grand Master of the Order of the White Wolf. The amber barrier cracked and split as the shadowy missiles writhed against it. Martak gestured, and the barrier collapsed about the darkling projectiles, sealing them inside. A second gesture sent the amber sphere hurtling away at speed, back towards the sorcerer on the rooftop. The man leapt gracefully from the roof a moment before impact. He dropped to the cobbles, where he was engulfed by the battle and lost to Martak's sight.

A moment later, that part of the street erupted in a flickering balefire. Bodies were hurled into the air or slammed back against the buildings that lined the street. Warriors from both sides screamed as the coruscating flames consumed them. Men fell, wracked with sickening, uncontrollable mutations, their bodies growing and bursting like overripe fruits. The sorcerer, his robes askew, strode through the conflagration, his hood thrown back to reveal a golden helmet covered in leering mouths. 'Malofex comes...' the mouths shrieked as one. 'Bow before Malofex, master of the Tempest Incarnate, freer of the First Born, bowbowbowbow.'

'No,' Martak said. He slammed his staff down, and the street rumbled as a ridge of amber spikes sprouted and stretched towards the sorcerer. Malofex stretched out a hand, and the amber turned liquid and rose into the air, becoming globules which began to spin faster and faster about the sorcerer's head. Then, with a sound like the crack of a whip, the globules shot back towards Martak.

Martak's eyes widened and he whipped his staff up and around in a tight circle, carving protective sigils on the air. The globules of amber struck the invisible barrier and exploded, casting razor-edged shards into the melee around him.

'Malofex, who freed Kholek Suneater, Malofex, who uprooted the Gibbering Tower, bids you cease and kneel, hedge-wizard,' the mouths on the sorcerer's helmet ranted. 'Bow to Malofex, and live.' As the sorcerer moved towards Martak, colourful flames sprouted on his robes, rising about him like an infernal halo. The flames swept out and struck the ground, towering around them like the walls of a keep.

Martak set the butt of his staff on the ground, and gripped the haft in both hands. Shards of amber formed and darted for the sorcerer, and were melted by the flames, or caught and crunched by the hateful mouths. He could feel the other's will pressing down on his own. He had surprised his opponent before, caught him off-guard, but now the full force of the sorcerer's attention was on him, and Martak found himself slowly but surely buckling beneath the weight of it. He was tired. He had been since Altdorf. There was no time to rest his mind or body. The war had been gruelling and his strength was worn to the nub. But he would not surrender, not now, not here. He hurled spell after spell at his opponent, and each was blocked or dispelled easily.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Greiss trying to break through the flames that had risen to isolate him and his opponent from the battle going on

around them. In the flames were faces, moaning, screaming, laughing, and they licked at Martak's flesh, raising weals of strange hues and sending shivers of pain through him. He could hear the chuckles and whispers of the mouths, and the sibilant crackle of the flames rising from his opponent's frame as the sorcerer drew close. But, then, a new sound intruded and the world grew slow around him. The flames seemed to freeze in place, and the colour drained from them as they fell silent.

In their place was the howling of wolves. Martak's breath frosted as the temperature dropped. His skin felt cold and clammy, and he heard the snarls and growls of beasts on the hunt. Lupine shadows stretched across the ground towards him. And then, as it stepped through Malofex's fire, he saw it.

The wolf loped towards him, seemingly unconcerned by what was going on around it. It moved effortlessly, as if it were a thing not of flesh but instead a ghost or phantom. Its jaws sagged in a lupine grin, and the howls grew louder, threatening to rupture Martak's eardrums. He could no longer hear Malofex, and the roar of battle sounded as if it were far away. All he could hear were the howls, and the harsh panting of the white wolf as it closed in on him.

It leapt past the sorcerer, sparing him not a glance. Martak wanted to move out of its path, but some force held him frozen in place. The wolf grew larger and larger, its mouth expanding until its upper jaw blocked out the sky and its lower tore furrows in the street, and then Martak was between them and they snapped shut.

Martak was enveloped in darkness. Frost formed on his shaking limbs, and icicles grew in his tangled beard. The howling grew thunderous, and he sank down to one knee, hands clasped to his ears. White specks swam through the dark, faster and faster, and he thought that they might be snow. He heard the crunch of footsteps: human ones, not the padding of paws, but somehow more terrifying for all of that.

Get up.

Martak peered into the swirling snow. The voice had been like ice falling from the face of a cliff, or the stormy waters of the Sea of Claws as they smashed into the shore. It reverberated about him, surrounding him and filling his head.

Get up, Gregor Martak. A man of Middenheim does not kneel.

Martak shoved himself to his feet. Something massive and terrible lunged out of the whirling snow, and caught his throat in a cold grip. He felt claws digging into his neck, and found himself flung down onto hard stones.

He does not kneel. But he will bare his throat, when it is demanded.

The curtain of snow parted, revealing not a beast, but an old, stooped man crouched over him, one hand locked about his throat. The old man's nostrils flared and he tilted his worn, hairy features up, as if tasting the air. He was clad in white furs and bronze armour, of the kind worn by horse-lords and the barrow kings who had ruled what was now the Empire in the centuries before the coming of Sigmar. His eyes glinted like chips of ice as he dragged Martak to his feet. 'Who—?' Martak croaked.

The old man threw back his head and howled. The sound was echoed by the unseen wolves, and its fury battered Martak like the blows of an enemy. He would have fallen, but for the old man's grip on his throat.

Quiet. Listen.

Martak shuddered, as the gates of his mind were burst asunder and a wild host of images flooded into him. He saw a vast cavern, somewhere far beneath the Fauschlag, though he did not know how he knew that, and saw the roaring light of the Flame of Ulric, stretching upwards towards the Temple of Ulric above. He saw a figure clad in flowing robes step from the shadows and saw ancient wolves rise from the sleep of ages to defend the Flame from the intruder.

In the flashes of sorcerous light which accompanied the short but brutal battle, the figure stood revealed. *An elf*, Martak thought, confused. His confusion turned to horror as he watched the elf thrust his staff into the Flame. The fire shrank away as the head of the staff touched it, and the guardian wolves howled as one and collapsed into shards of bone and ice. A moment later, the chamber fell into darkness.

And in that darkness, something moved and grew. In the ashes of the Flame, something began to stir, and Martak felt fear course through him. 'What is it?' he groaned as he squeezed his eyes shut. There were stars in the darkness, not the clean, pure stars of the night sky but rotten lights which marked the audient void, strung between sour worlds. He could hear voices, scratching at the walls of his mind, and heard the cackling of daemons.

Chaos, Ulric said. The thief stole my flame, and now the world aches as old wounds open in her flesh. Our mother dies, Gregor Martak, and I die with her. I am the last of the Firstborn, and my power, my rage... fades.

Martak looked up into the old god's face. There was fear there, but anger as well. The anger of a dying wolf as it snaps and snarls at its hunters, even as the trap crushes its leg and the spears pierce its belly. Ulric released his throat and laid a hand on his shoulder.

But it is not gone yet.

Ulric was not one to waste time. There was a moment of pain, of a cold beyond any Martak had felt, and a tearing sensation deep in his chest, as if something had eaten out his heart to make room for itself. And then, the world crashed back to life around him.

Martak opened his eyes. He could hear the crackle of Malofex's flames, Greiss's shouts, the din of battle. And beneath it all, the heartbeat of a god. Frost slipped from between his lips as time began to speed up. His staff vibrated in his grip as the ancient wood was permeated with rivulets of ice. He released it and it exploded into a thousand glittering shards, which hovered before him. The temperature around him dropped precipitously, and Malofex's flames were turned to ice. The sorcerer stopped and looked around, confused.

The hungry smile of a predator spread across Martak's features. The shards of icy wood shot forwards, punching through Malofex's hastily erected mystical defences as if they were not there, and smashed into the sorcerer's body. He was hurled backwards, and where he crashed down, ice began to creep across the cobblestones.

Malofex tried to pull himself upright, his many mouths cursing and screaming. The shards burrowed into him and tendrils of ice erupted from his twitching frame, coating him in frost and covering the street. Soon, there was nothing left of the sorcerer save a grisly sculpture. Martak turned his attentions to the northmen.

As the Chaos worshippers charged towards him, he raised his hands. He snarled a string of guttural syllables, and the air hummed, twitched and then exploded into a howling blizzard. Those closest to him were flash-frozen where they stood, becoming ice-bound statues, much like Malofex. Martak brought his hands together in a thunderous clap, and the newly made statues exploded into a storm of glittering shards. Hundreds fell to the icy maelstrom. Beastmen, skaven and Chaos warriors alike were ripped to shreds by Ulric's wintry fangs.

Martak lifted his hand, drawing the newly fallen snow and ice up in a cracking, crunching wave, and a moment later, the Manndrestrasse was blocked by a solid wall of ice. The wizard lowered his hand, and turned. Frightened men stumbled away from him, their breath turning to frost on the chilly air which emanated from him. Only Greiss did not fall back as Martak approached. Even so, the old knight flinched as Martak's eyes came to rest on him.

'Your eyes... they've changed,' Greiss said.

'Yes,' Martak said. 'We must fall back. To the Temple of Ulric, where the heart of the city still beats. Valten will meet us there, as will any other survivors.' He strode past Greiss without waiting for a reply.

'How do you know he'll be there?' Greiss demanded. 'How did you do whatever it was you just did?' He lumbered after Martak. 'Answer me, wizard!'

Martak stopped, and turned. Greiss froze. The old man stared at him, and his face paled as he began to at last comprehend what he was looking at. 'Your eyes are yellow,' Greiss murmured. 'A wolf's eyes...'

Martak said nothing. He turned away. A moment later, the first of his men followed. The ranks split around Greiss and flowed after Martak, leaving the Grand Master of the Order of the White Wolf staring after them.

The Ulricsmund

Wendel Volker beat aside the rough wooden shield and drove his sword through the northman's stinking furs. The warrior uttered a strangled cough as he folded over the blade. Volker set his boot against the dead man and jerked his weapon free.

Panting, he looked around. The battle, such as it had been, was winding down. A few dozen had tried to ambush his small troop of handgunners and halberdiers, and had fared accordingly. His mother had always said that northmen had neither fear nor sense, and that combination was what made them dangerous. Volker was forced to agree, given what he'd seen of their conduct so far. It was as if they had all been driven mad, all at once, and unleashed by some ill-tempered caretaker.

Then, perhaps their madness was merely acceptance of the inevitable. The horizon glowed with witchfire, and strangely hued smoke rose above the eastern section of the city. He could hear strange sounds slithering through the streets, like cackling children and grunting hogs. Shadows without bodies to cast them moved tauntingly along the walls to either side of Valten's battered column of men, and sometimes, when Volker glanced at them quickly enough, they seemed to be reaching for him.

Ghosts, he thought. The city was full of ghosts now. Would it become like they said Praag had been, before its final razing, or like Talabheim was now – a

haunt for monsters and daemons, unfit for normal men? That was always the bit of the old stories that had stuck in Volker's craw as a child. Even when men won, they lost. It hadn't seemed particularly fair to a lad of six, and the world hadn't done much to change his opinion since.

'Right, lads, back in line,' he called out to the others. They wore a collection of uniforms from various provinces and carried a motley assortment of weapons, and there was at least one woman among their ranks, a narrow-faced sneak-thief named Fleischer. 'Close ranks, wipe the blood off your faces and don't get separated. If you get lost, I'm not bloody well coming to look for you.'

'Not unless we're in a tavern,' one wit grunted, a formidable looking man by the name of Brunner. He wore a dented sallet helm that covered most of his face, and a battered suit of brigandine armour. Bandoliers of throwing knives and pistols scavenged from gods alone knew where hung across his bulky torso.

Volker pointed his sword in Brunner's direction. 'And if you find one that's still standing, and not drier than the Arabyan desert, be sure to let me know.' The others laughed, as Volker had known they would. Even Brunner cracked a smile. He'd known men who commanded through fear, like the late, unlamented Captain Kross with whom he'd shared duties at Heldenhame, and others who seemed born to it, like Kurt Helborg. But for the Wendel Volkens of the world, who were neither particularly frightful, nor authoritative, humour was the lever of command.

A jape and a jest served to keep you surrounded by friends, rather than resentful underlings. Discipline was required, but a bit of honey helped it work its way down. It was especially useful given that he and his motley coterie were the merest nub of the hundred or so men who had followed Valtan from the northern gatehouse or been picked up en route. The northmen were pressing into the city from all directions now, and the shattered remnants of the defensive garrisons were retreating before them.

Why exactly he'd volunteered to lead the way and act as the point of the spear, Volker couldn't say. Valtan hadn't asked, and there were other men likely better suited to the task close to hand. But he'd needed to do it. He'd needed to prove something to himself, perhaps, or maybe he'd simply needed to *do* something. Something to occupy his mind, something to focus on, to keep him busy while the darkness closed in. When the end came, Volker didn't want to see it. He had a feeling that it wouldn't be any more pleasant for seeing it coming. Not for him a hero's death. Something quiet and relatively painless would suit him fine.

He reached up to rub his shoulder in an effort to ease the ache growing in it, and swore under his breath as his armour snagged painfully. He still wasn't used to it. He didn't know why he'd accepted the commission into the Reiksguard. The Volkens had always been staunch Feuerbachists, rather than supporters of the Holswig-Schliestein family. 'Up Talabecland,' as his father had often used to say, loudly and at inappropriate times. Then, what did political divides matter when the wolf was at the door of the world?

Volker swept his sword clean on his defeated opponent's furs, nose wrinkling in disgust. As he sheathed his blade, he thought again of Goetz and Dubnitz. He wished they were here. Bravery had come easily in their presence. They had been like him – normal men, trapped in abnormal times. *A dying breed*, he thought, as he looked back at the column as it advanced down the boulevard, Valtan at its head.

He caught the other man's gaze and nodded once, briskly. Valtan returned the nod and raised his gore-stained hammer, rousing his men to the march once more. He spoke of the Temple of Ulric as if it were a source of salvation, rather than a place to make a final stand, and his words instilled courage and drove back fatigue. He wasn't like Volker. Volker had been wrong, before. He saw that now. Valtan was something else – not just a man, but an idea made real. Hope given form, and authority. The Empire made flesh. Abnormal times bred abnormal men. Only gods and monsters could survive what was coming, Volker thought. Where that left him, or any of the rank and file, exactly, he didn't know, and didn't care to think about.

He shook himself, and looked at his men. 'Let's go. We've got half the Ulricsmund between us and the temple, and the wolves of the north are snapping at our heels. It'll take the Three-Eyed King time to get them all moving in the same direction, but I'd like to be behind a cannon when that happens. Brunner, take point.' The big man nodded and moved forwards through the smoke, along the ruined boulevard, falchion in one hand and a pistol in the other. Volker had heard somewhere that Brunner had been a bounty-hunter, before the natural order had been overturned. Whatever he'd been, he was a born scout – stealthy, sneaky and utterly vicious.

Volker and the others followed as Brunner loped ahead of them. Volker kept his eyes on the surrounding buildings and alleyways, alert for anything that might signal an attack. He could hear the sound of battle echoing up from the city around him, and the air stank of a thousand fires. A mass of men as large as the one behind him was bound to attract attention. It wasn't a question of if an attack would come, but when – not to mention what form it would take.

Besides attacks by random warbands of northmen, out for slaughter and pillage, the column had had to deal with worse things. The creature calling itself Count Mordrek had been but the first. Others, champions of the Dark Gods all, had hurled themselves at Valtan out of the press of battle as he led his men through the reeling city. Volker could not help but keep a tally, for some of those names were nightmares which had frightened him as a child: names like Ragnar Painbringer, Sven Bloody-Hand, Engra Deathsword, Vygo Thrice-Tainted and Surtha Lenk. Names to conjure with, warlords and near-daemons, all of whom seemed intent on taking Valtan's head before he laid eyes on Archagon.

Whatever their names or titles, Valtan fought them all. Ghal Maraz took a steady toll of shattered skulls and broken bones, and through it all, the light within him shone brighter and brighter. It was as if whatever force drove him was growing stronger. Vashnar the Tormentor fell on the steps of the Middenplatz, and a burly, boisterous warrior calling himself Khagras the Horse-lord was left broken in the ruins of the Dragon Ale Brewery. The most recent of them, Eglixus, self-proclaimed Executioner of Trechagrad, had fallen mewling and broken-backed in the dust of the Freiburg, as Valtan led his men steadily towards the Temple of Ulric.

Volker heard a whistle from up ahead. Brunner appeared out of the smoke, his taciturn features pale beneath his helm. 'How many?' Volker said.

Brunner held up three fingers. 'Three,' he rasped.

'Three what? Three dozen? Three hundred?'

The former bounty hunter shook his head. 'Just three.' He looked at Volker, and then past him. Volker turned, as Valtan rode towards them.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Three men,' Volker said. He looked up at Valtan. 'Do you want us to go ahead?' he asked, even as he prayed that the other man would say no.

Valtan shook his head. 'No.' He smiled, and for a moment, it was as if something older and infinitely more savage looked out at the world from behind his eyes. 'No, I think they are waiting for me.' He turned and signalled for the column to wait. Then he urged his horse forwards, into the smoke. Volker looked at Brunner and the others, shook his head and gestured.

'Well, we bloody well can't let the Herald of Sigmar ride off alone, now can we?'

'Speak for yourself,' Brunner muttered. But he followed Volker as the latter led the others in pursuit of Valtan. They didn't have far to go. They just had to follow the sound of weapons meeting, and the harsh curses of the combatants. A large edifice, once regal, now smashed and defiled, rose up before them through the smoke.

Volker stifled a gasp as he recognised the Temple of Verena. The dome of the roof had been cracked wide open, and what appeared to be a Norscan longboat now rose from it. How it had got there, Volker couldn't imagine. The wide avenue before the steps was littered with bodies in the livery of three provinces, all buried beneath clouds of humming flies. The bodies were already beginning to bloat and burst, as if they had been out in the sun for days, rather than hours. He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, and tried to control the surge of bile that suddenly filled his throat.

Two men duelled amid the heaps of bodies. One was a monster of a man, clad in black, ruined armour, wielding a triple-headed flail. The other, a hairy northman wearing battered armour and more skulls than any self-respecting human ought, fought with a Norscan longsword and a heavy kite shield. They paid no heed to the newcomers, seemingly occupied with their duel.

'They've been fighting for just hours,' a languid voice said. Volker's spine itched as the words reached his ears. For the first time, he noticed the golden-haired man sprawled across the steps of the temple, a polished shield propped up beside him and his feet crossed on the broken body of a priest of Verena. The man was inordinately handsome. Too handsome. Volker felt something in him twitch away from the sheer, monstrous beauty of the speaker.

'You'll have to forgive Valnir and Wulfrik,' the man continued. There was a glow about him, as if thousands of fireflies were flitting about his head and shoulders. 'They are otherwise occupied. Selfish brutes that they are, they have little thought for the boredom such games inflict on others.' He smiled widely and sat up. 'Lucky for you, I am unengaged.'

Valtan straightened. He laid his hand on the hammer where it lay balanced across his saddle, as if to calm the ancient weapon. The man on the steps frowned, and Volker felt his guts turn to ice. 'Are you not going to ask who I am?' the man said.

'I know who you are, Geld-Prince. Sigvald, boy-prince of an extinct tribe, monster, cannibal and daemon.' The strange lights surrounding the other man seemed to dim as Valtan spoke, and when he took hold of Ghal Maraz's haft and lifted the weapon, the lights faded entirely, leaving only a ghostly afterglow.

'Not a daemon. Not yet. Perhaps never. Such ugly things, daemons. Function over form, as they say,' Sigvald said. His smile returned. 'The gods have tasked me three with killing you, but, well, that is not an honour lightly bestowed,' he purred, admiring his reflection in the polished surface of his shield. He glanced at them, and Volker felt a chill as those radiant eyes swept over him and dismissed him in the same instant. 'I, of course, felt it should have been mine, but, well, my... comrades disagreed. So, the Reaper and the Wanderer fight. Winner gets you, Herald of Sigmar.'

'And you?' Valten asked.

Sigvald laughed, and Volker cringed. He wasn't alone in that reaction. Even Brunner looked uncomfortable, and Fleischer unleashed a flurry of curses beneath her breath. The sound of Sigvald's laughter was too perfect, too beautiful, and nearby, one of Valten's men wept bloody tears as he dropped his weapon and clutched at his ears. He sank down into the dust, and began to whimper. Sigvald smiled, as if the sound were for his benefit. 'I have no interest in you, son of the comet. You are but the appetiser to the glorious banquet to come, and one does not gobble such morsels. This is a very tasty world, and one must pace oneself, mustn't one?'

He sniffed and rose gracefully to his feet. 'No, the Chosen Son of Slaanesh shall not sully himself on the Herald, when he might yet taste the real thing. Am I not deserving of such an honour?' His lips twitched. 'The answer, by the way, is most assuredly yes. I am perfection, and I do not waste my gifts on the imperfect. Thus do I take my leave. There are still pleasures yet to be plumed in this moving feast of a city, and I shall wallow in them to my heart's content, while I wait the coming of the king.'

Valten watched as Sigvald strode off down the avenue, whistling a cheerful tune. Only when the creature had vanished into the clouds of dark smoke rolling across the street did he turn his attention to the duel. The battle had continued even as he and Sigvald had conversed, and neither warrior seemed to have noticed the new arrivals or have the upper hand.

Every time the armoured hulk wielding the flail battered the hairy giant from his feet, the latter was up again a moment later, cursing and slashing at his enemy, his blows glancing from the other's maggot-ridden suit of Chaos plate.

Finally, the flail tore the heavy kite shield from its owner's grasp. The latter staggered back, apparently off balance. His opponent closed in, stomping forwards. 'Fall, Wanderer, for the glory of Father Nurgle,' the Chaos champion rasped.

'You first, Valnir,' Wulfrik said. He twisted aside, avoiding his opponent's next blow, and drove the broad blade of his sword into the pustule-lined gap between Valnir's helmet and cuirass. Wulfrik leaned into the blow with a grunt, forcing the sword all the way through his opponent's neck. The tip of the blade emerged in a burst of stinking gas and leprous filth. Valnir squawked and dropped his weapon as he reached up to claw at the blade. 'Oh no you don't,' Wulfrik growled. He set his boot against the other champion's hip and wrenched his blade free, out through the back of Valnir's neck.

Valnir's head dropped from his bloated frame and bounced across the cobbles. Wulfrik shoved the twitching body aside and spat after it. 'Say hello to the Crowfather for me, eh?' he said, as he retrieved his shield. Wulfrik turned towards Valten. 'Well, I like a man who's prompt,' he said in crude Reikspiel, spreading his arms. 'Herald of Sigmar, I, Wulfrik the Worldwalker, the Inescapable One, demand that you face me. The gods want your skull on their fire, and I'm of a mind to give them what they wish.'

Valten said nothing. He slid from the saddle, and waved back Volker and the others. It was a command Volker was only too happy to obey. Wulfrik grinned. 'I heard you did for old Mordrek. I killed him once myself.' He blinked. 'Twice, actually, now that I think about it.'

'This time, he will stay dead. Is that what you wish for yourself?' Valten asked, as he moved to meet the Chaos champion. 'Death? I know you, Wanderer, though I do not know how. I know your name, and your fate. I know why you are here, and I know that you cannot stop me. My doom is... already written.' Valten hesitated, as if uncertain. Then, he said, 'And it is not by your hand.'

'No, it wouldn't be, would it?' Wulfrik grunted. He sucked in a deep breath, and released it loudly. 'Ahhhhh. No, I feel the weight of your weird from here, Herald. Not a grand doom, for you. Just a doom. Stupid and small.' He looked up. 'Do you think, at the end, there will be anyone left to sing our sagas?'

Valten was silent. Wulfrik laughed. 'No, I thought not,' he said. He slapped his shield with the flat of his sword. Valten raised his hammer. Wulfrik attacked first. He bulled forwards, attempting to smash Valten flat with the face of his shield. Valten pivoted aside, but before he could bring his hammer around to strike, the other's sword was screeching across his armour. Valten stumbled back, eyes narrowed in surprise.

Wulfrik flashed his grin again and moved round warily, blade balanced on the rim of his shield. 'Come on, boy... Long fights are the stuff of poets' dreams,' he growled.

Valten whirled Ghal Maraz about, and advanced. Wulfrik gave a harsh laugh and raised his shield, but Valten didn't alter the trajectory of his blow. A moment later, Volker realised why – Ghal Maraz connected with the broad face of the shield, and the latter exploded into red hot fragments. Wulfrik was flung back by the force of the blow, and he skidded through the bodies. He was on his feet a moment later, his necklace of skulls rattling.

'Now it's a fight,' Wulfrik roared. He caught his sword in two hands and bounded in, hurdling the piles of corpses. Valten met him halfway. Sword and hammer connected again and again, the sound echoing through the streets. Valten made a wild swing, driving Wulfrik back. The Wanderer retreated, but only for a moment, twisting in mid-step to bring his blade around in a blow meant to decapitate his opponent. Valten fell, avoiding the sword's bite but losing his balance. He crashed to the ground, armour rattling, and rolled aside as Wulfrik's blade came down again, drawing sparks from the cobblestones.

Valten, still on his back, swung Ghal Maraz. The head of the hammer smacked into Wulfrik's waiting palm. Volker heard the bones of the man's hand splinter and crack from where he stood, but Wulfrik gave no sign that he felt any pain. Instead, his broken fingers folded over the hammer as his foot lashed out, catching Valten in the chest. As Valten fell back, Wulfrik tore the hammer from his grip and hurled it aside.

Valten shoved himself up on his elbows as Wulfrik approached. 'That hurt,' the champion grunted. 'Maybe your weird wasn't so heavy after all, eh?' He raised his blade in one hand, and brought it down.

Valten's hands shot up, catching the blade. He gripped it tight, even as it bit into his palms. Thin rivulets of blood ran down the tip of the blade. Wulfrik was forced back a step as Valten gathered his feet under him and slowly rose, still gripping the sword. Metal cracked as Valten and his opponent faced one another across the length of sharpened steel. Wulfrik's grin became a grimace of effort.

The sword shattered. Wulfrik fell forwards, eyes wide. Valten, a chunk of the sword still in his hand, slid it into the Chaos champion's throat as he stumbled past. Wulfrik toppled, clutching at his neck. Valten retrieved his hammer and turned back to his enemy. Wulfrik, gasping and choking, lowered his hands and lay waiting. He was smiling again, his teeth stained with blood. 'Good fight,' he gurgled as Valten stood over him. He closed his eyes. Ghal Maraz struck.

Valten made his way back to the others. The blood on his hands had already dried. Volker was possessed by the sudden urge to kneel. An urge shared by his men, and one by one, they did so. Even Brunner. Valten looked down at them silently. Then, a slow, sad smile crept across his face. 'Up,' he said softly. 'The Temple of Ulric is just ahead. And for good or ill, that is where we will make our stand.'

Grafsmund-Norgarten District

Horvath died slowly, and angrily if his frustrated howls were any indication. The Knights Panther, clad in their swirling, spotted skins and dark armour, had ridden out of an isolated cul-de-sac as the horde passed by, moving in pursuit of the retreating state troops. Horvath had been one of the unlucky ones, caught and spitted on a lance in that first charge. But it wasn't until the Knights Panther were joined by halberdiers, spearmen and crossbowmen, all flooding the wide boulevard, that Canto realised that the Headsmen, and the warbands following in their wake, had been drawn into a trap.

Middenheim, for all that it was undone and doomed, was still a battleground. Every house, every temple, every guildhall and tavern, was a fortress filled with desperate, deadly enemies, all determined to make Archaon's followers pay in blood for every stretch of street. Helblasters vomited volleys of shot from open doorways, and handgunners fired from behind overturned wagons and toppled stalls at the other end of the boulevard.

The warriors of Chaos pressed forwards, into the teeth of the fire, because there was little else they could do. And because the eyes of the Everchosen were upon them. Canto parried a halberd and hacked down its owner, even as he caught sight of the battle-standard of the Swords of Chaos rising above the melee. He couldn't say where they'd come from, or when they'd arrived, but they were here now, and where his Swords went, the Three-Eyed King would not be far behind.

A lead bullet struck his armour and caromed off into the press of battle. Canto spun and rammed his sword through an open doorway, killing the handgunner. He forced his way into the structure beyond, the taproom of a mostly empty tavern. Women and children cowered behind a barricade of tables, as men in the livery of Stirland raced to intercept him. Canto gutted the first to reach him, and beheaded the second. A sword shattered on his daemon-forged armour, and he turned, grabbing its wielder by the throat. He shoved the man back and slammed him against a support beam.

Canto tilted his head, looking up. He smelt smoke, coming from above. Some fool had set fire to the thatch. He looked back at the man he held pinned. The swordsman struggled uselessly in his grip. Ineffectual fists pounded on his arm. Canto considered snapping his neck. Then, without quite knowing why, he released him. 'Get your women and children and go. Out the back. Find a hole and hide, if you can. Or die. It makes no difference to me,' he said, stepping back. The swordsman stared at him. Canto turned away, and stepped back out onto the street. As his foot touched the cobbles, he was already regretting his mercy.

Then, it wasn't really mercy, was it? Middenheim was doomed, and its people with it. There would be no door strong enough, no hole deep enough to keep out the followers of the Dark Gods when the battle was won. When the last defenders fell, then the true horror would begin. Archaon had promised this city to the gods, and the word of the Everchosen was law.

As if the gods had heard his thoughts and wished to punish him, a lance slammed into his side, knocking him to one knee. His armour had been forged by the daemonsmiths of Zharr Naggrund and the mortal weapon merely splintered, peeling away as it struck him. Even so, the force of the blow was enough to rattle his brains, and he reeled, off balance. The knight galloped past, freeing a heavy morning star from his saddle as he did so. The spiked ball crashed down on Canto's helm. He lurched back, slamming into the doorway of the building. The horse reared over him, hooves lashing out. Canto snarled a curse and lunged forwards, driving his shoulder into the animal's midsection.

The horse toppled with a squeal, carrying its rider with it. Canto dispatched both swiftly. But even as he wrenched his blade free of the knight's shuddering body, he saw that his attacker hadn't been alone. The Knights Panther had ploughed through the jammed ranks of the horde, leaving a trail of carnage in their wake. It was a suicidal endeavour, but it had a purpose. Most of them had already been pulled from their saddles, but some still rode on, intent on their quarry – Archaon himself. One of the knights roared a challenge as he spurred his horse forwards, and raised a single-bladed war-axe in readiness for a killing blow.

The Everchosen was mounted upon a coal-black nightmare of a beast, with eyes like burning embers and hooves which split the stones they trod upon. Its fanged maw champed hungrily at its iron bit as Archaon hauled back on the reins and turned the animal to face his challenger. The menace of the steed was nothing compared to that of its rider. It was the first time Canto had seen the Everchosen in the flesh.

Archaon was taller and broader than most who fought under his banner and his armour was far more ornate, its plates covered in lines of scrawled script, strange runes and abominable sigils which made even the most puissant sorcerer weep with fear. Too, it seemed to be of all colours and none, shifting as it caught the light through a vast spectrum of hues wholly unknown to man. Canto had heard that the armour had belonged to Morkar the Uniter, First Chosen of Chaos, in the dim, ancient days of the past.

In his hand, Archaon held a heavy sword – the infamous Slayer of Kings. The blade writhed with barely contained power, and leering faces formed and dissolved on its surface as he brought it up and sent it slamming down through his challenger's shield and into the body below. The knight fell from his saddle as his horse thundered past. His death did not deter his comrades, however. Indeed, it seemed to only spur them on.

Canto watched in incredulity as the Everchosen was surrounded and separated from his bodyguards by the remaining knights. Those chosen to keep the Swords of Chaos at bay did so with reckless abandon, fighting furiously, with no thought for their own well-being. The remaining trio engaged Archaon. Two came at him from either side, while the third hung back. As soon as Archaon had turned to deal with his companions, the knight kicked his steed into motion and galloped towards the Everchosen.

Time stopped. The world grew still and silent. Canto held his breath. Archaon was the Chosen of Chaos, the man before whom all the daemons of the world bowed. But he was still a man. He could still be killed, and a blade to the back would do the job as easily as a cannonball or a warhammer in the hands of the Herald of Sigmar himself.

Against his better judgement, Canto looked up. The sky still moved. The clouds writhed and became faces, before breaking apart and becoming just clouds again. The gods were watching. Now would be a good time to pretend he hadn't seen anything, that he was elsewhere. *Pretend you're not here*, he hissed to himself. *Let the gods look after their own.*

But even as the thought crossed his mind, Canto hurled himself forwards. His blade hewed through the horse's legs, and the animal fell screaming. Its rider toppled from the saddle, but came to his feet a moment later. His sword slammed into Canto's and they duelled over the body of the dying horse, but only for a moment. The man was hurt, and perhaps even dying, even as his sword arm faltered and Canto's sword landed on his shoulder, driving him to his knees. The dawi zharr-forged blade cut through the knight's heavy armour with ease and he flopped across the body of his steed, dead.

Canto jerked his weapon free of the body. 'You have my thanks, warrior,' a voice rumbled. Canto turned. The Three-Eyed King looked down at him, and Canto wondered how far away Kislev was. Archaon looked down, at the body of the knight, and then back up, taking in Canto's unadorned armour. Canto stepped back, suddenly conscious of the lack of devotional markings on the baroque plates of black iron. He was called 'Unsworn' for a good reason; he had never climbed the eight hundred and eighty-eight steps to the Skull Throne, or hacked his way into Nurgle's Garden looking for a patron. The gods couldn't be trusted. They gave a man everything he wanted, even when he begged them to stop.

'Kneel,' Archaon rumbled.

'Rather not – trick knee,' Canto said, but he was already sinking down even as the words left his lips. The battle still raged about them, but here, in this moment, he felt the weight of a terrible silence descend on him. The clangour of war was muted and dull. He refused to look up, because he knew that if he did, something would be looking down at *him* from the wide, hungry sky. For the first time, the gods would see him. *You've done it now, fool*, he thought. *You've got their interest now, and you know what that means.*

Except he didn't, not really. Oh he'd seen what could happen, but he'd spent centuries avoiding the gazes of the gods. He'd done just enough, but never too much. Just enough to survive, but never enough to prosper. A rat hiding in a midden heap. His heart stuttered in its rhythm, and his armour rattled.

'Canto the Unsworn,' Archaon said. He sounded amused. Canto didn't bother to wonder how Archaon knew his name. The gods had likely whispered it in his ear. 'You rode with the Gorewolf, and before him, Tzerpichore the Unwritten.' Archaon cocked his head. 'They say Tzerpichore's great tortoise of iron and crystal still walks the Wastes, searching for its master.'

'Yes, they do,' Canto said. 'And it does.'

'There are few men these days who do not find sanctuary in one god or another's shadow. But you stand apart. Is that due to fear or pride, I wonder?'

'Fear,' Canto croaked. Archaon's eyes shone like stars, and he felt the strange heat of a cold fire wash over him. It was as if he were being flayed from the inside out, opened up so the Everchosen could examine every nook and cranny of his black and blasted soul.

'What do you fear?'

'Death. Madness. Change.' The words slipped out before Canto could stop them. They hung on the air, like the notes of a song. He felt the hideous interest intensify, and knew what a mouse must feel when it is caught by a cat. Several cats, in fact. And their king was glaring down at him, considering where to insert his claws.

'I was damned from the first breath that I took. All men are,' Archaon said, almost gently. 'We change from what we were with every moment and hour that passes, losing ourselves the way a serpent loses its skin. To hold on to the old, that is madness. To strive against the current, *that* is madness. There is nothing to fear, Unsworn. Not now. The worst has happened. The horns of doom have sounded, and the pillars of heaven and earth come crashing down.' His great blade stretched out. Canto closed his eyes. He saw his life – a life of running and fighting and colours and sounds and somewhere, out there, far away, he thought he could feel the slow rumble of the tortoise as it continued on its way through the Chaos Wastes, and he felt a moment of inexplicable sadness.

There was a soft sound, and he opened his eyes as the flat of Archaon's blade touched his shoulder. 'Rise, and be fearless. Rise, and find sanctuary in *my* shadow, Unsworn. We ride for ruin, and our victory is assured.' Then the sword was lifted, and Archaon's steed reared, pawing the air with an ear-splitting shriek.

Time snapped back into focus. Noise washed over Canto, staggering him. A howling, wolf-cloaked warrior charged towards him, hammer swinging out, and he rose to his feet smoothly. He swept his sword out and disembowelled his attacker. A riderless horse, its flesh writhing with thorns and its eyes made of smoking gemstones, galloped past, snorting and kicking. *Like a gift from the gods*, Canto thought, even as his hand snapped out to catch hold of its bloody bridle.



FOUR

The Temple of Ulric

Gregor Martak climbed the broad steps of the Temple of Ulric, looking about him with satisfaction. Whether that satisfaction was solely his or was shared by the power now inhabiting his body, he couldn't say, but he thought Ulric must approve of Valten's preparations. The Herald of Sigmar was no fool, whatever his origins.

He had garrisoned the cloisters and processional ways of the eastern and western wings of the temple with bands of state troops, ensuring that the flanks and rear of their position were well defended. The bulk of the surviving forces under his command now occupied the northern edge of the vast cobbled square which sat before the temple's main entrance. Deep ranks of troops stood before the steps, their lines anchored by the wings of the temple. Men of Averland, Ostermark and the Reikland stood ready to the east, their fire-torn standards whipping in the unnatural wind that curled through the streets of Middenheim. To the west, Talabheimers stood firm alongside the musters of Altdorf and Stirland. The honour of the centre position had been given to their hosts, who stood in the shadow of their god, halberds and crossbows ready for the storm to come.

The survivors of the various knightly orders who had chosen to make Middenheim their burying ground stood behind the centre. The Knights of the White Wolf, the Gryphon Legion, the Knights of the Black Bear, and the Knights of the Broken Sword were all in evidence. There were others scattered throughout the city, fighting a desperate holding action or mounting suicidal counter-attacks. The knightly orders had ever been the mailed fist of the Empire, and in these final hours most seemed determined to get in as many blows as possible, even if that meant their own annihilation.

Deployed at the top of the steps, before the doors of the temple, were the remnants of Middenheim's once-proud Grand Battery. Every gun that could be salvaged from the walls and keeps of the city had been, and they were now arrayed so as to belch fire and destruction into the enemy whose approach even now caused the street to shake slightly.

Martak joined a group of men at the top of the steps, before the battery. A ragtag group of captains, sergeants, and mercenary commanders stood in tense discussion. Martak recognised a few of them, including the raven-haired Torben Badenov, the peg-legged Marienburger Edvard van der Kraal, and the loutish Volland, a hedge-knight from Tilea. Nearby, Axel Greiss was arguing with two of his fellow Grand Masters, Nicolai Dostov of the Gryphon Legion and Volg Staahl, the Preceptor of the Order of the Black Bear. The latter nodded to Martak and said, 'Look, Martak's here. The day is saved.'

Greiss whirled. He glared at Martak, but only for a moment. 'Glad you could join us, wizard,' he muttered, turning back to the others. 'Tell him what you told me, Staahl.'

Dostov and Staahl shared a look. The other man's dislike of Martak was well known, and the wizard wondered if Greiss's sudden desire to include him in their hastily convened war council surprised them. Like Greiss, they were older men. Dostov, a white-moustachioed Kislevite clad in the banded mail and back banner in the shape of a pair of wings which marked a warrior of the Gryphon Legion, was lean and hard-faced. Staahl, on the other hand, was a keg with legs. With his ash-smeared plate armour and ragged bear-skin cloak, he resembled nothing so much as a particularly fat, disreputable bear.

'Achendorf is dead. Took his knights and made a try for the head of the beast, poor fool,' Staahl rumbled. Dostov frowned, but said nothing. Greiss snorted.

'Do not pity him. He gambled, and lost. Would that he had succeeded,' he said.

'It's not him I pity,' Staahl snapped. 'It's us. We could have used him and his men, Axel. Instead, he sacrificed them in a foolhardy attempt at glory. Every sword counts, and he took good men into death with him.'

'Does it matter where they die?' Greiss growled, bristling. He gestured at the men below with his hammer. 'That is why they – why *we* – are here, you fat old fool. To fight and die, so that the Emperor might live one more day. We are *bleeding* them. Nothing more.'

'No.'

They all turned as one, Martak included. The fragment of Ulric within him twitched as he caught sight of Valten ascending the steps. Down below, more men hastily squeezed into the ranks. 'No, we are not just a sacrifice, Master Greiss. In the end, perhaps. When the war is done, and scribes record the events of this day, that is what they might say of us. But here and now, we are so much more.' The trio of Grand Masters stepped aside as Valten strode past them. He looked up at the temple for a moment, and then turned back to them. 'Here and now, we are the Empire of Sigmar. Here and now, we are the City of the White Wolf. Middenheim stands. And while it does, so too does the world.' He raised his voice, pitching it to carry. Down below, the noise of men preparing for war had dimmed. Martak realised that almost every eye in the square was upon them.

As cheers rose up from below, Valten turned back to Martak and the others. Greiss and his fellow knights were staring at him as if, for the first time, they suddenly understood that Valten was not merely a jumped-up blacksmith in borrowed armour, but something else entirely. Valten met Martak's gaze. The part of the wizard which was Ulric recognised the spark of... otherness in the man before him. It was only a spark, but it might grow into a roaring flame. One to cleanse the stones of the Fauschlag of the filth that crept over them. If it was given the time.

But even as the thought crossed his mind, Valten's smile faded, becoming sad. He shook his head slightly, a gesture so infinitesimal that Martak knew he alone had seen it. And in his soul, Ulric howled mournfully.

Greiss cleared his throat. 'A very pretty speech, blacksmith. But speeches alone won't see us safely to another sunrise.'

Valten turned to the old knight. 'No, for that we'll have to trust in Altdorf steel, Nuln gunpowder and Middenheim courage.' He paused, as if taking stock of the situation. Then, he continued. 'We hoped that the Fauschlag would protect us. That the walls of Middenheim would keep the enemy at bay for weeks, if not months.' He looked at each of the gathered officers in turn. 'We hoped that the Emperor might rally the rest of the Empire from Averheim, and perhaps even relieve us here. That together, we could drive the enemy back into the Wastes.' He grinned. 'Doesn't seem very likely now, does it?'

Staahl snorted, and several of the captains chuckled. Greiss and Dostov frowned. Martak couldn't restrain a harsh cackle. He felt Ulric growl unappreciatively within him; the wolf-god wasn't, by nature, fatalistic. Nor did he have a sense of humour.

'The enemy is inside the walls. All we can do now is hope to bear the brunt of his fury, and break his back when he exhausts himself,' Valten continued. He looked at Martak. 'If we can bring Archagon to battle, then we have a chance. If the Three-Eyed King falls, his army will disintegrate. Middenheim might well be consumed in that conflagration, but that is a small price to pay for victory.'

Ulric snarled in agreement within Martak's soul, and Valten smiled slightly, as if he'd heard the god's voice. Martak wondered just how much Valten saw. If they survived the coming conflict, he intended to ask him. He heard the winding howl of a war-horn, and turned. 'It looks like we'll have no trouble with the first part of that plan,' Martak murmured.

Along the southern edge of the square, the foe had begun to arrive. Black-armoured northlanders chanted and bellowed, clashing their weapons and shaking their shields in furious tumult. Drums boomed back, deep in their ranks. Daemons capered about them, hurling incoherent threats at the men standing before the Temple of Ulric. Beastmen paced at the fringes of the gathering horde, throwing back their heads to add their roars and wildcat screams

to the dreadful clangour. But, even as their numbers swelled, they did not move to cross the square and attack.

'They're waiting for their master to arrive,' Valten said. He stared at the gathering ranks of the enemy, as if in search of Archæon.

'Biggest dog gets first bite,' Martak grunted. He could feel the essence of the wolf-god gathering itself in him, ready for the fury to come. His breath came in pale puffs, and those men closest to him stepped back nervously.

Suddenly, the air was split by the sound of beating wings. It was as if a hundred thousand crows had chosen that moment to fill the air above the square. The men on the steps cried out in alarm, and clapped their hands to their ears as the thunderous wingbeats threatened their eardrums. Even Valten staggered slightly as the air rippled with the shadows of diving, swooping birds. Martak alone stood tall.

His eyes narrowed, and his hand shot out to catch hold of the end of a spear moments before it lanced through Valten's chest. The whirring, shifting shadows parted, and the spear's wielder was revealed – a snarling beastman, with wide, black-feathered wings rising from his broad back. *Malagor, the Dark Omen, Best-Loved of the Dark Gods*, Ulric's voice growled in his mind. Martak's lips skinned back from his teeth, and he returned Malagor's snarl in kind. The tableau held for a moment, as man and beast stared at one another. Martak's arm trembled as he slowly forced the spear back. Malagor's wings beat heavily, as it tried to drive the weapon forwards. Then, in a clap of darkling thunder, the creature was gone.

On the other side of the square, the gathered beastmen suddenly broke ranks and pelled forwards, as if Malagor's attack had been a signal. They brayed wildly and brandished crude weapons as they charged in a scattered, undisciplined mass towards the gleaming ranks of spears and halberds.

Valten shook himself, as if emerging from a dream. He raised his hammer. 'To your places, brothers, captains, masters... May Sigmar and Ulric both watch over you,' he said, looking at the others. They snapped into motion, hurrying to their positions, as down below orders rang out along the Empire battle-line, drums rattled and horns blared. Valten looked at Martak. 'They want me dead,' he murmured. 'They do not want their chosen weapon to meet me in combat.'

'Well, let's disappoint them, then,' Martak growled. He looked out over the square, eyes narrowed. Whatever madness had seized the beastherds had not consumed the rest of Archæon's army. Unsupported as they were, and out in the open, the beastmen were being cut to ribbons by volleys of crossbow bolts and gunfire. Behind Martak, the great cannons began to bellow, and soon cannonballs bounced across the square, ploughing into the frenzied ranks of charging beastmen. Mortar shells and rockets hammered the disorganised herds, hurling broken corpses through the smoke-stained air. A looming ghorgon, massive jaws snapping hungrily, toppled backwards as a cannonball smashed through its skull, and crushed a dozen of its lesser kin.

A shriek from above tore Martak's attentions from the carnage being wrought in the square. He and Valten looked up, to see a swirling murder of crows descend on the artillery at the top of the steps. Gunners cried out in fear and pain as Malagor swept through them, plucking eyes and raking flesh. The Dark Omen was monstrous and unstoppable, and his body dissolved into a shower of feathers only to reform elsewhere to wreak more havoc. Even as the bodies of those he'd slain tumbled down the steps, Malagor vanished, the thunder of wings echoing in his wake.

Valten started up the steps, hammer in hand. Martak grabbed his arm. 'No. I'll handle the beast. You see to the battle.' Valten opened his mouth, as if to reply, then nodded and turned to race down the steps. Martak cracked his knuckles, and then closed his eyes. His nostrils flared as he inhaled the stench of Malagor's magics. The creature was ripe with the stink of the swirling energies which permeated the clouds far above. Martak, eyes still closed, turned one way, and then another, following Malagor's twisting, turning pilgrimage across the battle-lines of the Empire. Men died wherever the beast settled, and it seemed to be unconcerned with the savage slaughter being inflicted on its kin, for its attacks were random, rather than calculated to ease the advance of the beastmen.

Nonetheless, the beastmen were possessed by an unmatched ferocity, and down in the square they hurled themselves through the teeth of the artillery and crashed home at last, smashing into the ranks of the state troops. The creatures were outnumbered, and almost ridiculously so, but Martak knew that such concerns no longer held sway over them. The Children of Chaos had been driven into a killing frenzy, and they were determined to taste the blood of their enemies.

There!

The thought sliced through his consciousness, and Martak's eyes snapped open. His head ached with the pounding of wings as he turned and saw a mass of whirling feathers dropping towards Greiss and his knights. Martak raced down the steps, one arm flung back. He stopped, and his arm snapped forwards. A jagged spear of amber, coated in ice, cut through the air with a whistling shriek.

The mass of shadow-crows gave a communal scream and something hairy dropped from their midst to crash down on the steps. Martak pounced, his hands seizing the length of his conjured spear, and he shoved his prey back down as it tried to rise. Malagor howled in agony as it pawed uselessly at the ice. Its blood had splattered out across the steps like the wings of some great, malignant bird. Martak leaned against the spear with his full weight. Malagor's flesh blackened with frostbite, and its froth became frozen slush. It glared at Martak, and he matched that gaze, even as he had before.

Then, with a frustrated whimper, Malagor flopped back and lay still. Martak shoved himself back, and stood. Down below, the fury of the beastmen was mostly spent. Martak watched with grim pleasure as Valten struck a minotaur, the force of his blow driving the monster to its knees. His second blow took its head completely off, sending it rolling across the cobbles. The surviving beastmen were beginning to flee.

Valten wheeled his horse about and rode back through the lines, speaking calmly to the soldiers. A joke here, a word of comfort there... The god in Martak watched in wonder as men who had only moments before been filled with fury and fear straightened their spines and locked shields once more. The ragged holes carved in their ranks by the beastmen vanished as fresh men moved to fill the gaps. Fallen standards were lifted high as Valten passed along the shield-wall, meeting the gaze of each man in turn. He began to speak, and his words were almost immediately drowned out by cheers.

What is he? Ulric murmured. Martak smiled. 'A blacksmith,' he said, softly. War was Valten's anvil, and, were the world a kinder place, perhaps he could have made something stronger from the raw materials the End Times had provided him. For a moment, Martak could almost see it... a world of shining towers, and prosperous peoples. Where no woman would have to abandon her deformed child to the forests; where no man would so fear the touch of tainted water that he chose a slow death by alcohol, rather than risk the waters of the Reik. Where the cities of men were not threatened by howling hordes of northmen or orcs.

Ulric growled within him, and Martak felt his smile slip. Such a world was not a pleasant thought for a god of war, winter and woe. 'Well, it's not as if we have to worry about it, eh?' he asked himself. 'The wheel of the world is slowing, and soon enough it will stop.'

Valten rode up to the bottom of the temple steps, and Martak went down to meet him. 'Do you hear the drums, Gregor? I think we've caught their attention,' Valten said. His eyes strayed to the remains of Malagor, and then he turned in his saddle, peering out across the square. 'Which is all to the good, I think. The men have had a victory. They'll be hungry for another.'

Martak followed his gaze. The horde gathered along the southern edge of the temple square had grown to massive proportions. It was a seething tide of black armour, cruel weapons and ragged banners. The latter stretched back into the gloom which dominated the narrow streets and crooked avenues of the Ulricsmund beyond. A wave of noise rose and spread from the ranks of the Chaos worshippers, tortured syllables crashing down and flowing over the men of the Empire. The raw surge of noise rose to mingle with the thunder that rocked the strange clouds overhead, to create an apocalyptic cacophony which drowned out all thought and sense.

Then lightning flared across the sky, and the horde fell silent. The sudden quiet was almost as bad as the noise had been. Martak felt Ulric bristle within him, and he looked up, trying to catch a glimpse of the monstrous, ghostly shapes which moved behind the clouds. *They are here*, Ulric growled. *They come to watch.*

Eyes as wide and as hot as the sun washed over him, through a tear in the clouds, and Martak shuddered and looked away. There had been nothing recognisable in that gaze – nothing save an eternity's worth of hunger and madness. The Chaos Gods were not as the gods of men. They had known the world as dust in the aeons before creation, and they would know it as dust again before they were finished.

Out across the square, the host of the lost and damned parted like split wood. Chaos warriors, scarred tribesmen and squabbling daemons all pushed and thrust against their fellows to create a wide corridor. And down that corridor, riding at an unhurried pace, came the architect of all the world's pain himself.

Archæon, Lord of the End Times, had arrived.



Wendel Volker wished he had time for a drink. He wished he had time for anything. He stood amid the lines of the state troops, his armour stained with gore and his shield hacked almost to flinders. Brunner stood nearby, his falchion resting on his shoulder. The former bounty-hunter looked almost at ease, as if the carnage of only a few moments before had been nothing at all. The rest of Valten's men had spread out among the ranks, filling in gaps or simply seeking out friends and comrades to stand with. Volker had neither. Not any more.

He closed his eyes, and tried to relax. The worst was yet to come, and a Volker couldn't be found wanting. Behind him, he heard the murmurs of healers

and warrior priests as they worked to stiffen spines and bind wounds. Servants of Sigmar, Ulric and even Ranald, all were present. Whether their gods were was another matter.

'He's a big one,' Brunner grunted.

Volker opened his eyes. The Chaos horde had fallen silent. Their master, the Three-Eyed King himself, had arrived. Volker lifted his visor to get a better look at the king of all monsters. Brunner wasn't wrong – Archaon was big, bigger than any of his followers, save for those who loomed over buildings. His armour shone with a terrible light, and the air about him shimmered as if the weight of his presence caused reality itself to stretch and fray. Archaon was *wrong*, Volker thought. He was the very essence of wrongness, of the foulness that crept in through the cracks in the world, and Volker felt his stomach twist in agonised knots as he watched the Lord of the End Times ride through his followers and into the square.

'How much do you think they'd pay me for his scalp?' Brunner said.

'They'd make you bloody emperor,' Volker said, not looking at him. Archaon was in no hurry. His daemoniac steed pawed the ground as it moved forwards. The ground cracked and steamed where the animal's hooves touched. The Three-Eyed King was surrounded by a bodyguard of Chaos knights, each of them a monster in his own right. Archaon, his great sword balanced across his saddle horn, stared at the forces arrayed before the temple.

Volker fought the urge to shrink back into the ranks. He felt soul-sick and weary as Archaon's inhuman gaze swept over him. Overhead, the roiling clouds had thickened and darkened as the storm redoubled its fury. A hot rain had begun to fall, softly, slowly at first, and then with hissing fury. The sword in Volker's hand felt heavy, and his breathing was a harsh rasp in his ears. Archaon straightened in his saddle. His armour creaked like the wheels of a plague cart, and when he spoke, Volker felt each word in the marrow of his bones.

'I am the Final Moment made flesh. I stand here on this mountain, and I will sit on its throne. I will be the axis upon which the wheel of change turns, and the world will drown in the light of unborn stars.' Archaon looked up. 'Can you feel it, men of the Empire – can you feel the air tremble like a thing alive? Can you feel the heat of the fire that rages outside the gates of the world?' He lowered his head, gazing at them, his expression unfathomable, hidden as it was within the depths of his helm. 'The End Times are here, and there is no turning back. There is no past, no future, only now. Time is a circle and it is contracting about the throat of the world,' Archaon said, making a fist for emphasis. 'Why do you cling so to the broken shards of Sigmar's lie? There is no afterlife. There is no reward, no punishment. Only death, or life.'

Volker blinked sweat from his eyes. Men to either side of him shifted in obvious discomfort. Archaon's words ate at his resolve like acid, stripping him of courage and will. Archaon gazed at them for a moment, as if to let his words sink in, and then he began to speak again. 'Look to the sky. Look to the street. Cracks are forming in what is, and what was. That which shall be presses against the threshold of time itself. This world is, and always has been, but a moment delayed. A single drop of blood, hanging from the tip of a sword. And now, it splashes down.'

Archaon swept his blade up, and fire crawled along its length. 'This sword. Your blood. Your age has passed. The pallid mask of human existence has begun to peel back, revealing the canker within. Why not rip it off at once, and glory in these final hours – shout, revel, kill, and taste the blood of the world as it dies.'

Men murmured. Fever-bright eyes blinked. Tongues caressed lips. Volker shuddered, trying to push his way through the numbing fog that had engulfed his thoughts. Archaon seemed to glow with a sour light, like a beacon calling all of the world's children home. Part of Volker wanted to follow it wherever it led, to give in to despair and rage and wash away the memories of Heldenname and Altdorf in blood. He looked down, and caught sight of the crowned skull emblazoned on his cuirass, with the 'KF' sigil of Karl Franz.

The sound of hooves shook him from his reverie. Men stood straighter, and looked about, as Valten eased his horse through the press. He looked tired, the way they all did, but not weak. Not exhausted. When he spoke, his voice carried easily through the rain, and across the square, from one wing of the army to the other.

'He is right, brothers,' Valten said. 'All of history has come down to this place. Every story, song and saga, they have all led up to this day, this hour, this moment. We stand in the shadow of heroes and gods, and their hands are on our shoulders, urging us in one direction... or another.' As the words left his mouth, he turned towards Archaon.

'But it is up to us to choose who we listen to. We have been given this day to make our stand. To bar the door of the world against the beast that would devour everything we hold dear. We have been given this moment to show our teeth. To show our anger, and let it light the flames of the world's wrath.' Valten looked out over the massed ranks of soldiery. 'Let its heat warm you, and its light drive back the dark. Let that fire light the way to the ending of the world, if that is what the gods will. Let it scour the rock, and consume the stars themselves. Let the heat of our pyre scorch the Dark Gods cowering in the shadows, if that is the will of Sigmar.'

He paused. And smiled. It was a gentle smile. The smile of a blacksmith at his forge. 'But either way... let the fire burn, brothers.' The words were delivered quietly, but they carried nonetheless. Volker was not alone as a cheer ripped its way from his throat. Hundreds of voices rose, mingling into a single roar of defiance. The sky ripped wide, as if the cacodaemoniacal gods above had been driven into paroxysms of fury by the sound.

Archaon raised his sword. Lightning shrieked down, striking the blade and casting a sickly light across the square. The cheers ceased as the Lord of the End Times reminded them of his presence. Volker hunkered down behind his shield as stray sparks of lightning spat and crawled across the ground at his feet.

'This is the way the world ends,' Archaon rumbled. 'This is the way the world begins. Let my name ring out, and let the very mountains tremble. I have come for the rotten heart of your Empire, and I will not leave until I feel it grow still in my hand. Run and die, or stand and die, hammer-bearer, but die all the same.' He spread his arms, as if inviting attack.

'Death is a small price to pay for victory,' Valten said. He spoke steadily, with certainty, and his voice carried easily across the square. 'And our victory is writ in the heavens themselves. You are not the one to unravel the weave of the world. Ride home, ride back into the darkness.' He gestured with his hammer.

'I *am* home,' Archaon snarled. 'And I will not be denied.' He hauled back on the reins of his monstrous steed, causing the beast to rear. He raised his blade up and then swept it down, as if it were a headsman's axe and it were Middenheim's neck on the block.

With a roar to shake the Fauschlag itself, Archaon's army charged.



The moment the Slayer of Kings swept down, Archaon was in motion. Bent low in the saddle, the Lord of the End Times led the attack. Canto, surrounded on all sides by the grim, armoured figures of the Swords of Chaos, had no choice but to follow in his wake.

Canto ducked his head, and bent almost parallel to the neck of his newfound mount. The animal gibbered ceaselessly in what sounded like Tilean, spewing what were either curses or recipes as it pounded along, its hooves eating ground at a relentless pace. He'd tried hitting it, but that only made it talk more loudly, and it had tried to bite him to boot. He'd decided to settle for holding on and letting the beast do as it willed.

Holding tight to the reins, he risked a glance back. The rest of the Chaos horde was in motion behind the Swords. Chaos warriors from a hundred different warbands pounded after their warlord, shaking the square with the fury of their charge. Wild, yelling tribesmen ran alongside them. Packs of twisted, mutated hounds bayed madly as they loped across the cobbles, and daemons capered and gambolled in their wake. To the east, Canto caught sight of a massive slaughterbrute ploughing forwards, flinging aside unlucky tribesmen in its haste to get to the enemy. Gibbering Chaos spawn flailed about madly around its mighty form, screeching and screaming. Behind this vanguard came wave after wave of northmen, enough to bury all of Middenheim in corpses if that was what it took to win the victory.

He heard the roar of guns, and turned to see flashes of fire from the top of the temple steps. As soon as the horde had broken into a charge, the Empire guns had opened fire. Mortars thumped, cannons boomed and helblasters let out a staccato roar. To his right, a barrage of rockets slammed down amongst the remnants of the Headsmen, tearing his former comrades to pieces. Tribesmen fell as cannonballs pounded into the close-packed mass of bodies. Crossbow bolts hummed through the air like wasps, plucking riders from the saddles and catching leaping hounds in mid-air. Despite there being more room, it reminded Canto unpleasantly of his earlier march up the viaduct.

He jerked his mount to the side, narrowly avoiding a bounding pink horror as it was shredded into a pair of moaning blue ones in a spray of twinkling multi-coloured motes. Somewhere behind him, a Chaos-tainted giant gave a long, drawn-out death-howl as it toppled forwards like a felled tree. The ground shuddered beneath his steed's hooves as the great body crashed down, crushing a score of inobservant tribesmen.

But none of it mattered. There were simply too many bodies to be so easily thrown on the fire and forgotten. All around Canto, bellowing Kurgan, Aeslings and Tahmaks pressed forwards over the fire-torn bodies of the dead, climbing heaps and drifts of corpses in their eagerness to reach their foes. Snarling Dolgans, mounted on shaggy horses, galloped alongside Khazags and the horse-lords of the Kul. Kvelligs, Aghols and Bjornlings forced their way up, into the teeth of the enemy fire, their broad, brightly painted kite shields bristling with bullet holes and broken crossbow bolts. Too, masked cultists from the

softer southern lands charged as wildly as their hardier northern allies, robes the colour of dried blood flapping as they smashed round shields with bronze-headed maces in terrible hymns to the Lord of Skulls.

The end was as inevitable as a storm in summer, or snow in winter. Canto drew his sword as his horse vaulted the broken body of a mutated ogre, and felt a cold weight in his gut. Either way, what happened here would determine the fate of all involved. *Death or glory*, he thought bitterly, as the Swords of Chaos galloped on.

Even as he drew close to the Empire lines, Canto felt an old, horribly familiar tingle at the nape of his neck. Somewhere behind the enemy, a whirling white vortex took form and rose above the heads of the soldiers. A figure clad in furs rose with it, long arms gesturing frantically. A harsh voice spat out jagged words of power, and a blizzard of shimmering ice-forms erupted from the swirling vortex. Canto heard a chill shriek and saw an immense flock of white crows, with beaks and talons of glittering ice, hurtle towards Archaon, and by extension, himself.

Riders to either side of him were torn from their saddles by the birds. He ducked his head, and felt talons scrape against his helm and cuirass. A skull was plucked from his pauldron. He'd lost his shield not long after entering the city, and he cursed himself for not claiming another. With a roar, he whipped his blade about his head in an attempt to drive the flapping ice-constructs back as he urged his horse on. He caught a glimpse of Archaon moments before the Lord of the End Times struck the enemy like a thunderbolt.

The shield wall exploded, as if it had been hit by a volley of cannon fire. Archaon could not be stopped or slowed, and wherever his head turned, men died. Canto and the others joined him a moment later, thundering home with a resounding crash. Screaming soldiers were smashed off their feet by the impact, while the blades of the Chaos knights cut through breastplates and shields or hacked off heads. Canto laid about him without enthusiasm, fighting on instinct. Every blow felt like the turn of a page, bringing them closer to the end. *But that's what you want, Unsworn*, he thought. *An end to this madness.*

It sounded like something Count Mordrek might have said. Under other circumstances, that alone might have made him dismiss it out of hand, but the act of killing brought with it a strange sort of clarity. Was it truly escape from this battle, from the eyes of the gods, which he desired, or was it an ending?

When he'd first chosen sides and taken up arms against his fellow man, it had seemed that he would never tire of battle, or of the rewards bought with blood. But a few centuries' worth of slaughter was enough to glut any man, especially the son of a spice importer from Nuln. He'd slipped off the wheel of fate, and hadn't looked back.

It had all seemed so clear, once upon a time. The triumph of the Dark Gods seemed a certainty. But he'd never stopped to ask himself what form that triumph might take. The gods weren't warlords or tribal chieftains, for whom land and slaves were the spoils of victory. The gods only desired souls and destruction. Neither of which appealed to Canto, particularly.

To the west the Empire lines suddenly exploded into a lurid disharmony of light and sound, and Canto was nearly jolted from his saddle by the reverberations. The air stank of magics, and with a great roar, a firestorm exploded above the Empire army's western flank. Men screamed as their clothing caught light and their skin ran like tallow. Weapons warped and curled, transmuted into horrible shapes or inert elements. The ripple of sorcerous destruction spread outwards, claiming the lives of any in its path.

But in the centre, the shield-wall still held, much to Canto's frustration. He found himself surrounded by grim Middenlanders and howling, sackcloth-clad flagellants. Flails and halberd blades struck his armour from all sides, and it seemed that no matter how many men he killed, there were always more. Suddenly, the knot of death about him began to unravel as the Three-Eyed King forced his way through. He met Canto's bewildered gaze with a terse nod. 'You'll have to fight harder than that, Unsworn. We have a ways to go, yet.'

Archaon's eyes bored into him, as if the Lord of the End Times could see his earlier thoughts and had found them wanting. Canto's sword arm twitched, and he saw an image of his blade sliding into the gap between the Everchosen's helmet and gorget. Shadow-shapes hunched and slithered at the edges of his vision, and he felt taloned hands on his shoulders and on his forearm, ready to guide his blade – where?

He felt a kernel of panic begin to grow in him, and he recalled how the air had tasted in that far-off, but never far away, moment when he'd had a man named Magnus at his mercy, and chosen obscurity over glory. He'd had a chance, once, to earn the rewards of the gods. He had chosen their ire and indifference instead.

He had another chance now. It was as if that same moment had hunted him down through all of the ages, and now it had found him. He could hear its howl of triumph as it stalked him over the points of spears and shaking standards. *Run and hide or stand and fight, Unsworn – your appointed hour has come round at last*, something whispered in his head. Was that his voice, or Archaon's? Was it a human voice at all, or something else?

And, more importantly, *what was the choice it wanted him to make?*

Archaon turned away, and began to fight his way forwards once more. His dreadful sword rose and fell with a sinner's wail, cutting short destinies and devouring hope. Canto looked down at the blade in his hand. Then, with a sharp cry, he drove his knees into his mount's flanks and charged in the Everchosen's wake.



FIVE

The Temple of Ulric

Gregor Martak spun, and his ice-wreathed hands punched through the cackling daemon's soft belly. The pink horror shrilled as it began to split into two smaller blue ones, but Martak's fingers caught the creatures before they could fully form and filled their gaping maws with ice and amber. The daemons evaporated with tinny moans, as Martak turned his attentions elsewhere. Inside him, he could feel the godspark of Ulric raging and smashing against the confines of his soul.

To the west, the west, the god howled.

'Are there not enemies enough for you here?' Martak snarled. Ice and snow rose from his hands, sweeping forward to flash-freeze a slobbering Chaos troll. The brute toppled over and shattered into a dozen chunks. Northmen filled the gap left by the troll, and hurled themselves towards him with suicidal courage. Martak, mind reeling with the fury of the god nesting within him, hastily created a shield of amber and frost, blocking the first blow. At a gesture, the shield twisted and transformed, splitting into a multitude of stabbing lances. Several of his attackers were punched off their feet, and the rest were driven back. Martak stepped forwards, gathering his strength, and gestured again. The lances bulged, cracked and split, becoming shrieking hawks, raucous crows and even a few stinging hummingbirds.

The barbarians were forced back by the swarm of mystical constructs, even as he'd hoped. Breathing heavily, he staggered back too. The state troops closed ranks to his fore, buying him a few precious moments to catch his breath. He was tired – more tired than he'd ever been. Every muscle ached, and his body felt like a wrung-out wineskin. It was no easy thing to carry the weight of a god, and he knew, with animal certainty, that even if they won the day, he would be burned to nothing by the cold fire of Ulric's presence. Whatever happened here today, Gregor Martak was a dead man.

He smiled thinly. Then, his life expectancy had dropped to almost nothing the moment he'd been made Supreme Patriarch. And in a time of war, no less. He'd almost died ten times over in the first battle for Altdorf, and its fall almost two years later. He shook himself all over, like a dog scattering water, and sniffed the air. He caught the rank odour – like sour milk and spoiled fruit – of fell sorcery, and peered west, as Ulric had urged.

His eyes widened as he caught sight of the eldritch inferno sweeping across the western flank of the Empire's battle-line. He could hear the screams of men and the cackling of daemons, and knew that, unless whatever magics had been unleashed there were countered, the whole flank might collapse. He cursed and looked around for Valten.

The Herald of Sigmar sat on his horse nearby, with Greiss and the other commanders. His armour was dented and scorched, and his face was drawn and haggard. He had fought in the vanguard for those first terrible moments of the attack, but had been forced back behind the shield-wall by simple necessity. Now he was trying to organise a counter-attack with Greiss, Staahl and the remaining knights.

Martak hurried towards them. 'We ride through them, then,' Greiss was saying, as the wizard drew close. 'Middenheimers are bred hard, boy, and we don't balk at necessary sacrifice.'

'There's a difference between necessary sacrifice, and foolishness,' Valten retorted. For the first time since Martak had met him, the Herald of Sigmar looked angry. He seemed to loom over the knights. 'These are our men, Greiss, and you shall not treat them as mere impediments to your glory. They are not pawns to be sacrificed, or tools to be discarded,' Valten growled. 'They are men. *My* men.'

'Men die in battle,' Dostov said. It was obvious whose side the Grand Master of the Gryphon Legion was on. Then, the Kislevite wasn't unduly burdened by sentimentality.

'Men die, but they are not ridden down like dogs by their own commanders,' Valten said. He raised Ghal Maraz. 'And I will split the skull of the next man who uses the phrase "necessary sacrifice" to my face in such a way again.' He turned in his saddle, and looked down at Martak. 'Gregor, what-?'

Martak, about to tell Valten what he had seen to the west, felt his words die on his lips as a new sound intruded over the booming report of the artillery at the top of the steps above them. From within the confines of the temple came the scream of voices and the clash of weapons. These were mingled with the rapid chatter of gunfire and dreadful chittering. Even as Valten and the others turned to look up the steps, towards the great entrance of the Temple of Ulric, the artillery crews began to hastily pivot their guns.

'What are they doing?' Greiss snarled. 'The enemy is out here!'

Martak didn't bother to remind Greiss he'd said something similar before, and been wrong then as well. Blackened and bloodied soldiers, survivors of the temple garrisons, stampeded out through the great doors, hampering the efforts of the artillery crews. They were followed by hulking, armoured rat ogres, who tore into the fleeing soldiers and artillery crews both. Great cannons were upended and sent rolling down the steps. Gun carriages shattered to matchwood. Bullet holes stitched their way along Nuln-forged gun barrels, courtesy of the skaven rattling gun teams. Powder kegs were perforated as well, and the subsequent explosion rocked the temple to its foundations. The concussive blast killed men, skaven and rat ogres besides, and only Martak's quick thinking and magics prevented the explosion from reaching Valten and the others.

As his amber shield cracked and fell to pieces, Martak saw a fresh tide of ratmen sweep over the burning wreckage of the Grand Battery. Stormvermin and clanrats poured down the steps of the temple in a screeching flood. Valten cursed. He looked at Greiss. 'Hold the line. I'll deal with the vermin.' Without waiting for the surly knight's reply, he looked at Martak. 'Gregor, can you-?'

Martak shook his head. 'The western flank is collapsing. Daemon-fire is sweeping the square there, and I am needed.' He smiled bitterly. 'I was coming to ask for your help.'

Valten shook his head. He hesitated, and for a moment, Martak saw not the Herald of Sigmar, but the callow young blacksmith Huss had introduced him to, so many months ago. 'It appears our journey is coming to an end,' Valten said, fighting to be heard over the noise of battle. 'Since Luthor vanished, I have relied on your advice more than once. It has been a pleasure to call you friend, Gregor.' Valten bent low and reached out his hand. It was Martak's turn to hesitate. Then, he clasped forearms with the Herald of Sigmar. Valten smiled and straightened in his saddle. 'I do not think we will meet again, my friend.'

Then he turned, jerked on his horse's reins, and galloped up the steps to meet the coming threat. Martak hesitated again, for just a moment. Then, with a snarl, he turned to the west. He ignored Greiss's shouts as he began to push his way along, moving more swiftly than a man ought. He ran smoothly, his steps guided by Ulric, and in seemingly no time at all he was bulling through the ranks towards the daemon-threatened stretch of the line. As he moved, he reached out with his mind, snagging the errant winds of magic and drawing them in his wake.

I grow weak, son of Middenheim, Ulric murmured. Soon my spark shall gutter out, and you will crumble to cold ash.

'Then we'd best take as many of the enemy with us as we can,' Martak growled. 'Or would you rather crawl into a hole and die?' He heard the indignant snap of the god's jaws and bared his teeth in satisfaction. He shoved aside a pair of spearmen, and found himself staring at a hellish inferno of dancing, multi-coloured flames. Screams of terror filled the air as men burned and died, or worse, *changed*. Daemons leapt and shimmered beyond the flames, cackling and chanting.

As the line of soldiers around him fell back, Martak spread his arms, calling up what strength Ulric could spare him. The heat from the fires faded, and with a single, sharp gesture, Martak snuffed them entirely. He felt his body swell with power as he drew the winds of magic into himself, bolstering the strength of the fading godspark.

Martak threw back his head and howled out incantation after incantation. Daemons screamed as ice-coated spears of amber spitted them. Others were flash-frozen, or torn to shreds by icy winds. The daemonic assault faltered in the face of the combined fury of man and god, and for a moment, Martak thought he might sweep every daemon from the field.

Ulric howled a warning and Martak twisted around, freezing the air into a solid shield over him with a sweep of his hands as a wave of sorcerous fire lashed down at him from above. A gigantic avian shape crashed down, nearly crushing Martak. The wizard hurled himself aside, trying not to think about the men who still writhed beneath the immense daemon's talons. He scrambled to his feet.

Two pairs of milky, possibly blind eyes regarded him, and two cruel beaks clacked in croaking laughter. The daemon's two long, feathered necks undulated as its vestigial, yet powerful wings snapped out, casting the wizard into their shadow. He recognised the beast, though he had never seen it before. Kairos Fateweaver, dual-voiced oracle of the Changer of Ways. 'Ulric, man and god. We see you, wolf-god. We see you, cowering in this cave of blood and meat. Come out, little god... Come out, and accept the judgement of fate,' the daemon rasped, its voices in concert with itself.

Martak felt Ulric twitch within him. Even a god wasn't immune to accusations of cowardice. 'You are not fate,' he roared, though whether they were his words or Ulric's, he didn't know. 'You are its slave, as are we all.' Frost swirled about his clenched fingers. 'You are but the merest shard of a mad, broken dream. A cackling, senile shadow which schemes against itself because it is too myopic to recognise the wider cosmos.' He flung his hands out, releasing a blast of wintry power.

Kairos staggered, cawing angrily. The daemon's great wings flapped and its twin beaks spat sizzling incantations. The air about Martak took on a greasy tinge and strange shapes swam through it, passing through the fleeing soldiers as if they were not there. Motes of painful light swirled about, emerging and twisting about an unseen aleph.

'We have seen what awaits us all, wolf-god. It is a beautiful thing, and hideous, and it will unmake all and fashion it anew. The earth will crack, the skies will burn and all will cease, before beginning again. Why do you struggle and snap so?' the Fateweaver croaked.

A strange howling grew in Martak's ears and he staggered as unseen hands plucked at him, trying to draw him into the Realms of Chaos. If he had been as he was, he would have been lost. But he was more than he had been. And he was not alone.

Ulric roared, and Martak roared with him. His muscles bunched and he hurled himself away from the unseen hands. Claws of amber formed about his hands and he raked them across the Fateweaver's wrinkled chest. The raw stuff of magic poured from the wounds and the daemon snarled. Twin beaks snapped at Martak, who stumbled back. 'What have you done, cur?' the Fateweaver cawed. 'You were supposed to die. We saw it!'

The daemon hefted its staff and swung it in a furious arc. Martak, his muscles filled with the power of the last god of mankind, caught the staff in mid-swing. He grinned into the teeth of the daemon's fury. 'What you saw, and what is, are not necessarily the same thing,' he said. Frost spread from his fingers, curling up the length of the staff. The Fateweaver squawked as it tried to rip its staff free of his grip. The unnatural flesh of its arms began to blacken and peel away from brass bones.

With a single, thumping beat of its wings, the Fateweaver hurled itself skywards. It paused for a moment, wings flapping, and glared down at Martak. Then, with a sound which might have been a frustrated scream, or a laugh of contempt, or even perhaps both, the Fateweaver vanished.

Martak stared upwards for a moment. Then he dropped his gaze to the remaining daemons. The creatures, deprived of their master and of their advantage, cowered back. He gestured sharply and jagged chunks of ice and swirling snow struck the closest of the creatures, as the soldiers of the Empire gave a great shout and surged forwards, their courage renewed. Martak stood unmoving as the line passed him, driving into the daemonic host. Ulric growled softly in his head as Martak turned east, where he knew that even at that moment, Valten was trying to drive back the skaven.

The god sounded as weak as Martak felt, and he knew that neither of them had much time left. But he was determined to make it count for something. Though the City of the White Wolf and its god might die today, the Empire would be preserved. Whatever else happened, Martak, and the spark of godly fury within him, could do that much.



The explosion had come as another unpleasant surprise in a day already full to the brim of them. Wendel Volker fought in the centre of the Empire lines, alongside Brunner and a few other familiar faces, including a number of dismounted Reiksguard and Knights of the Black Bear. They acted as a steel core to anchor the centre, but they rapidly became an island in a sea of panic as the Grand Battery ceased to exist and Archaon's forces attacked with renewed vigour. Volker cursed as crossbowmen fled past him, seeking the dubious safety of the temple. He thought he saw Fleischer among them, moving as quickly as her legs could carry her. He could hear screams echoing behind him, and the rising chitter of skaven.

A smaller explosion followed the first, and a keg of black powder, wreathed in flames, soared overhead. He looked up, watching it arc over the square. When it exploded, he instinctively raised his shield, and left himself open to a bludgeoning blow that catapulted him off his feet. He slammed into another knight, and they both fell in a rattling tangle. Wheezing, Volker looked up as a burly northman, wearing the shaggy hide of an auroch, swept his stone-headed mace out and drove another Reiksguard to his knees. The knight wobbled and was unable to avoid the next blow, which sent him spinning head over heels into the air. The northman spread his arms and roared, 'Where is the Herald of Sigmar? Gharad the Ox would crush his delicate bones in the name of the Lord of Pleasure!'

'Over there somewhere,' Volker coughed, forcing himself to his feet. 'Why not go look for him?' He was shoved aside as the man he'd slammed into got to his feet and lunged towards the Ox. The stone mace came down and pulverised the knight's head, helmet and all. Volker stared at the gory ruin of the man's skull for a moment, and then back up at Gharad. 'All right, then,' he muttered, raising his sword.

The mace whipped out and Volker stepped to the side, narrowly avoiding the blow. As the weapon whistled past his chin, he brought his sword down on the brute's arm. The blade chopped through meat and muscle, but became lodged in the bone. Gharad howled in pain, and his mace fell from his fingers. The northman clawed at Volker's throat with his good hand, while the latter tried to pry his weapon free.

Their struggle was interrupted by the sound of horns and the thunder of hooves. Volker dragged his sword free and hurled himself backwards as, with a mournful howl, the Fellwolf Brotherhood and the Knights of the White Wolf charged. Fleeing state troops were ridden down by the templars of Ulric as they galloped through the disintegrating centre line and smashed full-tilt into Archaon's advance. Empire and Chaos knights met with a mighty crash. Armoured steeds slammed together, crushing limbs and sending horses rearing in panic as their riders hacked and hammered at one another.

Volker scrambled away from the stomping hooves of the horses, one arm wrapped around his chest. Pain shot through him with every step, and it was hard to breathe, but he had to get clear of the press. Even his armour wouldn't save him from being trampled to death. He'd seen men die that way, and he had no wish to share their fate.

But, as he made to extricate himself from the situation, a large hand fastened itself around his ankle. He looked down, into the grinning, battered features of his opponent. 'Gharad is angry. He has been stomped on by many horses, little man,' the northman said, as he yanked Volker off his feet. 'Let Gharad show you how it feels.' Gharad slammed a bloody fist down on Volker's chest, denting his cuirass and driving all of the air from his lungs.

The northman tore Volker's gorget loose and flung it aside before fastening his thick fingers around Volker's throat. Gharad hunched over him as horses stomped and whinnied around them. Volker clawed at his opponent's wrists, trying to break his grip. Gharad grinned down at him. 'Goodbye, little man. Gharad the Ox has enjoyed killing—' The northman's eyes crossed, and his grin slipped. With a sigh, he slumped over Volker, revealing a falchion, three throwing daggers and a hand-axe embedded in his back.

Volker heaved the dead weight off him, and looked up at Brunner. 'Thanks,' he gasped, as he rubbed his aching throat.

'Come on,' Brunner said, jerking his falchion free of the fallen northman.

'What?' Volker said, shoving himself to his feet. 'Where are we going?'

'Cut off the head, and the body dies,' Brunner spat. There was a dark stain on his side, and he grimaced as he pressed a hand to it. He jerked his chin towards Archaon. The Three-Eyed King was impossible to miss, despite the confusion. As they watched, he cut down a howling knight. 'Kill him, we get out of this alive.'

'I don't like our odds,' Volker wheezed. Something in his chest scraped. The blow from the northman's mace had, at the very least, cracked his ribs.

'I fought my way across half the Empire, through the walking dead, beastmen and worse things, all to get here,' Brunner growled. 'Never tell me the odds.'

Volker shook himself and looked around. The bulk of the Empire troops still held their place, despite the massed ranks of the enemy that pressed against them. But Volker had commanded enough men to see that the Middenheimers were close to collapse. The halberdiers still hacked and thrust at their enemies with grim resolve, but exhaustion was taking its toll, and Greiss and his fur-clad maniacs charging through the centre of their own lines hadn't

helped matters. The enemy, on the other hand, seemed tireless, and without number. Every northman who fell was quickly replaced by two more; but there were no fresh troops to throw into the gaps growing in the defenders' ranks. What reinforcements there were, were busy trying to hold off the skaven pouring out of the Temple of Ulric.

That fact, in the end, made Volker's decision for him. If Archaon fell, the Chaos attack might disintegrate, easing the pressure on the embattled defenders. Evidently Brunner thought the same. He gestured with his sword. 'By all means, lead the way.' *You lunatic*, he added, in his head. Brunner smirked, as if he'd heard Volker's thoughts, and turned.

The bounty-hunter moved through the press of battle like a shark. His falchion snaked out left and right, cutting through legs or chopping into bellies. Volker did his best to keep up, smashing aside tribesmen with his recovered shield and sword, despite the pain in his chest. At times, through the smoke that now obscured most of the square, he caught sight of the battle going on atop the steps of the Temple of Ulric. Valten was there, his golden armour reflecting the light of the fires as he employed Ghal Maraz with lethal efficiency. The Herald of Sigmar had ploughed into the ratmen like a battering ram, and broken, twitching bodies flew into the air with every swing of his hammer.

'There he is,' Brunner shouted. He grabbed Volker and gestured with his bloody falchion. Volker peered through the smoke and saw their quarry. Archaon's horse reared as the Three-Eyed King chopped through a bevy of thrusting spears.

'What do we do?' Volker said.

Brunner smiled, pulled one of the pistols from his bandolier and fired. To Volker's surprise, Archaon tumbled from his saddle. 'What--?' Volker said.

'Wyrdstone bullet,' Brunner said, tossing aside the smoking pistol. A moment later, the bounty-hunter was ducking past the daemonic steed's flailing hooves, and arrowing towards its rider. Volker tried to follow him, but he found himself preoccupied by the attentions of one of the Chaos knights who made up Archaon's bodyguard. He caught a hoof on his shield, and felt a shiver of pain run through him. His sword sliced out, driving back a horse and rider. He saw Brunner's falchion flash down, only to be intercepted at the last moment by Archaon's blade.

Archaon forced Brunner back, and rose to his full height. Green smoke rose from the hole in his armour where Brunner's bullet had struck home. To his credit, the bounty-hunter didn't seem impressed. He lunged, and their blades came together with a barely audible screech. Volker saw Brunner's free hand flit to his vambrace, and then something sharp flashed and Archaon roared. The Lord of the End Times stepped back and groped for the throwing blade that had sprouted from between the plates of his cuirass. Brunner drew another pistol, his last, and fired. Or tried to, at least. There was a puff of smoke, followed by a curse from Brunner, and then Archaon lunged forwards, thrusting his sword before him like a lance.

The tip of the sword emerged from Brunner's back and he was lifted off his feet. Archaon held him aloft for a moment, and then, with seemingly little effort, swept the sword to the side and slung the bounty-hunter off. Brunner hit the street hard, with a sound that made Volker cringe inside his armour. He took a chance and darted through a gap in the press of battle, ducking a blow which would have removed his head.

Archaon was already climbing back into the saddle when Volker reached Brunner. He sank down beside the man, but he could see that it was already too late. And not just for Brunner – he heard a roar from behind him, and turned. He saw Archaon catch a blow from Axel Greiss, Grand Master of the White Wolves, on his shield. The Grand Master recoiled, readying himself for another swing as his stallion bit and kicked at Archaon's own mount. The White Wolves duelled with Archaon's knights around them.

Archaon swung round in his saddle, and his sword chopped down through plate mail, flesh and bone, severing Greiss's arm at the elbow. Greiss's scream was cut short by Archaon's second blow, which tore through the old knight's torso in a welter of gore. Volker looked away as Greiss's body slid from the saddle.

He looked down at Brunner. He realised that he'd never seen the other man's face in the little time they'd known each other. They hadn't been friends. Merely men in the same place at the same time, facing the same enemy. Even so, Volker felt something that might have been sadness as he looked down at the dead bounty-hunter.

Panic began to spread through the ranks of the Empire almost immediately. The troops in the centre had held their ground against the worst Archaon could throw at them, but the death of Greiss was too much, even for the most stalwart soldier. Volker couldn't blame them. He knew a rout in the offing when he saw one, however, and he was on the wrong side of it, cut off from the obvious route of retreat by the fighting. Knots of defenders still battled on, most notably around the standards of the Order of the Black Bear and the Gryphon Legion, and to the east and west the flank forces still held, but the line had been broken.

Volker looked around desperately, trying to spot an avenue of escape. If he could reach someone – anyone – he could organise a fighting withdrawal. At the very least, they might buy themselves a few more hours. *Averheim*, he thought. *Save as many as I can – get to Averheim. The Emperor is at Averheim. The Emperor will know what to do.*

'Yes, he will,' a voice growled. Volker looked up into a pair of yellow eyes. 'Up, boy,' Gregor Martak growled. His furs were scorched and blackened, and his arms and face were streaked with blood. Volker knew, without knowing how, that it was not merely the wizard who regarded him, but something else as well. Something old and powerful, but diminished in some way. The wizard hauled him to his feet with ease, sparing not a glance for Brunner's body. Martak's eyes narrowed. 'Volker,' he rasped. 'One of Leitdorf's lot, from Heldenhame.'

'I-' Volker began.

'Quiet.' Martak's eyes were unfocused, as if he were listening to something. 'You survived Heldenhame, Altdorf and everything in between. You might even survive this, where braver men did not.' The yellow eyes looked down at Brunner. 'The time for heroes is past, Wendel Volker. Wolves are not heroes. They are not brave, or honourable. Wolves are survivors. The coming world needs survivors.'

Volker struggled against Martak's grip. The wizard shook himself and grinned savagely. 'It's the end, boy. You can feel it, can't you?'

Volker's lips tried to form a denial, but no words came. Men were fighting and dying around them, but no one seemed to notice them. Martak laughed harshly. He grabbed hold of Volker's chin. 'It's like a weight in your chest, a moment of pain stretched out to interminable length, until death becomes merely release.' His chapped, bleeding lips peeled back from long, yellow teeth. 'But not for you. Not yet. You must tell the Emperor what has happened. You must show him what I now show you.' Martak dragged Volker close. The fingers clutching Volker's chin felt like ice. 'You must claim my debt.'

Images filled Volker's mind – a shadowy shape creeping through the Fauschlag; the snuffing of the Flame of Ulric; and worst of all, a pulsing, heaving tear in the skin of reality itself. Volker screamed as the last image ate its way into his memories like acid. He tried to pull himself free of the wizard, but Martak's grip was like iron. He felt cold and hot all at once, and a cloud of frost exploded from his mouth. His heart hammered, as if straining to free itself of his chest, and he thought that he might die as his insides filled up with ice and snow and all of the fury of winter and war.

'No,' he heard Martak growl. 'No, you will not die, Wendel Volker. Not until you have done as I command.'



Panic spread like wildfire through the Middenheim companies, fanned to greater fury by the bludgeoning advance of the Swords of Chaos. Canto, still astride his cursing steed, could only marvel at the sheer, dogged relentlessness of Archaon's warriors. They fought like automatons. There was never a wasted motion or excess of force. As soon as one enemy fell from their path they moved on to the next without hesitation. They fought in silence as well, uttering no battle cries or even grunts of pain when a blow struck home.

Archaon, in contrast, was all sound and fury. He was the centre of the whirlwind, and he seemed to grow angrier the more foes he dispatched. Men were trampled beneath the hooves of his daemon steed, and banners were chopped down and trodden into the thick streams of blood which ran between the cobbles. One moment, he was amidst a desperate scrum of hard-pressed soldiers. The next, it had collapsed into a howling mass of terrified humanity, each seeking to get as far as possible from the roaring monster who had come to claim them.

The Everchosen spurred his mount through the madness, ignoring the fleeing soldiers. Canto knew who he was looking for and he spurred his own beast in pursuit, the whispers of the gods filling his mind. He tried to ignore them, but it was hard. Harder than it had ever been before. They were not asking that he follow their chosen champion – they demanded it. And Canto had neither the strength nor the courage to do otherwise.

So he galloped in Archaon's wake, and watched as the last defenders of Middenheim parted before the Three-Eyed King, or were ridden down. 'Where are you, Herald?' Archaon bellowed, as his horse reared and screamed. 'Where are you, beloved of Sigmar? I am here! Face me, and end this farce. How many more must die for you?'

Archaon glared about him, his breath rasping from within his helmet. 'Face me, damn you. I will not be denied now – not now! I have broken your army, I have gutted your city... *Where are you?*'

Canto jerked on his mount's reins, bringing it to a halt behind Archaon. The latter glanced at him. 'Where is he, Unsworn? Where is he?' he demanded, and Canto felt a moment of uncertainty as he noted the pleading tone of Archaon's words.

'I am here,' a voice said, and each word struck the air like a hammer-blow. Canto shuddered as the echo of that voice rose over the square, and the

sounds of battle faded. A wind rose, carrying smoke with it, isolating them from the madness that still consumed the world around them. 'I am here, Diederick Kastner,' Valten said. His words were punctuated by the slow *clap-clap-clap* of his horse's hooves.

'Do not say that name,' Archaon said, his voice calmer than it had been a moment ago. 'You have not earned the right to say that name. You are not *him*.'

'No, I am not. I thought, once, that I might be... But that is not my fate,' Valten said. 'And I am thankful for it. I am thankful that my part in this... farce, as you call it, is almost done. And that I will not have to see the horror that comes next.'

'Coward,' Archaon said.

'No. Cowardice is not acceptance. Cowardice is tearing down the foundations of heaven because you cannot bear its light. Cowardice is blaming gods for the vagaries of men. Cowardice is choosing damnation over death, and casting a people on the fire to assuage your wounded soul.' Valten looked up, and heaved a long, sad sigh. 'I see so much now. I see all of the roads not taken, and I see how small your masters are.' He looked at Archaon. 'They drove their greatest heroes and warriors into my path like sheep, all to spare you this moment. Because even now... they doubt you. They doubt, and you can feel it. Why else would you be so determined to face me?'

'You do not deserve to bear that hammer,' Archaon said. 'You do not deserve *any of it*.'

'No,' Valten smiled gently. 'But you did.' He lifted Ghal Maraz. 'Once, I think, this was meant for you. But the claws of Chaos pluck even the thinnest strands of fate. And so it has come to this.' His smile shifted, becoming harder. 'Two sons of many fathers, forgotten mothers and a shared moment.' He extended the hammer. 'The gods are watching, Everchosen. Let us give them a show.'

'What do you know of gods?' Archaon snarled. 'You know nothing.'

'I know that if you want this city, this world, you must earn it.' Valten urged his horse forwards and Archaon did the same. Both animals seemed almost as eager for the fray as their riders, and the shrieks and snarls of the one were matched by the whinnying challenge of the other. Canto tried to follow, but found himself unable to move. He was not here to participate, but to watch. The Swords of Chaos spread out around him, a silent audience for the contest to come. He felt no relief, and wanted nothing more than to be elsewhere, anywhere other than here.

Archaon leaned forward, and raised his sword. Valten swung his hammer, and Archaon's shield buckled under the impact. The Everchosen rocked in his saddle. He parried a blow that would have taken off his head, and his sword wailed like a lost soul as its blade crashed against the flat of the hammer's head. As they broke apart, Archaon's steed lunged and sank its fangs into the throat of Valten's horse. With a wet wrench, the daemon steed tore out the other animal's throat.

Valten hurled himself from the saddle even as his horse collapsed. He crashed down on the steps of the Temple of Ulric. Archaon spurred his horse on and leaned out to skewer the fallen Herald. Valten, reacting with superhuman speed, caught the blow on Ghal Maraz's haft. He twisted the hammer, shoving the blade aside. The daemon-horse reared up, and Valten surged to his feet. His hammer thudded into the animal's scarred flank. The beast cried out in pain, and it stumbled away. Archaon snarled in rage and chopped down at Valten again and again. One of the blows caught Valten, opening a bloody gash in his shoulder.

The Herald of Sigmar staggered back. Archaon wheeled his steed about, intent on finishing what he'd started. His mount slammed into Valten, and sent the latter sprawling. As Valten tried to get to his feet, Archaon's sword tore through his cuirass.

Valten sank back down, and for a moment, Canto thought the fight was done. But, then Valten heaved himself to his feet, and he seemed suffused with a golden, painful light. Canto raised a hand protectively in front of his eyes, and he heard a rattling, hollow moan rise from the stiff shapes of the Swords of Chaos.

Archaon's steed retreated, shying from the light. It gibbered and shrieked, and no amount of cursing from Archaon could bring the beast under control. The Everchosen swung himself down from the saddle and started towards his opponent. As he entered the glow of the light, steam rose from his armour, and he seemed to shrink into himself. But he pressed forward nonetheless. Valten strode to meet him.

They met with a sound like thunder. Ghal Maraz connected with the Slayer of Kings, and Canto was nearly knocked from his saddle by the echo of the impact. Windows shattered across the plaza, and the Ulricsmund shook. The two warriors traded blows, moving back and forth in an intricate waltz of destruction. Archaon stepped aside as Ghal Maraz drove down, and cobbles exploded into fragments. Valten leaned away from the Slayer of Kings's bite, and a wall or statue earned a new scar. When the weapons connected, the air shuddered and twisted, and each time the Swords of Chaos groaned as if in pain.

Their fight took them up the steps of the Temple of Ulric. First one had the advantage, and then the other. Neither gave ground. Canto watched, unable to tear his eyes away, though the power that swirled and snarled about the two figures threatened to blind him. Two destinies were at war, and the skeins of fate strained to contain their struggle. The rest of the battle faded into the background... heroes lived, fought and died in their dozens, but this was the only battle that mattered. The future would be decided by either the Skull-Splitter or the Slayer of Kings.

Or, perhaps not.

A figure, reeking of blood and ice, clad in scorched furs, darted suddenly through the smoke. For an instant, Canto thought it was a wolf. Then he saw it was a man, and felt something tense within him. The man radiated power—dark, brooding and wild. He sprang up the steps of the temple, bounding towards the duellists. 'Stay your hand, servant of ruin,' he howled, in a voice which was at once human and something greater. 'This is my city, and you will despoil it no more!'

'Gregor—no!' Valten cried, flinging out a hand. The newcomer froze, half-crouched, like a wolf ready to spring. Magic bled from him, and the air about him was thick with snow and frost. 'This is my fight. This is the moment I was born for, and you well know it, Gregor Martak. And even if its outcome is not to your liking, neither you nor Ulric shall interfere.'

The air vibrated with a growl that came from everywhere and nowhere at once. To Canto, it was as if the city itself were a slumbering beast now stirring. Archaon hefted his blade in both hands and said, 'Growl all you like, old god. You are dead, and your city with you. And that shell you cower in is soon to join you, Supreme Patriarch or no.'

'Maybe so, spawn of damnation,' the newcomer growled, 'but even dead, a wolf can bite. And when it does, it does not let go.'

'Bite away and break your teeth, beast-god. My time is now,' Archaon snapped.

'No,' Valten said. 'Our time is now.'

Silence fell as the three men faced one another. Archaon slid forwards, blade raised. Valten moved to meet him. Canto longed to draw his sword, but he could not, nor did he know why he felt so. *Who are you planning to help this time, Unsworn? What god do you serve?* He pushed the thought aside. Something was happening on the steps. Something no one but him seemed to notice. He squinted, trying to see through the greasy envelope of smoke and the harsh light of the fire.

A sense of wrongness pervaded the air, as the shadows cast by the firelight seemed to congeal. A mote of darkness, which grew, like a rat-hole in an otherwise unblemished wall. Where before there had only been a conjunction of firelight, drifting ash and darkness, there was now something vast and verminous. It sprang too swiftly for Canto to get a clear look at it, but he thought it must be a skaven, although of great size. He caught only the glint of a blade. He could not even tell who it was heading for, whether its target was Archaon or Valten. His answer came a moment later.

'Valten, behind you,' Martak roared, flinging up his hands. With almost treacle-slowness, Valten and Archaon both turned. The triple blade hissed as it whipped through the air and struck Valten cleanly in the neck. The Herald of Sigmar made a sound like a sigh as his head tumbled from his shoulders. Archaon lunged forward and caught his body as it fell, roaring in outrage. From the darkness came a sound like the scurrying of myriad rats, and a whisper of mocking laughter. Then it was gone.

Archaon sat for a time, cradling the body of his enemy. 'He was mine,' he said. He looked up. The Eye of Sheerian flared like a dying star on his brow, and Canto felt a wave of incandescent heat wash over him. '*Mine*.' Archaon's rage was a force unto itself, burning clean the smoke and driving back all shadows. Above the city, the sky buckled and the clouds tore open as a bolt of sorcerous lightning slammed down. A portion of the temple dome collapsed with an explosive *boom*. Smoke billowed out through the temple doors and swept down the steps. Archaon set Valten's body aside and rose.

'He was never yours,' Martak rasped. He tapped the side of his head. 'This was never preordained, not in the way you think. It was a game. And it has been won.' His hands twitched and he stepped forward. 'But I have never been very good at games.' His hands flexed and the air ruptured as a great bolt of amber and ice shot towards Archaon.

Archaon split the bolt in two with his sword. More blades followed as Martak advanced slowly, tears streaming down his face. Archaon smashed them aside one by one. Shuddering, eyes white and hoarfrost crackling across his flesh, Martak thrust his hands out and a howling blizzard, composed of a million glinting shards of amber, enveloped the Everchosen. Shreds of his cloak slipped from its obscuring pall, and Canto felt his heart lurch in his chest.

Archaon emerged from the blizzard, hand outstretched. He caught Martak about the throat and lifted him high. 'The only game that matters is mine, wizard. Not yours, not that of the withered godspark in you which fades even now, and not even those of the Dark Gods themselves. Only mine. But you were right. It has been won.'

Martak twisted in his grip, howling like a beast. A knife appeared in his hand, and he thrust it into a gap in Archaon's armour, eliciting a scream. Archaon

dropped him and staggered back, clutching at the wound, which smoked and steamed like melting ice. Martak rose up, eyes blazing. 'Even in death, a wolf can still bite. And what it bites, it holds,' he growled. 'You will not leave Middenheim alive, Everchosen. Whatever else happens, *you will die here.*'

Martak lunged. Archaon's sword slashed out, and the wizard's head, eyes bulging with fury, bounced down the steps. The air reverberated with a mournful howl as something left his body, and then all fell still. Archaon sank down onto the steps, his sword planted point-first between his legs. He leaned against its length.

'Yes, wizard, I will,' Archaon said softly, as he stared down at Martak's head. Nonetheless, his words echoed across the plaza. Canto, at last able to move, urged his horse forwards. The Swords of Chaos followed him. Around them, the battle was coming to its inevitable conclusion. The army that had stood with Valten was no more, its positions overrun and its few survivors fleeing through the streets, pursued by their victorious enemy.

Middenheim, the City of the White Wolf, had fallen.



SIX



The Eternal Glade, Athel Loren

Jerrod, the last Duke of Quenelles, hunched in his saddle and steeled his mind against the creeping quiet of the Forest of Loren. Since childhood, he had feared the forest which clung to the south-eastern border of Quenelles. Over the years, it had been responsible for the deaths and disappearances of more friends and subjects than he cared to count. More than once, as a young lord, he had ridden to its edge on the trail of a missing peasant child, only to be forced to turn back in failure. It was a place of pale shapes and bad dreams. Then, the world itself had become a nightmare of late.

He closed his eyes, and wished yet again that the burden he now bore had not passed to him. That his cousin Anthelme had not perished in Altdorf, victim of a plague-stained blade. That Tancred, Anthelme's predecessor, had not fallen to the black axe of Krell. That he, Jerrod, was not the last of the line of Quenelles. But mostly, he wished that he was not here now, riding into the belly of the beast rather than fighting alongside his people in their hour of need – whatever remained of them.

Jerrod could still recall the smoke that lay thick on the horizon as he'd ridden hard through the pine crags, seeking aid for his beleaguered companions. The smoke that rose over the pyre that had been his homeland, and more besides. For there to be so much smoke, the whole of Bretonnia would need to be aflame, he knew.

What had happened, in the months since he and the Companions of Quenelles had ridden out alongside Louen Leoncoeur's crusade into the heart of the Empire, to bend their lances in aid of their oldest rivals, greatest enemies and occasional allies? What had befallen Bretonnia in that time? He opened his eyes and reached beneath his helmet to scratch at the week-old growth of beard covering his cheeks and jaw. Since his manservant had been brained at the Battle of Bolgen, he'd had no one to make him presentable.

If what was occurring in Bretonnia was anything like what was happening in the Empire, he feared to learn of it. The Empire had always seemed an unconquerable behemoth to him, a vast dragon with many heads, belching fire and ruin against its foes. To test oneself against that dragon had been the dream of many a young knight, himself included. But now the dragon had fallen, slain by a death of a thousand cuts, each more inglorious than the last. Then, when your enemy wielded plague, storm and fire as easily as a peasant wielded a cudgel, glory was the first casualty, as he and his Companions had discovered to their cost.

Barely a third of the men who had ridden beside him, first in the civil war against Mallobaude's wretches, and then later at La Maisontaal Abbey, and finally to Altdorf at the command of the Lion-Heart, still lived. Gioffre of Anglaron had died beneath Krell's axe at La Maisontaal Abbey. The cousins Raynor and Hernald had fallen beside Anthelme at Altdorf. Old Calard of Garamont had died on the walls of Averheim, sword in hand and a curse on his lips. Those who remained, however, were the cream of what Bretonnia had stood for – driven by duty and their oaths to the Lady to stand against evil wherever it might be found. And there was evil aplenty in the Empire.

First Altdorf, then Averheim, had become victims of the foulness seeping down from the north. The other cities of the Empire had fallen besides, but he had been at both Altdorf and Averheim, and had led the Companions in battle against the enemy alongside the Emperor Karl Franz himself, as well as the wild-haired Slayer King of the mountain folk, Ungrim Ironfist.

The thought of the latter only made the weight on his soul all the heavier. The Slayer King had died so that they might live, and escape the trap Averheim had become. While Jerrod knew little of dwarfs, he knew from the weeks they'd spent fighting beside one another that such a death had long been Ironfist's desire. That made it no less sorrowful, and he felt a moment of pity for the remains of the once-mighty throng which had followed Ironfist out of the Worlds Edge Mountains and into defeat. Like the Bretonnians, they too were the last gasp of a shattered people. And like the Bretonnians, they had no way of knowing the fate of those they had left behind.

He turned slightly in his saddle, to glance down at the heavy form of Gotri Hammerson as the dwarf runesmith stomped alongside Jerrod's horse. He was old, older perhaps than many a storied Bretonnian keep, Jerrod thought, and as hard as the stones of the mountains they now travelled through. He and the dwarf had not become friends – not quite – but they had fallen into a companionable routine. Their outlooks were not entirely dissimilar, for all that the dwarf mind was a thing utterly alien to Jerrod.

It was Hammerson who had seen them safely away from Averland, after the magics of Balthasar Gelt had plucked the battered remnants of their forces from the clutches of the Everchosen. Hammerson had led the Emperor and his motley assemblage of humans and dwarfs through the Grey Mountains by hidden dwarf roads. Indeed, it was only thanks to Hammerson that they had been able to proceed at all. Unguided, the army would have foundered, burdened as it was by the number of wounded.

Even with Hammerson's aid, the going had been difficult. Mindless dead clustered in the high crags, their only purpose to kill the living. Pools of suppurating wild magic had given birth to monsters and daemons. Too, the mountains were home to hundreds of orc and goblin tribes. Even the hidden dwarf paths had not been entirely safe. More than once, the battered group of men and dwarfs had been forced to defend themselves against greenskins which swept howling out of the crags. There, only Zhufbarak guns and Gelt's spellcraft had carried the day, a fact which proved no small frustration to Jerrod and his remaining knights.

While he respected Hammerson, his feelings for the wizard, Gelt, were mixed. The man, clad in filthy robes and a tarnished golden mask, made Jerrod's skin crawl. He stank of hot metal, and there was something... otherworldly about him. Jerrod had felt similarly when in the presence of the Emperor, who had wielded lightning at the Battle of Bolgen.

Unfortunately, whatever power had infused the Emperor now seemed to be gone, ripped from him by the hands of the Everchosen himself. He was nothing but a man now, in a time when men were all but helpless.

Jerrod sighed. He had seen two great nations consumed in fire and blood, and he longed to do something, anything, to achieve some small measure of retribution, no matter how futile. Nonetheless, even with guns and sorcery, it was invariably a close thing. The greenskins had ever frenzied forth in great numbers, but now, as the world came undone, they seemed particularly driven to madness. It was as if some unseen power had caught hold of them and set their brute minds aflame.

But even battle-maddened greenskins had been as nothing compared to what had come after. Even as the column of refugees had reached the pine crags that marked the northern boundary of Athel Loren, the wind had carried the sound of berserk howls. They had been pursued all the way from Averheim by an army of the Blood God's worshippers, and it was at the infamous Chasm of Echoes that they had been forced to make their stand. While Gelt and Hammerson's dwarfs had held the pass, Jerrod and the Emperor had ridden hard, braving the forest's dangers in an effort to make contact with Athel Loren's defenders.

Jerrod looked up towards the head of the column, where the Emperor walked alongside his griffon, Deathclaw. The animal was limping, but even so, it looked as dangerous as ever. It was a rare man who could ride such a beast without fear. Rarer still was the man who actually felt some form of affection for his monstrous mount. That Deathclaw seemed to reciprocate this affection was merely proof of Karl Franz's worthiness, and the rightness of Leoncoeur's decision to bring aid to the embattled Empire.

Jerrod had fought alongside the man for months. While at times Karl Franz seemed aloof and otherworldly, Jerrod had come to admire him, foreign sovereign or not. The Emperor inspired the same sort of loyalty in his men as the resurrected and re-crowned Gilles le Breton had in Jerrod's own countrymen. Especially his Reiksguard, the knights who acted as his personal bodyguard. Jerrod had got to know one of them quite well – Wendel Volker.

It was Volker who had brought the sad tidings of Middenheim's fall to the Emperor at Averheim. Volker was young, but his hair was white and his face worn like that of a man twice his age. His armour was battered and scorched, and he moved at times like one who was trapped in a dream. He was, like many men in these sad times, broken. He had seen too much, and endured more pain than any man ought.

Volker was walking beside the Emperor, one hand on the hilt of his sword. He had not left Karl Franz's side since arriving at Averheim's gates, leading a tiny, exhausted band of riders – the only survivors of Middenheim. How Volker had got them out, he'd never said, and Jerrod hadn't asked. They had arrived only days before Archaon's forces, and had ridden their horses to death to reach the dubious safety of the city walls. As if he'd heard Jerrod's thoughts, Volker slowed, turned and soon fell into step beside Jerrod's horse.

'Hail and well met,' Jerrod said, leaning down. He extended his hand. Volker took it.

'Never thought I'd see this place,' Volker murmured, without preamble.

Jerrod looked around. 'Nor did I.' He shivered. 'I wish there had been some other way.'

'You and me both, manling,' Hammerson grumbled. He looked up at Volker. 'It's no place for men nor dwarfs.'

'Few places are these days,' Volker said. He ran a hand through his frost-coloured hair. 'And fewer by the day.' He blinked and looked up at Jerrod. 'I'm sorry, Jerrod, I spoke without thinking.'

Jerrod smiled sadly and sat back in his saddle. 'We've all lost our homes, Wendel,' he said. He swept an arm out. 'We are all that remains of three mighty empires, my friends. The last gasp of a saner world. I would that it were not so, but if it must be, at least we die as the Lady wills, with courage and honour.'

'I'm sure Sigmar is of a similar mind,' Volker said, with a grim smile. He looked at Hammerson. 'And Grungni as well, eh?'

'I doubt a manling knows anything of the mind of a dwarf god,' Hammerson said sourly. He sniffed. Then, 'But aye... if death comes, let it come hot.'

'No danger of it being otherwise, given our rescuers,' Volker said. He pointed upwards, towards the sky, where the fiery shapes of phoenixes swooped and cut through the air. They were ridden by elves, Jerrod knew.

It had been by purest chance that he had found himself on the path to *Ystin Asuryan*, as their rescuers had called it. Fiery birds, white lions, and tall, proud elfen warriors clad in shimmering armour had marched along its length, and gone to the aid of Hammerson and Gelt against the followers of Chaos. Now, the remains of that host escorted them deeper and deeper into the winding heart of Athel Loren.

All at once, Jerrod was reminded of where he was. Around them the trees seemed to press close, and strange shapes stalked through the gloom, watching them. This forest was no place for men. And there was no telling what awaited them within its depths.



Gotri Hammerson ignored the shadows and the trees and the whispers and concentrated on the path ahead, as Jerrod and Volker continued to speak. Let the forest talk all it wanted. He didn't have to listen. That was where the manlings always went wrong... they listened. They couldn't help it. They were curious by nature, like beardinglings, only they never grew out of it. Always poking and prodding and writing things down. *And on pulped wood or animal skins at that*, he thought. *They trust their knowledge to things that rot... That tells you all you need to know.*

Still, they weren't all bad. He glanced at Volker, and at Jerrod, who sat slumped in his saddle. The Bretonnians were a hardy folk, and they knew the value of an oath. It was a shame that they had the stink of elves on them, but that was humans for you. Naive, the lot of them. You couldn't trust an elf, everybody knew that. Common knowledge in Zhufbar, that was. Couldn't trust elves, halflings or ogres. Not an honourable bone in any of that lot.

And you certainly couldn't trust a forest. That much wood in one place was unnatural. It did odd things to the air, and the light. And this particular forest was a wellspring of grudges, stretching from the time of Grugni Goldfinder to the present day. Many a dwarf's bones were lost beneath the green loam of the deep forest, their spirits trapped by the roots, never able to journey to the halls of their ancestors.

It was a bad place, full of bad things, like a pocket of old darkness in an abandoned mine. *At least we've got the ancestor gods on our side*, Hammerson thought. He felt a moment of shame, but pushed it aside. It wasn't the manling's fault, no matter what some among his dwindling throng might grumble. Still, there wasn't a dwarf alive who wouldn't be discomfited by the thought of one of their ancestor gods – and Grungni no less! – blessing a human so.

And there was no other explanation for it. Balthasar Gelt was blessed. How else to explain how runes flared to vigorous life in his presence? In the wizard's vicinity, gromril armour became harder than ever before and weapons gained a killing edge that no whetstone could replicate. Hammerson sniffed the air.

He didn't even have to look around to know that Gelt was near. The wizard glowed with an inner fire, like a freshly stoked forge. The air around him stank like smelted iron, and when he spoke, the runes that were Hammerson's to shape and bestow shimmered with the light of Grungni. Hammerson could feel the human's presence in his gut, and it bothered him to no end to admit that, even to himself.

Why had the gods gifted a manling with their power? And a wizard at that – a blasted elf-taught sorcerer, without an ounce of muscle on his lean frame and no proper axe to speak of. *And he rides a horse. With feathers*, Hammerson thought sourly. Couldn't trust a horse, especially one that could fly. A horse was just an elf with hooves.

And speaking of elves, and their lack of trustworthiness... Hammerson stumped ahead, one hand on the head of the hammer stuffed through his belt, to join Caradryan at the head of the column. The elf looked as tired as Jerrod, for all that he sat erect on his horse. His overgrown chicken was somewhere above them, turning the night sky as bright as day. Only an elf would ride a bird that burst into flame if you gave it a hard look. Caradryan, like Gelt, smelt of magic. He stank of wildfire and burning stones. It was a familiar odour to Hammerson.

'So you've got it then, have you?' he said, without preamble. He'd heard the Phoenix Guard weren't allowed to talk, so he was anticipating a short conversation. Or maybe just a nod, or grunt of acknowledgement. 'Ungrim's fire?'

Caradryan blinked and looked down. 'What?' he said, and his voice crackled like a rising flame. His eyes shone strangely, but Hammerson wasn't afraid to meet them. He'd got used to eyes like that, on the march from Zhufbar to Averheim. Ungrim had been like a flame caged in metal, sparking and snarling, aching to unleash its power.

'I thought you lot couldn't talk,' he said.

'We can speak. We simply did not. Asuryan commanded it,' Caradryan said. The elf's face twisted, and what might have been sadness filled his eyes.

'Nice of him to let you talk now,' Hammerson grunted.

'Asuryan is dead. And silence is no longer an indulgence we can afford,' Caradryan said.

'Just like an elf. Wouldn't catch a dwarf breaking a vow just because he misplaced his god,' Hammerson said, bluntly.

Caradryan's expression became mask-like. 'What do you want, dwarf?'

Hammerson looked up at him. 'Got a bit of godfire in you, elf. Don't deny it. Ungrim Ironfist had it, before he fulfilled his oath. I can feel it from here. Worse than that bird of yours. I'm surprised that horse hasn't died of heatstroke.' Hammerson looked away. 'Godfire or no, if you're leading us into a trap, I'll crack your skull.' He patted his hammer affectionately.

'Why would I rescue you, only to lead you into a trap?' Caradryan murmured. Hammerson frowned. He didn't like being reminded of that. He was no prideful beardingling, and he knew that the presence of the elves had been instrumental in turning back the tide of blood-worshippers who had caught up with the dwarfs and their mannish allies in the pine crags. But it was impolite to mention it, and even an elf ought to know better.

'Who knows why elves do anything? You're all crooked in the skull,' Hammerson said, twirling his finger about alongside his head. 'And you didn't rescue us. Maybe you helped the manlings, but the Zhufbarak need no aid from your sort.'

'No?'

'No.'

'We didn't have to offer you our help, you know,' Caradryan said, frowning.

'Elves never offer help freely. There's always a price.'

'And your people would know all about that, eh, dwarf?' Caradryan said.

Hammerson looked up at him, and made to retort. But before he could, someone said, 'There is a price, and it is obvious, Master Hammerson. For we have all asked it, and paid it, in these past few months.'

Hammerson glanced over his shoulder, and saw the human Emperor striding along beside his griffon. Karl Franz had one hand on the beast's neck, and its striped tail lashed in pleasure as he scratched beneath its feathers. 'We fight for each other. That is the price and the paying of it, in these times. To fight alongside one another, and for one another, in defence of all that we knew and loved.'

Hammerson grimaced and turned back to the trail ahead. 'Aye,' he grunted. 'Doesn't mean we have to like it, though.'

The Emperor laughed. 'No, nor would I ask it of you. Irritable dwarfs fight better than content ones, I have learned.'

Hammerson opened his mouth, ready to deny it. Then he snorted, shook his head and looked up at Caradryan. 'And what about elves, then?' he asked.

'We fight better than dwarfs, whatever their disposition,' Caradryan said. The elf turned in his saddle and looked at the Emperor. 'We are drawing near. When we arrive, you will accompany me into the Eternal Glade alone.'

'Not if I have anything to say about it,' Hammerson growled.

'You do not.' Caradryan didn't look at him. He spoke disdainfully, as if Hammerson were no more important than a pebble lodged in his horse's hoof.

Then, that was elves for you. They thought the world danced to their tune. Even now, with everything that had happened, elves were still elves. But dwarfs were still dwarfs.

Hammerson stumped around in front of Caradryan's horse and extended a hand. As the horse drew close, the dwarf reached out and gave the animal a hard flick on the snout with one thick finger. The horse reared and snorted. Caradryan cursed and fought to control his steed. The whole column crashed to a halt behind him. White lions roared in consternation as horses whinnied and men shouted questions. Elves pelted forwards, bleeding out of the forest like ghosts. Hammerson ignored them, and the arrows that were soon pointed at him.

The runesmith crossed his brawny arms and smiled. 'Seems like I do, lad. Now, before we go a step further, I think we ought to decide who's going where, and who's invited to what.'

'Move aside, dwarf,' Caradryan said. The air grew hazy around his head and shoulders, and Hammerson could see the faint outline of flames. Hammerson shook his head.

'No.' Behind Caradryan, he could see the Emperor watching the confrontation, and Gelt as well. The latter looked as if he intended to intervene, but the Emperor stopped him with a gesture. Hammerson felt his smile widen. *Aye, leave it to the dwarfs, manling*, he thought.

'Move aside, or be moved,' Caradryan growled. He slid from the saddle and approached Hammerson. Flames crawled across his armour and his flesh was growing translucent, his every pore shining with reddish light. Hammerson held his ground, though every instinct he had was screaming for him to run. The elf wasn't really an elf any more, even as Gelt wasn't human. There was a power there he didn't understand, and didn't want to. But that power was as nothing compared to the weight of the responsibility on Hammerson's shoulders.

'No. Whatever happens, from here on out, my people will be heard and will hear all that is said. We've earned that right, in blood and iron.'

'You've earned nothing, dwarf,' Caradryan said, in a voice like the hiss of flame across stone. 'That you still live, after being allowed so far into the last, most sacred place of my people, should be enough, even for your greedy kind.'

'If you think that, then you really don't know much about us. Whatever is said, it likely concerns us, and I would hear it.' The Zhufbarak, his warriors, his kin, were all that remained of Zhufbar. As far as he knew, they might be all that remained of the dwarf race. He had a responsibility to them, to see that their sacrifice wasn't in vain. To see that their enemies, at least, remembered them. To see that, whatever else happened, they had a say in how they met their end.

'I should have left you to die,' Caradryan growled. Hammerson wondered how much of the anger in his voice was him, and how much was the power that now resided in him. Ungrim had been much the same, in those final days. Angry at everything, and nothing.

'Would have been convenient for you, aye,' Hammerson said. He cut his eyes to Gelt, and then added, 'Without us to caution them, the manlings would fall right into whatever trap you've laid out for them. That's why you don't want us to hear it, eh?'

Caradryan frowned. 'You know nothing,' he snapped. Flames blazed to life around his clenched fists and crawled up his forearms. In their light Hammerson saw strange figures, part wood and part woman, slink through the trees, their bark claws flexing eagerly. More elves had arrived as well, these clad in the colours of the woods, and he felt a chill as he recognised the wild elves and dryads of the forest.

'Well that's why I want to hear all about it,' Hammerson said. He thought of home, of the Black Water, and of the huge waterfall that cascaded down the side of the chasm in which the hold was nestled. If he were to be burned here, he wanted that to be his last thought.

'Wait,' someone said, from behind him. Hammerson turned.

Several figures stood behind him, suffused by a soft light which threw back the darkness that clung to the trees. Three elves – a woman and two men, both of the latter armoured, one in black iron, the other in gold and silver. The woman stepped forwards, her forest green robes rustling softly. She wore a crown of gold, and her face was so beautiful as to be painful, even to Hammerson. Caradryan sank to one knee, head bowed. His flames flickered and died.

The Emperor moved then to stand beside Hammerson. He sank down slowly, arms spread, head lowered. 'Greetings, Alarielle the Radiant, Everqueen, Handmaiden of Isha. We come before you to humbly beg sanctuary and to offer our aid in these troubled times,' Karl Franz said. His voice carried easily through the trees. He looked up. 'Will you welcome us to Athel Loren?'

Hammerson lifted his chin in defiance as the woman's gaze passed over him. He knew of the Everqueen, and knew that she could incinerate him on the spot with the barest word. The runes branded into his flesh ached, and he could feel the power of her through them. But he was a dwarf of the Black Water, and he would not kneel before an elf.

Her eyes met his, and, after a moment, what might have been the ghost of a smile passed across her lovely features. She inclined her head. 'Be welcome, travellers,' she said. She raised her hand, and the elves lowered their weapons. The dryads retreated, slinking back into the forest. 'The world has changed, and old distrusts and grudges must be abandoned. You have done well, Caradryan.' Alarielle gestured for the Emperor to rise. 'Come. There is much to be discussed, before the end of all things.'

The Eternal Glade

Teclis, once-Loremaster of the now-shattered Tower of Hoeth, blood of Aenarion and Astarielle, sat beneath an ancient tree in the Eternal Glade, eyes closed, his head pressed against the staff he held upright before him.

To his mystically attuned senses, the heartbeat of the primordial forest of Athel Loren was almost deafening. The forest, and the Eternal Glade in particular, was a place of immense, incomprehensible power. It would have taken him an eternity to learn its secrets, if he had been so inclined. And then only if the forest itself had let him.

The murmur of voices rose and fell around him, beyond the barrier of his eyelids. Not just the voices of elves, more was the pity. There were men as well, and dwarfs. Athel Loren had become the final redoubt for the mortal races as well as the immortal.

When Caradryan, captain of the Phoenix Guard, had led a column of weary survivors into the Eternal Grove that morning, he had paid no notice to the furore it elicited in the inhabitants of the woodland realm. Instead, his mind had turned inwards, hunting, seeking, probing, trying to root out some clue as to the source of his failure.

Where did I go wrong?

He was not used to asking such questions. In him was personified both the capability and the arrogance of his people, and it was not without cause that some – including himself – thought he was the greatest adept produced by the folk of Ulthuan since the breaking of the world in those far, dim days when daemons had poured through the wounds in the world's poles. He was the first to admit it, and wore it as a badge of pride. Like his brother, Teclis was the best and the worst of his folk made flesh.

I made a mistake. Somewhere, somehow... What did I miss? What factor did I overlook? The thoughts spiralled around and around, like leaves caught in a stiff breeze. *Where did I go wrong?* He examined the moment again and again, from every angle and facet.

He could still feel the frustration of that moment – the winds of magic raging within the Vortex, even as Ulthuan crumbled beneath him, his ancient home sinking into the raging sea. He could feel the winds escaping, one by one, slipping through his grasp as quick as eels, and the mounting sense of loss. He had wagered everything on a single throw of the dice, and while he had not lost, he hadn't won either.

His hands tightened on his staff. He knew every groove and contour of it by touch, and he had worked magics into it since he had first taken a knife to the length of wood in which it had hidden. The staff was as much a part of him as one of his limbs. It was warm to the touch, and the pale wood shone with a soft light. The residual power of the lore of Light, the one wind until recently within his grasp, coiled within the core of his staff, where it had slumbered until he'd found the one on whom he would bestow it. The one whom he had resurrected and transformed into the Incarnate of Light, a living embodiment of Hysh, the White Wind of magic.

Oh my brother, what have I made of you? What have I done to you? What have I done for you? The latter question was easier to answer than the former. His sins in that regard were ever at the foreground of his thoughts. Tyron, his brother, had died, consumed by the curse of their mutual bloodline, his body and soul twisted by the madness of Khaine. And it had happened by Teclis's design.

It had always been Tyrior's destiny to become the Incarnate of Light. But if he had done so while still bearing the curse of Aenarion, that power – the power necessary to redeem the world – would have become corrupted, and bent to the will of Khaine... or worse things. Thus Teclis had been forced to manipulate his own brother, to set the one he loved best on a path that would inevitably lead to his death. That such an outcome had been the only way of ensuring that the curse exhausted itself did not ease Teclis's guilt. Nor did the knowledge that Tyrior's resurrection as the Incarnate of Light was the lynchpin of his plan to throw back the *Rhانا Dandra* – to win the unwinnable war. All that mattered was that he had killed his brother and doomed the world.

But Teclis had brought Tyrior back from death's bower; he had transported the frail, mummified remains of his twin across the world, from the shattered remnants of Ulthuan, leaving his people in the hands of Malekith.

He had come to Athel Loren, and watered the seeds of Tyrior-as-he-had-been within the Heart of Avelorn. When Tyrior had awoken from the slumber of death, Teclis had filled the emptiness left behind by Khaine's passing with the Flame of Ulric, filling Tyrior's still-weak limbs with new strength. He had damned a city and all of the innocents within its walls in order to give his brother a chance of survival, and he knew, in his heart, that he would make the same choice again. Tyrior had endured too much, and all of it at his brother's hands, for Teclis not to. And then, when he was sure that Tyrior could stand it, he had given him the power of Hysh, and stirred the ashes of destiny to life once more.

He had given his brother back his life, and in return Tyrior had fought alongside his fellow Incarnates, Malekith and Alarielle, to save the Oak of Ages from the depredations of Chaos's firstborn son, Be'lakor, and those dark spirits he had twisted to his foul cause. Now, in the aftermath of that desperate battle, the few survivors of another, equally terrible conflict had come seeking sanctuary under the boughs of Athel Loren. And with them had come two more Incarnates.

Through the staff, he could sense the presence of the five Incarnates, their power grounded in frail flesh and bone, and the briefest trace of a sixth. The world hummed with the weight of them. Their every word sent shockwaves through his senses, and he could taste the raw power that seeped from their pores.

Slowly, his eyes still closed, he turned his staff, the gem set in its tip moving like a serpent's tongue, tasting the scent of each wind in turn. The gemstone was almost as old as the world itself, and it had taken him decades to work it and carve its facets to the proper shape. In his mind's eye, he saw the radiance of each – the blinding aura of Hysh, the constantly-shifting morass of Ulgu, the throbbing heat of Ghyran, the roaring hunger of Aqshy, the dense power of Chamon and, last and not least, the faint thrum of Azyr, the Blue Wind of magic. Light, Shadow, Life, Fire, Metal and the faintest traces of the Wind of the Heavens. Only two were missing... Shyish, the Wind of Death, and Ghur, the Wind of Beasts.

Of the two, he suspected he knew where the former had ended up – indeed, where else could it have gone? – but he had lost all hope of learning the location of the Wind of Beasts, or of the identity of its chosen host. The others, however, were here, right where they were supposed to be, and his regret was tempered by some small relief.

Nonetheless, he had failed. He had failed to control the Incarnates, failed to bestow the winds of magic on his chosen soldiers, and failed to bring them together in time. He had failed Ulthuan, he had failed his people, and now the world teetered on the knife-edge of oblivion. *What remains of it, at any rate*, he thought. The island-realm of the high elves was gone, lost to the swirling waters of the Great Ocean; the blood-slicked stones of Naggaroth were now little more than a haunt for cannibals and monsters; and Athel Loren was an inhospitable refuge for what remained of the elven peoples.

The elves were not alone in their doom, however. The ancient temple-cities of Lustria were no more, consumed in fires from the sky, the fate of their inhabitants unknown. The dwarfs had fared no better; their greatest holds had been all but overrun by skaven and worse, and those that remained had barred their gates in a futile effort to wait out the end of all things.

The realms of men had suffered as well. Bretonnia was a haunted wasteland, overrun by daemons and monsters despite the best efforts of its defenders. The lands of the south were gone, erased by the rampaging hordes of the ratmen. Kislev had been stripped to the bone by the hordes of Chaos, its people slaughtered or driven into the frozen wilderness to die. And the Empire, the last hope of the human race, was all but gone, its greatest cities taken by the enemy or reduced to plague-haunted ruins.

The enormity of it all threatened to overcome him, and would have, had events not conspired to bring the Incarnates together at last. He had doomed the world by his actions, his carelessness, but there was still a chance to salvage something. There was still a chance to weather the storm of Chaos, and throw back the Everchosen. And while there was a chance, Teclis would not surrender to despair. He could not.

'Teclis.'

Teclis opened his eyes. A ring of expectant faces met his sight. He took note of some of them – the newcomers had only been allowed a few representatives. The Emperor, Karl Franz. Duke Jerrod of Quenelles. Gotri Hammerson, runesmith of Zhufbar. Balthasar Gelt, wizard and Incarnate. And a white-haired knight, who was the Emperor's bodyguard. Something about the latter drew his attention. The man looked cold, as if he had been doused in ice-water, and when he caught Teclis looking at him, his face twisted, just for a moment, into a snarl. Teclis blinked, and the expression was gone. He hesitated, suddenly uncertain. 'What would you wish of me, Everqueen?' he asked, looking at Alarielle.

The Everqueen had been a living symbol of Isha, the mother-goddess of the elves, in better times. But her beauty had been transfigured into something terrifying since she had become the host for the Wind of Life. No more the nurturer, Alarielle had become instead the incarnation of creation and destruction, of life's beginnings and endings. The trees of the Eternal Glade shuddered and twitched in time to her heartbeat, her breath was in the wind, and in her voice was the rush and crash of the brooks and rivers.

'What I wish, Loremaster, and what I require are two separate things,' Alarielle said. Teclis knew she meant no insult, but even so, the coldness of her tone was almost too much for him to bear. Ever since she had given up the Heart of Avelorn to help resurrect Tyrior she had become withdrawn, as if the love she had once borne for his brother had become as dust.

'Not Loremaster,' he said. 'Not any more. Ulthuan is gone, and the Tower of Hoeth with it.' He spat the words with more bitterness than he'd intended. *You have no right to bitterness*, he thought, *not when your actions are the cause*.

'But you still live, brother,' Tyrior said, softly. 'We still live. Our people survive, thanks to you. Ulthuan is gone, but while one asur lives, its spirit persists.'

'Oh yes, very pretty. And while one asur lives, or druchii or asrai for that matter, I am still their king, as much good as it does any of us,' Malekith interjected, his voice a harsh, metallic rasp. Like Alarielle, he had been bound to one of the winds of magic. In his case, it had been Ulgu, and the coiling, cunning lore of Shadows suited Malekith to his core. He was less a being of flesh than of darkness now, stinking of burned iron and radiating cold. 'And as king, I would have answers. Why do you come to us, human?' Malekith asked. 'Why do you dare to come to Athel Loren?'

'Where else is there to go?' Karl Franz said. 'The world has grown hostile, and sanctuary is hard to come by. Old allies find themselves equally hard-pressed.' He indicated Hammerson and Jerrod. 'Our greatest cities are in ruins, and our people are in disarray. Our last redoubt, Averheim, is dust beneath the boots of the world's enemy. I am an emperor without an empire, as are you,' Karl Franz said, looking at Malekith.

'Look around you, human... my empire still stands,' Malekith said. He stood and spread his arms. 'The enemy have broken themselves on it again and again. But we still stand.'

Karl Franz smiled. 'If this is what you call an empire, I begin to wonder why Finubar feared you.'

Shadows coiled and writhed around Malekith's form as he went rigid with anger. 'You dare...?' he hissed. 'I will pluck the flesh from your bones, king of nothing.'

'Yes, for that has ever been the way of your folk. The world burns, and you can think of nothing better to do than to squabble in the ashes.' Karl Franz gestured sharply. 'You would rather kill the messenger than hear the message. You would turn away allies, because in your arrogance you mistake strength for weakness and support for burden.'

'What would you know of us, human?' Alarielle said. Teclis glanced at her. Her features were perfectly composed, but he thought he detected the trace of a smile on her face.

'I know enough,' Karl Franz said. He turned, his eyes scanning the Eternal Glade. 'I know that what your folk call the "Rhana Dandra" has begun – indeed, it began several years ago. I know that Ulthuan is gone, and that the Great Vortex is no more.' His eyes sought out Teclis. Teclis twitched. The Emperor's gaze revealed nothing, but the elf felt a glimmer of suspicion.

Why had Azyr sought out Karl Franz? The winds were drawn to their hosts as like was drawn to like, but the Emperor had, to the best of his knowledge, never displayed the least affinity for the lore of the Heavens. Teclis forced the thought aside. It mattered little now, in any event. The power was gone, torn from him. Teclis shook himself and said, 'And do you know why?'

Karl Franz looked at him. 'No,' he said, and Teclis knew it was a lie.

'Oh, well, let Teclis illuminate you, eh?' Malekith said. He had sunk back onto his throne, his anger already but a memory. Teclis looked at him, and Malekith gestured sharply. 'As your king, I command you to tell the savages of your crimes, schemer.' Malekith laughed. 'Tell our guests how you gambled the world, and lost.'

Teclis looked at the thin, dark shape of the creature once known as the Witch-King, sitting on his throne of roots and branches beside the Everqueen. The

creature he had helped crown Eternity King, and had gifted with more power than he deserved. Malekith met his glare, and Teclis knew that the former ruler of the dark elves was smiling behind his metal mask.

Teclis used his staff to help himself to his feet, and he pulled the tattered remnants of his authority about him. He looked at the newcomers. Despite being bedraggled and bloodstained, they did not look beaten, and for that, Teclis thanked the fallen gods of his people. They would need every ounce of strength that they could muster for what was coming. He cleared his throat, and made ready to speak.

Before he could, however, a snarl ripped through the glade. A snarl that was achingly familiar, and utterly terrifying. He turned, and his searching gaze was met by a yellow, furious one. Beast eyes those, and blazing with intent. The temperature in the glade began to drop.

'Thief!' the white-haired knight roared, in a voice not his own. The Reiksguard shoved past the Emperor, and hurled himself towards Teclis, fingers hooked like claws.

'Volker – no!' the Emperor bellowed, reaching for his guard. The man slithered out of his grip.

With a curse, the dwarf, Hammerson made a grab for Volker. 'Hold him back, lad, or it's an arrow to the gibles for the lot of us,' the dwarf roared at the Bretonnian as he wrapped his brawny arms around Volker's legs. The Reiksguard fell sprawling and Jerrod sprang on top of him, armour rattling. Volker thrashed beneath them, howling like a wolf. Teclis stumbled back, one hand pressed to his throat, his face pale with shock.

Volker was cold; colder than Teclis thought it was possible for a man to become and survive. The air around the struggling figures became silvered with frost, and the grass beneath them turned stiff and shattered. Jerrod's teeth were chattering, and Hammerson was cursing. Volker glared at Teclis, his eyes yellow and bestial. 'Thief,' he snarled again, and Teclis shuddered, pulling his cloak about himself. He had expected this, though he'd hoped it would be otherwise. Ulric was not the sort of god to pass quietly into oblivion, even if it would be better for all concerned.

'Yes,' he said hoarsely. 'Yes, I am a thief. And your moment has passed, old wolf. You are dead, and I will not let you sacrifice a life merely to take mine.' He lifted his staff, and the words to an incantation rose in his mind. But before he could speak, Karl Franz stepped between them. Though the Wind of the Heavens had been stripped from him, there was still something yet in him that made Teclis wary. A lurking strength, as unlike his own as Tyrion's was. He lowered his hands. 'I did what I had to do,' he said, without quite knowing why, as he met the Emperor's gaze. 'I did what was necessary.'

'And would you do it again?' Karl Franz said, his voice a quiet rumble.

Teclis hesitated. He glanced towards Tyrion. 'In a heartbeat,' he said.

The Emperor nodded slowly, as if he had expected no other answer. He turned and looked down at his bodyguard. The man thrashed and howled, fighting to be free of his captors. Veins bulged on his neck, and froth coated his lips. Karl Franz looked back at Teclis. 'Can you help him?' he asked.

Instead of replying, Teclis knelt. Volker's body twitched and his face seemed to elongate, becoming monstrous and unformed. Teclis stretched out his hand and plunged his fingers into the wet chill that obscured the man's face. He tried to grasp the shard of Ulric's essence that had made its home in the man, even as he had grasped the Flame in Middenheim. But this was different. It was no mindless flux of power, but rather a desperate consciousness, savage and determined. It struggled against him, and he heard Volker wail in agony.

Images flooded his mind. He saw Middenheim burn, felt the heat of the flames, and the blistering cold as the sliver of Ulric's might was pressed into Volker's soul. Fear, weakness, fatigue, all were buried beneath the cold, so that Volker might survive the sack of the city and escape to bring warning to Averheim. Even in death, the wolf-god had been determined to watch over his chosen people. Sigmar might have been their greatest god, but Ulric had been their first.

But now, with warnings delivered, there was one last task. Ulric had known that somehow, someday, Teclis would cross paths with the men of the Empire once more, before the end of all things. And he was determined to have his revenge. Teclis felt a sudden, stabbing pain, as if teeth were tearing into his flesh, and he jerked his hand back with a hiss. Steam rose from his blue-tinged flesh as he cradled the wounded limb to his chest. Alarielle and Malekith's guards started forward, but the Eternity King slammed a fist down on his throne. 'Be still,' he grated. 'No more of our people's blood shall be spent in payment of his schemes. Let him survive or fall on his own.'

Volker flung off his captors. 'You killed them, thief,' Volker snarled, lunging for him again. His voice echoed strangely amongst the trees, with a sound like ice-clad branches snapping. As he fell back, Teclis saw Tyrion start forwards, one hand on his blade. He waved a hand, stopping his brother before he could interfere. *This is my fight, brother, my burden*, Teclis thought. 'You killed my city – my people – you killed the world. For what?' Volker growled, in a dead god's voice.

'For him,' Teclis said, indicating his brother. 'For them. I sacrificed your people for my own, and I would do it again, a thousand times over, if I had to.' He extended his staff to hold Volker at bay. 'Malekith was right. I gambled the world. But I did not lose, for here you all stand... Incarnates, gods in all but name, ready to throw back the end of all things.' He made a fist. 'I tore apart the Great Vortex, and sought to ground the winds of magic in living champions, who would become mighty enough, as a group, to defy the Chaos Gods themselves.'

He saw Balthasar Gelt nod, as if a question had suddenly been answered. The wizard said, 'But not all of the winds are accounted for – what of the Winds of Beasts, and of Death?'

Volker threw back his head and howled, before Teclis could even attempt to reply. The air quivered with the sound. He ripped his sword from its sheath and swung a wild blow at Teclis. The sound of steel on steel followed the echoes of the howl, as the Emperor interposed himself, and his runefang, between the maddened knight and his prey. 'No,' Karl Franz said. 'No, the time for vengeance is done.'

'Who are you to gainsay me?' Volker roared. His eyes bulged from their sockets, and froth dotted his patchy beard. He strained against Karl Franz, trying to untangle their blades.

'I am your Emperor, Wendel Volker. And that should be all that needs to be said.' The Emperor spoke quietly as he leaned into the locked swords. 'Now sheathe your blade.' The two men locked eyes, and for a moment, Teclis wondered which would win out. Then Volker staggered back and slumped, his sword falling to the grass. He sank down, and the frost that coated his armour began to melt. The Emperor dropped to one knee and placed a hand on Volker's shoulder. Teclis could still feel the wrath of the wolf-god, or whatever was left of him, retreating, slinking back into hiding. It was not gone, but its fury was abated, for now.

Before anyone could speak to break the silence that followed, the trees gave out a sudden rattle, and a wind rose up, causing the leaves to make a sound like murmuring voices. Teclis stiffened. While he was no native of the forest, he knew well what that sound meant. It was a warning.

A moment later, a member of the Eternal Guard moved out of the trees to Alarielle's side and whispered something into her ear. Her eyes widened and she stood quickly. She looked around. 'It seems that you are not the only refugees seeking sanctuary within the forest,' she said. Her voice was strained, and her skin pale. 'An army approaches the edge of the Wyrdrioth.'

Teclis's grip on his staff tightened. He could feel the presence of another Incarnate – and one far more powerful than any of those now standing in the Eternal Glade. Together, they might equal him, but separately, they stood no chance. Even here, in the living heart of Athel Loren, he could feel the malignant, suffocating pulse of Shyish – the Wind of Death – and the one who had become its host.

'An army?' Malekith snarled. 'Who would dare?'

'The Wind of Death,' Teclis said, before Alarielle could speak. He bowed his head. 'It is the Incarnate of Death.' He looked up, meeting the gaze of each Incarnate in turn.

'The Undying King has come to Athel Loren.'



SEVEN



The Wyrdrioth, Northern Edge of Athel Loren

'Well, they appear to have prepared quite the welcome for us, I must admit,' Mannfred von Carstein said as he lounged insouciantly in Ashigaroth's saddle. The abyssal steed growled in reply. Mannfred patted the creature's armour-plated neck, and glanced around at his bodyguard of Drakenhof Templars. The armoured vampires sat astride their cannibal steeds, awaiting his orders. *Or so they wish me to believe*, he thought. His good humour evaporated. He turned back towards the forest and ran his palm over his hairless scalp.

If he'd been human, what he saw before him might have taken his breath away. Banners of all colours and designs were raised together as, for the first time in generations, elves, dwarfs and men prepared to fight as one. The battle-lines had been arranged before the tree line, barring the army of the dead from the Wyrdrioth.

If he'd had any intention of taking his forces into the forest, such a display might have annoyed him. He turned in his saddle, taking in the bleak host which was spread out behind him. The banners of the dead were thick among the pine-crags. An army of worm-picked bone and tattered wings, lit by baleful witch-fires, the dead had spilled down from the mountains in their thousands, their every step precise, guided by a single, crushing will. The will of Nagash.

Mannfred snapped his teeth in frustration. In the years since he had aided Arkhan the Black in resurrecting the Undying King, he had seen everything for which he had worked since his resurrection from the stinking mire of Hel Fenn turn to ashes. Every scheme, every triumph, gone like dust on the wind. All of it ground beneath the remorseless heel of Nagash, as the Undying King prepared for the final war.

Even Sylvania was no longer his – Nagash had given the blighted province over to Neferata to defend, while he marched to war with his remaining lieutenants. *Speaking of which... where is the bag of bones?* He twisted about, hunting for any sign of his rival. Arkhan was never very far from Nagash these days. Too, he seemed somehow... diminished by the association. As if Nagash's will had completely obliterated his own. In and of itself, the neutering of his old rival didn't bother Mannfred all that much. But the implications of it were unpleasant, to say the least.

I'd rather not become a mindless automaton, thank you very much, he thought. Such a fate was beneath him. Then, so was the current state of affairs. Still, reduced circumstances often meant increased opportunities. And there were plenty of the latter, in the wake of the destruction of the Black Pyramid.

He smiled thinly, relishing the memory. At the time, it had not been so enjoyable. But in the aftermath, with several weeks between then and now, he had come to see it for the opportunity it was. A sizeable Chaos army, composed of the rotting dead, giggling plague-daemons and howling barbarians, had smashed through Nagash's defences with a single-minded determination that put the Undying King's own forces to shame. Even worse, the enemy had been commanded by old friends and absent companions – the spectral abomination known as the Nameless, and Isabella von Carstein, newly resurrected and as unhinged as ever. One of them would have been bad enough, but the presence of both had made a bad situation all the worse.

The Nameless had ever been treacherous; the dark spirit was a thing fuelled by spite and treachery, more so than any vampire, and its questions and petulant demands had been a constant annoyance. Why Nagash had brought it back, when there were any number of appropriate champions to choose from, Mannfred couldn't say. The Great Necromancer could stir the waters of death and bring any spirit bobbing to the surface – why not bring back Konrad or one of the other von Carsteins? *Anyone other than Vlad*, he thought. But no, Nagash had seen fit to bend the Nameless to his will, and then forgotten about it until the creature had returned in the service of a new master.

And Isabella had come with it. *Hadn't that been a surprise*, he thought. Of all the von Carsteins he had certainly never expected to see her. Indeed, he'd half expected that Nagash had hidden her soul away in some phylactery somewhere, so as to better control Vlad. It was what Mannfred would have done, had he ever conceived of such a ploy. Unlike Nagash, however, he had no illusions as to just how uncontrollable Vlad truly was. *Or had been*, Mannfred thought, not without some amusement.

Sylvania had resisted the End Times until that point, inviolate and unchanged. Now, it was a reeking ruin, and what little life it had once had was gone, snuffed by the contest between Nagash and Nurgle. And more than one of Nagash's lieutenants had been claimed in that conflagration – Luthor Harkon, gone at last to join his treacherous kinsman Walach, and the mighty Vlad von Carstein himself, brought low by the woman he loved.

Mannfred couldn't restrain a laugh. *Goodbye, goodbye, parting is such sweet sorrow*, he thought gleefully. *So soon returned to the dust where you belong, old man*. How the Chaos Gods had got their talons in Isabella's twisted soul he didn't know, but she had been the most effective weapon they'd employed to date. She had distracted them all, even Nagash, while the skaven had burrowed beneath Nagash's nightmare pyramid and claimed a debt that the Undying King had owed them since the razing of Nagashizzar.

It had been a plan worthy of... well, him. He scratched his chin and chuckled, studying the ranks of the living. Of course, if he had been in charge, he would have made sure Nagash had been returned to his well-deserved oblivion, one way or another. Instead, all the Dark Gods had managed to do was stir the tiger from his lair. And now the predator had come to make common cause with his prey, against the fire that threatened to claim the forest around them. Not that the prey knew that just yet. The smell of fear on the wind was delightful.

'Ah Vlad, if only you could be here – at last, he follows your sage counsel. Too little, too late,' Mannfred murmured.

'You sound cheerful for one who has just had his territories stripped from him', a familiar voice said. Mannfred twisted about in his saddle and looked down at Arkhan the Black as the latter pushed through the front rank of corpses. *'I thought you might make your move at last, when he made Neferata castellan of Sylvania.'*

Mannfred's smile faded. 'My loyalty is as solid as the bedrock beneath our feet, liche.'

Arkhan's skull tipped back, and a weird scuttling sound rose from his fleshless jaws. Mannfred's lips peeled back from his fangs. The liche was laughing at him. 'Oh, be silent, you withered husk,' he snapped.

'You are like a spoiled child, angry at having a favoured toy snatched from his grasp', Arkhan rasped, staring towards the army of the living. *'And it is only fitting that Neferata rule... She was born for it, and it would take all four gods of Chaos to shift her. Besides which, there are now more Nehekhara nobles in your precious province than the backward Sylvanian aristocracy you and Vlad dote on. Nagash took the Great Land from them, and now they will have Sylvania in recompense.'*

'Yes, because gods forbend that they should be discomfited in any way. A fragile breed, your desert princes,' Mannfred spat. Arkhan was right, which only made it worse. The customs of the kings and queens of Nehekhara were alien to him, and without Nagash there to quell them, they would revolt against him the moment he tried to impose his will. For now, at least. He pushed the thought aside and hunkered forwards in his saddle.

'Think of it, Arkhan. Few men, living or dead, can say that they have seen the green-vaulted reaches of Athel Loren. What secrets must linger in that wild wood? What secrets might you or I rip from it? All we have to do is...'

'Parley', Arkhan said.

Mannfred snorted. 'Of course. Forgive me. For a moment, I forgot we had an army of but thousands at our back. So of course we must parley, lest their few hundred weak unmentionable havoc.' He looked slyly at Arkhan. 'Why the sudden change of heart, you think? Why now, after all this time, does our lord and master stoop to address the cattle?' He smiled and tapped his nose. 'Vampires are very good at smelling weakness, liche. We can taste death on the air.' He leaned down, and met Arkhan's flickering gaze unflinchingly. 'Just how badly did losing the Black Pyramid hurt him, eh?'

'Why not ask him yourself?' Arkhan said.

'I thought I was,' Mannfred said. He turned away. 'In any event, who's it to be, then? Who'll act as herald, to bring word of our peaceful intentions to yon foemen?' He sat back. 'You, perhaps? Or one of your Nehekharan addle-pates? Perhaps that loudmouthed fool, Antar of Mahrak? He's a favourite of yours, is he not?'

'You will do it,' Arkhan said, not looking at him.

'Will I?'

Arkhan said nothing. Mannfred sniffed, stood up in his saddle, and craned his neck, searching for the Undying King. Nagash was hard to miss – he stood at the centre of the army, a skeletal giant surrounded by a flickering corona that changed colour by turns, becoming green, then black, then purple. He was the corrupt heart and dark will of an army that was little more than a single, charnel entity. The hooded and cloaked forms of a dozen necromancers surrounded him as ever, each one lending his will to ease Nagash's burdens.

Nine heavy tomes, each filled with Nagash's darkest wisdoms, floated around him, pages flapping with a sound like the snapping of jaws. The grimoires were connected to Nagash by heavy chains, and they strained at them like beasts at the leash. Moaning spirits swirled about him, blending together and breaking apart in a woeful dance of agony. There were men there, and elves and dwarfs, as well as other races. To die at Nagash's hands was to not die at all, but instead be condemned to eternal servitude.

The wide skull, lit by its own internal flame, turned, and the blazing orbs that danced in its cavernous sockets brightened briefly. Nagash did not speak. He did not need to. Mannfred knew that Arkhan would not have spoken without Nagash's permission. He turned and snapped Ashigaroth's reins. The abyssal steed leapt into the air with a shriek, and hurtled towards the lines of the living.

He did not bother to attempt to conceal himself. As pre-eminent as he was in the sorcerous arts, those below were his match. The most powerful surviving sorcerers, wizards and necromancers in all the world, those not aligned with the Archenemy, were here in this place. The rest were dead, or hiding. Creatures like Zacharias the Everliving had perished, defying Nagash to the last, while monsters like Egrimm van Horstmann had been consumed by the ever-shifting tides of war and madness. Those who remained had chosen their hills to die on, and were gathering their strength for the storm to come.

Zacharias, at least, had made his end an entertaining one. He smiled as he thought of it – the sky had been wracked with spasms, and the Vanhaldenschlosse chewed to steaming wreckage by the confrontation between vampire and liche. Zacharias had held off Nagash's army alone with only his magics for days, before Nagash had bestirred himself to end the conflict. There had been something personal in it, there at the end, Mannfred thought. As if the two knew one another, and there was some grudge between them. In the end Zacharias had perished at Nagash's hands, strangled in the ruins of the Vanhaldenschlosse and his remains cast upon the pyre.

He leaned forwards, and Ashigaroth wailed like a lost soul as it hurtled over the heads of elves, dwarfs and men. Mannfred laughed as he let his steed indulge itself. Like him, the creature fed as much on fear as flesh, and there was precious little of the former left in a world so close to ultimate ruin. But while it lasted, he saw no harm in enjoying it.

He knew he was trusting in the curiosity, and perhaps even the misguided honour, of the living. And that trust was not misplaced. No arrow, bullet or spell assailed him as his abyssal steed dropped to the top of a towering boulder just before the line of raised shields. He sat for a moment, relishing the attention. He had moved in the shadows for so long, waging little wars, that he had almost forgotten what it was like to be the focus of so much fear. Once, long ago, he had faced men and dwarfs arrayed similarly. His enjoyment lessened as he recalled how the battle of Hel Fenn had gone. For all his power, he had been struck down in what should have been his moment of ultimate triumph.

And now, he was merely one nightmare amongst many. Mannfred shook his head, and smiled. 'Ah well,' he murmured. 'Best to be about it.' He straightened and said, 'So – who will it be, then?' His voice carried easily. The living were almost as silent as the dead. Mannfred grinned. 'Come now, don't be shy. We are all men of the world, and is not my presence a guarantee of good conduct? Who will it be? The Emperor without an empire? Or one of the exiles of fair Ulthuan, who now infest these shores like field mice? Come, come, step forward, and sign thy name into history as the one who stretched out a hand in fellowship to the Undying King,' he said. 'You have called, and we have come. Do not turn us away now, at light's last gleaming.'

It was a pretty speech, equal parts mocking and inviting. And it had the desired effect: a tall figure, clad in darkly gleaming armour, stepped forwards. 'Say what you have come to say, abomination, and then begone,' said Malekith. His armour's death-mask rendered his words strangely metallic, and Mannfred felt a chill. Here was one like Nagash, bound to some greater power. He could smell the raw essence of magic rising from the Witch-King, and for a moment, he felt his confidence waver.

Mannfred leaned in. 'And if I choose to tarry?' he spat.

'Then we will destroy you, and forget you,' said a second masked individual. Robes rustling, Balthasar Gelt stepped up to join Malekith. 'Your master has a surplus of puppets, vampire. One more or less will hardly change things.'

Mannfred smiled lazily. Though he could sense the power that now held Gelt in its glittering clutches, he was on firmer ground with Vlad's former pet. 'Ah, Gelt. Twice-traitor, first to your Empire and then to Vlad.' He shook his head. 'Poor Vlad... He could have used your help, you know. There at the end, I mean.'

Gelt stiffened, and Mannfred laughed. 'And now, here you stand.' He leered at Alarielle, who stood behind Malekith. 'I wouldn't trust him, my lady. Yon poltroon is the very best of serpents. Why, his heart is rotted clean through with guile and malice.'

'Something you would know intimately,' Karl Franz said. He didn't look at Mannfred as he spoke, and the latter knew, without turning to look, that the Emperor was staring at Nagash. And that, even more worryingly, Nagash was staring back at him.

Incensed, Mannfred glared at the man. 'I know only that you are a relic of a newly dead world. What use have you now, eh? A statesman without a state, a tyrant stripped of his power. A dead man would be more use than you, Karl Franz, last of the rotten house and failed potentate that you are. I dub thee Fumbler of the Faith and Lord Lackwit,' Mannfred said, making the sign of the hammer in mocking fashion. The Emperor looked at him, and Mannfred lowered his hand. Smoke rose from his fingers, and he shook his hand to disperse it. Even now, the symbols of Sigmar held some power over him.

'You have no power in that regard, thankfully,' Karl Franz said. 'Only one vampire was named elector, and he does not stand before me.'

Mannfred blinked. For a second, he was tempted to cross the distance between them and tear out the man's throat. But he restrained himself. Now was not the time to be drawn into foolishness. He licked his lips and looked at Malekith, pointedly ignoring the human. 'You commanded that I speak my piece, so I shall, mighty elf-king.' He swept out his arm to indicate the maggots stretched across the horizon. 'Great Nagash, Lord of the Underworld, Undying King and Supreme Lord of All Dead Things, wishes to parley.'



Arkhan the Black watched Mannfred confront the last rulers of the living world, and thought how, under different circumstances, the army spread out around him would be here for different reasons. Instead of a triumphal siege, however, they had come seeking allies in a last-ditch gamble.

The thought elicited some amusement. In life, he had been a notorious gambler, and a champion of debt; that was how Nagash had first caught him up in his schemes of empire. And here he was at the last, wagering what little he still had in one last great throw of the dice. He reached up and touched a charred spot on his robe. The black mark was in the shape of a hand – the hand of the Everchild, Aliathra of Ulthuan. In her final moments, before Arkhan had slit her throat, the elven princess had struck him. Something had passed between them, though he could not say what it had been. Whatever it was – curse, blessing or something in between – it was still within him. And it was growing stronger.

Arkhan looked up, examining the wheel of stars and the tortured heavens. They held no answers. The music of the spheres had become discordant and painful. Auguries showed only falsehood, and the oracular spirits spat gibberish, even when Nagash himself questioned them. The underworld was in disarray, and the gods of men were dead or diminished.

The Great Work was undone. An eternity of careful preparation, of strife and conflict, all for nothing. The thought did not weigh as heavily as he'd feared it might. In truth, it was worth it, if only to see the Undying King at a loss. Though his mind and soul had long been bartered away to Nagash, some flicker of the man he had been yet remained. Some sliver of that cynical, acid-tongued wretch, with his black teeth and gaudy robes, still lingered in the husk of him, and was, perhaps, growing stronger as Nagash's attentions were diverted to more important matters. And that fragment, that ghost of a ghost, was amused to no end by the predicament that Nagash had found himself in.

'Irony is a beautiful thing, if you are not its victim,' someone said, close beside him. Arkhan looked around. He was surrounded by a flock of robed and

hooded adherents – liches, vampires, necromancers – all students of the Great Work. Mortuary priests, disciples of poor, dead W'soran, and those few surviving living practitioners of the Corpse Geometries, all gathered together now at his discretion. But the one who had spoken was none of those things – he was as unique as Arkhan himself. He wore a hooded cloak, concealing his identity, but there was no hiding the warrior's build, or the aristocratic posture.

'I was never one to indulge in the misfortunes of others,' Arkhan said.

The hooded figure gave a bark of laughter. 'You forget – I have played dice with you, Arkhan. I know exactly what sort of man you were – and still are.'

'And what sort of man are you?'

'One who honours his debts.'

Arkhan turned away. *'It is a shame that you could not reach Averheim in time. You might have turned the tide.'*

The hooded figure looked at him. 'It is a shame that our lord and master failed to heed me when I suggested that we muster in defence of the Empire. And now look where we are. The last place any of us, especially him, wanted to be.'

'Which him are you referring to? Nagash... or your hapless progeny?'

'Both, I think,' Vlad von Carstein said. 'But Nagash especially. Mannfred knows that failure breeds opportunity as well as, or better than, success in the right circumstances. Nagash, I think, does not.' The vampire looked towards the towering shape of Nagash, his expression speculative.

'Nagash cannot conceive of failure. To fail would imply that he made a mistake. To admit that would unravel all that he is, was and will be,' Arkhan said.

'And would that be so bad?'

Arkhan leaned against his staff, skull pressed to its length. *'For better or worse, Nagash is as close to a god as remains to this dying world. To remove his certainty would be to cripple him, and by extension, condemn us all.'*

'Arrogance set him on his path, and arrogance will see him through,' Vlad said. He shook his head and sighed. 'More and more, I wonder if Mannfred is not his truest servant after all, given the similarities between them.'

'Mannfred is a fool. Nagash is not.' Arkhan looked at Vlad. *'Why have you not informed him of your survival? He believes that you met your end in Sylvania, at your paramour's hands.'*

'To be honest, I'm a bit surprised that he still thinks I'm dead,' Vlad murmured. He frowned, and for a moment Arkhan considered asking him about Isabella. That the Chaos Gods had brought her back was of little surprise to him. Nothing was beyond them, and such a resurrection was merely a parlour trick for such powers. But he decided against it. What Vlad thought of it was unimportant. All that mattered was that he served.

'He has never been very observant, where his desires are concerned. He wishes for you to be dead, and so you are,' Arkhan said. *'That is his greatest weakness, and greatest strength. His lies propel him on, fuelling the arrogance that lends him strength.'*

'Like Nagash,' Vlad said, with the smile of one who believes he's scored a point.

Arkhan shifted uncomfortably. He did not reply. Let the vampire think what he liked. In all the years he'd spent duelling with Mannfred, he'd forgotten how much more deadly the first von Carstein was. Mannfred, for all his faults, was not a philosopher. He was pragmatic, and focused on the material world. A craftsman of death, rather than an artist. For all his pretensions of nobility and all of his insistence that the world's throne was his by right of blood, Mannfred was still a callow, petty creature.

Vlad, on the other hand, was anything but. He had wrung knowledge from the writings of Nagash without the benefit of a tutor, learning through trial and error. He had fought for everything he claimed, and claimed nothing he had not shed blood in pursuit of. Mannfred schemed towards a single, final goal, like an arrow travelling towards its target. Vlad, however, was more like a sword, capable of more than simply carving out an enemy's heart.

'Was I ever as arrogant as Nagash?' Vlad asked. 'Was I ever as blind as Mannfred?'

Arkhan looked at the vampire. *'You tell me,'* he said, after a time.

'Neferata certainly thought so,' Vlad said, and chuckled. He rubbed the heavy ring that decorated his finger. 'Never could abide arrogance, that one.'

'No... she cannot.' Arkhan turned away from him. Vlad smiled.

'She and Isabella have – had – much in common. I thought, once upon a time, that I could mould her into the image of the queen. When she resisted, when she turned my arrogance back on me, hissing and spitting, I knew that there was no need. The first time she raised her voice to me in anger, I felt my heart ignite.' Vlad cocked his head. 'Was it that way with you, gambler? Prisoner, slave, lover... so many masks between you two. And now, shorn of all pretence...'

Arkhan said nothing. Vlad waited. When no reply seemed forthcoming, he sighed and shrugged. 'And that is the shame of it all. Love, that rarest of alchemies, is lost so easily when the wind shifts and the fire is sighted on the horizon. Luckily, for some, adversity only adds strength to that bond.'

Arkhan turned to see what Vlad was looking at. Behind them were arrayed the Drakenhof Templars. Loyal once to Mannfred, they had, by and large, honoured their oaths to serve the master of the von Carstein line, and had bent knee to Vlad upon his resurrection. Of the inner circle, only a few remained. Count Nyktolos had met his fate on the sands of the Great Desert; and the burly monster Alberacht Nictus, the Reaper of Drakenhof, had died defending that infamous pile, and the scores of huddled Sylvania peasantry sheltering within it, against daemons more monstrous even than himself.

Of those he had known, and who had aided him in restoring Nagash, only two remained – Erikan Crowfiend, and Elize von Carstein. The morose Bretonnian, in his dark patchwork armour, sat close beside the crimson-haired von Carstein woman, both of them mounted on cannibal horses from the Sternieste stables. He saw that their hands were not-quite touching, fingers barely intertwined. Love was not forbidden among the dead, for Nagash had little understanding of it, save as a goad. But it was rare. Vlad watched them surreptitiously, his eyes unreadable.

If he had been capable of it, Arkhan might have smiled. Instead, he let his gaze play over the other templars. Von Carsteins, most of them, though there were a few who bore on their faces the stamp of other primogenitors. Hard-eyed Blood Dragons, cunning Lahmians, even one or two brutal Strigoi, wearing tattered armour and cradling crude weapons. And one other, her face composed and so still as to resemble marble.

Eldyra of Tiranoc was an elf, or had been. She was the only survivor of Eltharion the Grim's doomed rescue attempt on behalf of the Everchild, she whose life essence had been used to quicken Nagash's spirit from its dark bower in those final moments at the Nine Daemons. She had fallen in that last, fateful battle, but Mannfred had been seized by one of his distressing whims, and had shown her mercy. Of sorts, at any rate.

Now, she sat astride her horse, as undead as the rest of the Drakenhof Templars, and as bloodthirsty as any of Mannfred's get. The elf noticed his attentions, and met his gaze. Her eyes held no hint as to her thoughts. As he watched, Elize von Carstein leaned over and murmured something to Eldyra, and the elf looked away.

'Not the first mistake Mannfred has ever made, but it might be his last,' Vlad said. Arkhan looked at him. Vlad gestured to Eldyra. 'Still, I am impressed that it was done at all. A rare thing, to see one of our sort crafted from alien flesh.'

'Your sort. Not mine,' Arkhan said.

'But even you have to admire the artistry of it. Men are born to die. They are well on their way to being corpses with the first, squalling breath that they draw. But to take a thing of life, a thing which will not know death, and to twist it so... Ah, well.' Vlad shook his head. 'Mannfred was always creative. For a limited value of the term.'

'Yes. And foolish. He is taunting them,' Arkhan said. Vlad followed his gaze, and frowned.

'Well, that's hardly a surprise, is it?' He chuckled. 'It has ever been his nature to be imprudent. That arrogance you mentioned earlier, I think. He cannot conceive of a defeat or a treachery of which he is not the author.'

'Then he is in for a rude surprise,' Arkhan said. He looked at Vlad, and then past him, at Nagash. The Undying King paid no attention to the living or the dead, instead communing with the roiling tempest of souls which had made him its aleph in the moments following his consumption of the gods of Nehekharu so many months ago. Arkhan cut his eyes back to Vlad. *'You are certain, then?'*

'If I weren't, I would have said nothing. I would not be hiding myself from him,' Vlad said softly. He frowned. 'Mannfred is a poison, and he always has been. He is treacherous and uncontrollable. He knows no master save ambition, and he listens to no counsel save that which is born in the black froth which passes for his mind. And he is the author of too much of the tragedy, too much of the grief which afflicts them. Though I am loath to admit it, Mannfred shook the pillars of heaven and earth. And the only way to patch the resulting cracks is... well.' He smiled sadly. The emotion, Arkhan noted, did not reach his eyes.

'He will be missed,' Arkhan said.



Middenheim, City of the White Wolf

Canto Unsworn rode through the ruined streets of Middenheim on his gibbering horse and tried to ignore the shrieks and screams that even now, a year after the fact, still rang out at odd intervals from the shadowed recesses of the fallen city. He also ignored the moans of the beaten, battered shape which he

had dragged behind his horse across half of the city. Ignoring the former was easier than ignoring the latter.

A crackling bolt of sorcerous lightning hammered into a nearby building, causing a section of it to collapse and a cloud of dust to wash across the street. Canto looked up. The skies overhead still boiled with madness. The fury of the maelstrom above was matched by the destruction below. In the wake of the slaughter wrought by the victorious Chaos forces, the city had been scoured of what life it had once possessed. Archaon's forces ran riot through the ruins. Corpses had been piled into heaps in every square and plaza, unstable mountains of carrion that grew until they rivalled the city walls in sheer height. Many of these had been set on fire, and now a pall of stinking charnel smoke hung over sections of the city. Northmen, skaven and beastmen alike looted freely and with abandon.

Canto knew that it was only the will of Archaon which kept the disparate parts of the horde from turning on each other. For the servants of the Dark Gods, victory was as perilous as defeat, and the only safety was in battle unending. Already, the knives had come out; more than one ambitious chieftain or champion had made a try for Archaon's throat. Their bodies now hung above the city's gatehouses, beside the bodies of the Fellwolf Brotherhood, the Gryphon Legion and any others who had elicited the Three-Eyed King's displeasure.

The latter had been the last of the organised resistance within the city to fall. The hardy Kislevite knights, led by their Grand Master, Dostov, had holed up in the House of Coin, alongside the survivors of the various mercenary companies who had fought for Middenheim. Surrounded and besieged in an ill-provisioned prison of their own making, Dostov and his followers had nonetheless held out for several weeks. When the break-out attempt came, the Gryphon Legion – or what was left of it – had led the way, thundering towards the northern causeway and the viaduct beyond. Those who made it had found themselves fighting upriver against the warbands which were even then still streaming into the city.

Now Dostov hung from a stake on the northern gatehouse, beside what was left of the Grand Master of the Knights of the White Wolf, Vilireska the so-called Lord of the Flux, Fregnus the Pallid, and the Pox-Knight.

Canto hauled back on his mount's reins, forcing it to stop as a pack of baying hounds loped across the street ahead. Through the smoke he thought he saw manlike shapes moving amongst them, and heard human voices mingled with the howling. Nearby, a nest of writhing tentacles and pulsing flesh that had once been a carriage house emitted a soft, wheezing moan, as if in mockery of the mortal wreckage Canto dragged behind him.

'Quiet, Ghular,' Canto said, as he twisted about in his saddle. 'Unless you want me to take your other hand.' The bedraggled shape shivered and fell silent. *How the mighty have fallen*, Canto thought. Ghular Festerhand, the Ravager of Loren, the King of Flies, and the Duke of Rot, was mighty indeed. Or had been, before Canto had taken off the blighted limb from which he had taken his sobriquet.

'You have only yourself to blame for this, you know,' he said, turning away. 'You saw what happened to the others, didn't you? The Pox-Knight? Cringus of the Thirty-Seventh Configuration? The Copper Princess? Do those names ring a bell, perchance? No? Of course not. Because if they did, you certainly wouldn't have planned to do what you were planning to do.' Canto shook his head. 'I understand the temptation, believe me. But did you really think the Everchosen wouldn't step on you like the disgusting maggot you so resemble?'

Canto kicked his steed into motion and rode on without waiting for an answer. The streets squirmed beneath the hooves of his horse, and ahead of him, a giant made from broken stones, splintered beams and masticated corpses staggered drunkenly across the Ulricsmund, roaring unintelligibly. Whole sections of the city had become distorted reflections of their former glory, transmogrified into screaming sculptures of living fire or revolving facets of impossible design and unknowable angles. Those that were left untouched by the warping power of Chaos had been claimed by petty chieftains or muttering cults, made over into personal lairs and fanes.

Granted, there weren't as many of the latter as there had been in the weeks following the city's capture. Archaon had seen to that, dispatching the detestable Curseling south to lay siege to Averheim. He'd sent the most enthusiastic and troublesome with the two-headed sorcerer, and as a result the city had quieted down nicely. For a time at least.

But then, the Curseling had gone and ruined everything. By the time Archaon had marched on Averheim, Vilitch had vanished. He wasn't especially missed, but his ineptitude had enabled the Emperor to escape into the mountains. Archaon had gone into a rage – denied the lives of both Valten and the Emperor, he'd butchered threescore of his lieutenants and tossed their skulls to the hounds. Canto had avoided that particular fate only by dint of luck; in the aftermath of the siege of Averheim, several plotters had chosen to take advantage of Archaon's fury to make their moves.

Canto had put himself between the Everchosen and the blades of his enemies. He had done so without thinking, and now reaped the rewards. He looked back at Festerhand. *Some rewards are better than others*, he thought morosely.

Archaon had taken Averheim as a message from the gods. He had returned to Middenheim, taking only such forces as were necessary. The rest, mostly worshippers of Khorne, he'd sent haring off to chase down the surviving enemy. Averheim had been left to the beasts. Some milky-eyed brute named Moonclaw ruled there now, the last Canto had heard of it. Now, Archaon sat brooding on his throne, conferring only with daemons, and marshalling his forces for... something.

And oversaw the excavation, of course. *Mustn't forget that, must we?* Canto thought, without amusement. Indeed, how could one forget a steadily growing chasm being gouged into the very heart of the Fauschlag by hundreds of slaves, both human and otherwise? At the very least, the massive heaps of spoil and slag which surrounded the ever widening scar were a constant reminder. Gangs of skaven scuttled past, keeping to the shadows. They lurked amongst the spoil and smoke, their chattering voices accompanying the screams of slaves and the hum of warpstone-powered devices.

Archaon had been quite put out with the skaven for a time, despite the alliance between his forces and those of the so-called 'under-empire'. He had become enraged when the ratmen had interfered in his duel with the Herald of Sigmar, and he had personally hunted down a number of the creatures in order to make them answer for their effrontery, including the creature which had first proposed the alliance – a whining, sneaky wretch of a rat called Thanquol. Now their bodies were displayed with the rest, and those that survived had quickly made themselves useful as overseers, foraging parties and slave labour.

When he reached the Temple of Ulric, Canto did not stop, but let his horse climb the steps. Besides being able to curse in four languages, the animal was quite adept at scaling stairs. That it could do both never failed to impress Canto. As it climbed, he gazed east, towards the excavation where it abutted the temple. Day and night, the Ulricsmund rang with the sounds of it, and he fancied his ears would never be free of it.

He rode past toppled statues of the wolf-god, and into the temple proper. The echo of his horse's hooves as he rode through the rotunda sounded strange, and slightly distorted. All around him was madness: busts and statues had been thrown down, or carved into hideous new shapes. Faces writhed and moaned along the walls. The vaulted ceiling had been hung with thick iron chains, from which dangled hooks and blades. On the latter were spitted the bodies of priests. All were present – the servants of Sigmar, Ulric, Shallya and more besides. Most were dead. Some were not.

Archaon was waiting for him, as ever, at the centre of his chosen throne room. The Everchosen had claimed the dais from which the Flame of Ulric had once burned as his own, and had placed his throne there. The throne was a monstrous construction, composed of brass and black iron, covered with stretched skin and skulls. Ghal Maraz sat at its apex, clasped in brass claws. A heavy shadow, black and stinking of hot iron, crouched behind Archaon's throne. It was massive, larger than any ogre or troll. As Canto approached, the shadow straightened with a sound like a bellows and great wings unfurled. He felt a wash of heat, as if from a smokeless fire.

He knew the daemon's name, though he wished that he did not. Ka'Bandha, the Skull-Smasher. Ka'Bandha, the right hand of the Blood God himself. Eyes like forge-fires gazed at him, burning him inside out. The air around the bloodthirster shimmered, as if the creature's very presence were a wound in reality. It eyed him with interest, as if sizing him up for a challenge. Canto ducked his head and tried to make himself smaller. Even Archaon himself would have been hard-pressed to survive an encounter with Ka'Bandha. Canto would have no chance at all. He kept his gaze averted, and relaxed slightly as he felt the daemon's disappointment wash over him. *No fun for you here, beast*, he thought.

The Swords of Chaos lined the way to the throne. Even now, having fought beside the black-armoured sentinels more than once, Canto could still feel the palpable menace which radiated from them. He hauled back on the reins and brought his disagreeable mount to a halt amidst a flurry of gutter-Estalian.

Canto waited, counting the moments. When Archaon did not stir, Canto cleared his throat and said, 'I come bearing gifts, my lord. As you requested.' He reached behind him and cut the straps that held Festerhand tied to his saddle. The champion, or what was left of him, flopped to the floor with a groan. His armour hung in ragged tatters from his maggot-like body, and his pale flesh was streaked with blood and bruises. He cradled the stump of his wrist to his sunken chest. Ka'Bandha chuckled. The sound was like scalding water hissing over stones.

Archaon looked up. He stared at the broken shape of the traitor for long moments, and then said, 'His hand?'

Canto reached into his saddlebag and produced a dripping sack. Something moved unpleasantly within. 'I thought it best to disarm him,' he said. He tossed the sack down.

Archaon didn't laugh. He rarely laughed. He pushed himself up, off his throne, and strode down from the dais, after gesturing for the bloodthirster to remain where it was. He stepped over the sack as if he hadn't seen it, and made his way to Ghular's side. He looked down at the broken creature. 'Grandfather Nurgle grows impatient. How many of his champions has he thrown in my path of late?' He looked at Ka'Bandha as he spoke.

'You do them honour, to call them champions,' the bloodthirster growled. Canto heard the clatter of brass chains as the shadowy mass moved about behind the throne. 'They are as blossoms, pruned from his garden, and as easily crushed.'

'Yes,' Archaon said. 'Fewer of them than the Schemer or the Prince of Pleasure, to be sure, but still... a not inconsiderable number. Is it vengeance for the Glottkin? Or something else?' The bloodthirster subsided into silence.

Canto knew Archaon wasn't expecting an answer. He followed Ka'Bandha's example and kept silent. It was always the same; Archaon spoke more to hear himself speak, than because he wanted replies. The Everchosen sank to his haunches with a creak of metal, and examined Canto's prisoner. 'Did he fight hard?' he asked.

That he expected an answer to, Canto knew. 'No harder than the others,' he said. 'I waited until he was looking the other way, and then cut his hand off. After that, he didn't have much fight in him.'

Ka'Bandha made a sound like a dog choking on a bone. The heat grew intolerable, and Canto forced himself to look only at Archaon. The bloodthirster had a short temper, and it was made even shorter by such admissions. Simple murder was beneath the god of slaughter, apparently. 'Coward,' the beast gurgled, eyes shining like beacon fires.

Archaon stood. 'You are getting a reputation, Unsworn. They say you are my executioner.' Ka'Bandha made another disapproving noise, but Archaon ignored the creature.

'I am but your humble servant, my lord,' Canto said, bowing his head.

'Then come with me, O humble servant. I wish to look upon my great work, and see how it progresses,' Archaon said. Ka'Bandha rose to its full height, as if it intended to follow the Everchosen, but settled back at a gesture from Archaon.

Canto hesitated, watching the daemon warily, then slid out of the saddle and hurried after the Everchosen as the latter strode deeper into the temple. He could feel Ka'Bandha's eyes on him the entire way.

'What about the Festerhand?' he asked, as he caught up with Archaon. They were descending into the chill depths of the Fauschlag. Those who knew such things said that the skaven had bought their survival with a treasure that they had located deep in the mountain's guts, somewhere beneath the temple. And that treasure was the reason for the great excavation, as Archaon employed hundreds of slaves and gangs of sorcerers and daemons both in the endeavour, carving a path down through the heart of the mountain. Canto knew the truth of it, and knew that it was not a treasure, but something infinitely worse.

'What about him?' Archaon said. 'If he survives until I return, then I will kill him – or spare him, as the mood takes me. If he doesn't, the point is moot.'

'As you say, my lord,' Canto said obsequiously. He wondered what would get the Festerhand first... his wounds, or Ka'Bandha. Khorne had less use for beaten champions than he did for murderers.

Archaon stopped. Canto stumbled to a halt, just barely avoiding slamming into the Everchosen. Archaon turned. 'Do you disagree?' he asked. Canto hesitated. Archaon cocked his head. 'Do you know why I elevated you, Unsworn?'

A thousand witticisms sprang to mind and immediately turned to ash on Canto's lips. He shook his head slowly. 'No, my lord,' he said.

'I elevated you because I am not your lord,' Archaon said softly. 'Not really. You are a scavenger, a jackal, haunting the edges of eternity. You owe no fealty to any god or warlord. Like a thousand others, you are a man apart, with no loyalty or code to bind your words or mark your path. You do not seek pain, pleasure, pestilence or power. You seek only to survive. Of all the men and women who ride beneath my banners, you and your ilk are the most human. The most flawed, the weakest. But also the strongest.' Archaon turned away and continued walking. Canto followed.

Archaon continued talking. 'The followers of the gods burn bright, but burn swiftly. In every war, they die first, and at the pleasure of the gods. But your kind survives. You cling to this world like a barnacle, holding tight to what you once were, though it profits you nothing. Why did you never seek out the favour of the gods, Unsworn?'

You've already asked me that. You ask me that every day, Canto thought. What he said was, 'Fear, my lord. I feared losing myself.' It was the same answer he always gave, but it never seemed to satisfy Archaon. Then, few things did. The Three-Eyed King seethed with a cosmic frustration, as if the very air scraped his nerves raw.

'And would that be so bad?' Archaon asked. Canto looked at him. It was the first time Archaon had asked *that*. They had come to a massive cavern, its walls marked by skaven graffiti and piles of rotting bodies heaped in the corners. Chittering, red-eyed rats scattered as Archaon and Canto stepped into the eerie light cast by the iron and brass braziers set about the circumference of the cavern.

Before Canto could answer Archaon's question, a guttural voice bellowed a challenge. A trio of ogres, their flesh marked by tattoos of ownership and allegiance, and their arms and armour bearing all of the hallmarks of the daemonsmiths of Zharr Naggrund, stepped into view out of the shadows. The ogres bore heavy swords, and horned helmets that obscured their brutish features. Archaon raised his hand, and the ogres sank to their knees with much grunting and grumbling.

Archaon led Canto past the brutes, and into the gloomy chamber beyond the cavern. Something horrible and flickering occupied the bulk of the chamber – a black, glistening globe supported between two golden hemispheres. The globe was a blotch of shimmering darkness which seemed to draw all sources of light towards it. Canto staggered, struck, as always, by the sheer *wrongness* of the thing.

He had seen it more than once, but it never failed to cause his mind and what was left of his soul to tremble and cringe. He could hear a vast roaring of innumerable voices, and a thinner, sharper sound, like the scraping of rats behind the walls of the world.

Even worse, he knew it was but the merest tip of whatever monstrous eidolon was buried beneath the Fauschlag. Gangs of slaves worked day and night to uncover it, when Archaon's pet sorcerers weren't studying it, trying to unlock its power. Both slaves and sorcerers died in great numbers, their bodies left to rot at the bottom of the pit from which the thing rose. Soon they would have it fully uncovered, and they would pry it free of the mountain, like a pearl from an oyster.

Archaon moved across the chamber towards the dark globe, and the coven of robed cultists who were gathered about it. The cultists were muttering and invoking for all that they were worth. Which, Canto knew, wasn't much. The masked fools were little more than attendants. One of them, obviously the leader if one went by his golden mask, hurried towards Archaon, trying to run and bow at the same time.

'Can we proceed?' Archaon said, not looking at the coven leader.

'It stirs to life even now, mighty Archaon,' the man whimpered. He flung out a trembling hand. 'See how it shines, with the radiance of a thousand unseen suns. We have only uncovered the barest tip, and already it awakens.'

'Can we proceed?' Archaon asked again. There was a hint of menace in his voice.

The coven leader jerked upright in a flare of robes. 'If the gods will it,' he said. Archaon was silent. The man twitched and added, 'An offering of souls will be needed.'

'Then make it,' Archaon rumbled.

'My lord?'

'The slaves,' Canto interjected, unable to bear the coven leader's stupidity. 'Start feeding it the slaves.' He moved closer to Archaon.

'You never answered my question,' Archaon said softly, after a moment of silence. 'Would it be so bad, to lose yourself?'

Canto hesitated, and then said, 'Yes. Who I am, who I was, is the only thing I have left. To surrender it is to lose everything I fought for in the first place.'

'You value the life you had, then?' Archaon said. 'You cling to the past, afraid to face the future.' He swept out a hand towards the shimmering black globe. 'See, Unsworn, the beautiful thing which awaits all of us. It is not terrifying. It is life, and change, and growth. It is the life which springs from death. This world is dead, but a new one is growing here.'

'Mushrooms from a corpse,' Canto said.

Archaon lowered his hand. 'If you like. Maybe the world to come will be simpler, at that. Less burdened by the weight of history and failure. What I do know is that it will be stronger than this husk of a world we reside in now. There will be no weakness, no false morality or burdensome piety to chain men. The gods will sweep aside the old, and unmake the false foundations upon which the lie of this world stands.'

'And that will be better, will it?' Canto asked, without thinking.

'Yes.'

'For whom?' he asked. Archaon looked at him. Canto waited, then, when no punishing strike came, he continued. 'I never wanted this burden. It just came on me. I'm only a man,' he said softly. He looked at his hand, encased in black iron for gods alone knew how many centuries. 'I've only ever been a man. A wicked, evil man, who has done wicked, evil things. But I was never a monster. Never that.'

Archaon chuckled. 'And what would you be now, Unsworn? Man or monster?'

'I would be true to myself,' Canto said, though not without hesitation.

'There was one other who spoke like that,' Archaon said. 'His name was Mortkin. They called him the Black-Iron Reaper, and he carved his saga on the hearts of the gods themselves.' He glanced at Canto. 'He could have been the one standing here, once upon a time.'

'And why isn't he?'

'In the end, he remained true to himself. He was a man, Unsworn, not a monster.' Archaon turned back to the coruscating darkness of the globe. 'But I

shed my humanity long ago. I cannot escape what is inside me, nor would I wish to. I have been in darkness for so long, that I fear I would find the light blinding.' He stared up at the globe, as if seeking something within its glistening depths.

'I am a monster and I have set the world aflame, so that I might watch it burn.'



EIGHT

 *The King's Glade, Athel Loren*

It had been a week since the arrival of the dead on the border of Athel Loren, and what some were calling the Council of Incarnates had gathered in the King's Glade to at last discuss the ramifications of that arrival. The week had been one fraught with whispered discussions and late-night visitations as the influential vied against one another in preliminary debate. Too, it had taken a week to debate the truth behind Nagash's offer of parley. Some had sworn it was only a trick, meant to allow the Great Necromancer access to the Oak of Ages. Others had believed that Nagash himself was fleeing certain destruction and looking for protectors, rather than allies.

For his part, Duke Jerrod of Quenelles suspected that either possibility was likely, or that some other, even more subtle scheme was at work. He had argued fiercely against even allowing the creature into the forest, but, as was becoming clear to him, his voice counted for little in the debate. So, instead, he stood in silence beside Gotri Hammerson and Wendel Volker, and watched as those whose voices did count argued over the fate of the world, and of Nagash himself.

The council was an uneasy affair. Trust was not in ready supply amongst the powers gathered beneath the green boughs of the glade. There was discord amongst the elven Incarnates, though Jerrod couldn't say where it originated from. Too, none of the elves trusted Gelt or the Emperor, and Gelt, for his part, kept a wary eye on Malekith. The Emperor, as ever, moved amongst all of them, trying to reach an accord.

It wasn't simply the Incarnates who bickered, either. The elves were divided amongst themselves, united only in their disregard for the dwarfs and men who now shared the forest with them. The dwarfs were uncertain and tense in the trees, and Jerrod had no doubt that the strangeness of Athel Loren grated on them as much as it did his own people.

'Foolishness,' Hammerson muttered. He tugged on his beard. 'Look at it – standing there as if it has a right to exist. Fouling the air with its grave stink. Surrounded by flying books. Can't trust a book that flies, manling.' He gestured towards Nagash, who stood in the centre of the glade accompanied by his mortarchs, Mannfred von Carstein and Arkhan the Black. They stood within a ring of spears, surrounded by the Eternity King's personal guard. Malekith's Eternity Guard were amongst the finest warriors left to the elven race. They counted former members of the Black Guard, the Phoenix Guard and the Wildwood Rangers among them, and had faced daemons and beastmen alike in defence of their liege-lord. Despite the fierce pedigree of those guarding them, Nagash and his mortarchs didn't seem particularly intimidated.

Nagash was terrifying, even to one who had tasted the waters of the Grail. He was a hole in the world, an absence of life, heat and light. He radiated a cold unlike any that Jerrod had ever felt. It was the cold of the grave, and of hopelessness. Even here, in the heart of the forest, spirits whined and moaned as they swirled about the Undying King, caught in the maelstrom of his presence. Everywhere he walked, the grass died beneath his feet, trees withered, and the dead stirred.

'Is there any sort of book you do trust, Gotri?' Volker replied. The white-haired knight leaned against a tree, a jug of something strong and dwarfish dangling from one hand. Jerrod wondered where he'd got it. The dwarfs were stingy with their reserves of alcohol, especially given the fact that it was likely the last such in the world. Then, perhaps they'd thought it wiser to give Volker what he wanted without too much fuss.

Jerrod studied the knight. Sometimes, in the right light, Volker's eyes flashed yellow, and his face took on a feral cast. Mostly, it happened when Teclis was nearby. It was as if whatever force rode Volker were stalking the elf mage. Though, after the first incident, it seemed disinclined to attack. *And thank the Lady for that*, he thought. He'd heard the men of the Empire muttering the name 'Ulric' whenever they thought Volker was out of earshot, and wondered if the gods were truly gone, or merely biding their time.

Even as he thought it, his eyes swept the glade, taking in the faces of those who might as well be gods. The Incarnates were gathered together on the dais which held the thrones of the Eternity King and the Everqueen. They were speaking in hushed voices, intently and at times angrily. Of them all, only Balthasar Gelt paid any attention to Nagash. Though he could not make out the man's face behind his gilded mask, Jerrod knew that the wizard was glaring at the Undying King. Gelt's hatred for the creature had been plainly evident from the moment Mannfred von Carstein had brought word of Nagash's offer.

The Incarnates were not alone in the glade. Besides Jerrod, Hammerson and Volker, there were elves of every description, huddled in scattered groups, or standing alone, like Teclis, who watched Nagash like a hawk. Jerrod's eyes were drawn past Teclis, however, to the pale, radiant figure of the elf woman called Lileath, who stood nearby. It was not the first time he had found his attentions fixed on her. She was beautiful, but it was not her beauty which caught him. Instead, it was the vague, nagging sense that he knew her. That he'd always known her, somehow. Where she had come from, or who she represented, was a mystery. The elves seemed to defer to her, though she was no Incarnate.

'Stop staring at that *elgi* witch, lad. She'll have your soul out of your body like *that*,' Hammerson grunted, snapping his fingers for emphasis. Jerrod looked down at the runesmith.

'You know who she is, then?'

'Don't have to. She's an elf. Only two types of elves, manling... the ones that'll gut you, and the ones that will steal your soul before they do the gutting.' Hammerson crossed his arms. 'Heed me well, you stay away from that one.'

'Are we allowed to associate with any of them, then?' Jerrod asked, with as much innocence as he could muster. Volker snorted, stifling a laugh with the mouth of his jug. Hammerson glared first at the other man, and then at Jerrod.

'This is no laughing matter, manling. We're in their realm, and make no mistake – we're not guests. We might not be prisoners either, but that's only because they're more worried about him.' He pointed at Nagash.

Jerrod was about to reply when a hush fell over the glade, stifling each and every murmured conversation. Malekith rose from his throne of tangled roots, stone and metal, and said, 'Enough.' The word hung in the air like the snarl of an animal. 'Our path is obvious. We have the beast caged... Why not simply dispense with him once and for all? Let us scour this abomination from the face of the world, while we have the chance.'

He looked about him, as if seeking support from the other elven Incarnates. Caradryan remained silent, which didn't surprise Jerrod in the least. The silence of Alarielle and Tyron, however, did. Only Gelt spoke up.

'I agree,' Gelt said. 'Nagash is as much a danger to us as the Dark Gods themselves, and he will turn on us in a heartbeat, if it suits him.'

'You're one to talk, sorcerer,' Mannfred said. Gelt flinched. The vampire smiled, and made to continue. He fell silent, however, as he glanced at Nagash, who had not moved, and did not seem inclined to do so.

Jerrod tensed, and his hand dropped to his sword. Nagash had said nothing, but Mannfred had obviously heard him nonetheless. The creature seemed disinterested in the debate, as if he were above the petty concerns of the living. Part of Jerrod longed to confront the beast – here was the living embodiment of the corruption which had so devastated his homeland, and he was barred from drawing his sword against it.

Frustrated, he drew his sword partway from its sheath and let it drop back with a rattle. He caught Lileath looking at him, and felt a flush of shame for his

loss of control. Her eyes seemed to pull him in, and open him up. It was as if she knew everything about him, and somehow found him wanting. She looked away as the Emperor spoke up, and Jerrod twitched in relief.

'And if we destroy him, what then?' Karl Franz said. His voice carried easily through the glade. 'The foundations of the world crumble beneath us as we argue. We have no time for this. He is here, and his might, joined with ours, might yet win us the world.'

'Oh, well said, well said,' Mannfred crowed, clapping briskly.

Teclis spoke up. 'He is right, Malekith. It was only thanks to Nagash's theft of the Wind of Death that I was able to imbue you all with the powers you now wield. Though I wish it were otherwise, his presence is as necessary now as it was then. He is the Incarnate of Death, for better or worse. His destruction would serve only to weaken us,' he said. He looked at Nagash and met the Great Necromancer's cold, flickering gaze without flinching. 'And he knows, whether he admits it or not, that treachery will avail him nothing, save that he meets his ending sooner rather than later. Is that not so, O Undying King?'

Nagash said nothing. He merely stared at Teclis. Malekith, however, was in no mood for silence. 'Oh yes, and you would know all about treachery, wouldn't you, schemer? More even than myself, I think, and I am no novice in that regard.' Malekith laughed harshly. 'I never imagined to find myself here, the lone voice of reason in a world gone mad. The beast must die. This I command.' He sliced his hand through the air.

'Are you deaf as well as spiteful?' Teclis spat. 'Did you not hear me?'

'I heard,' Malekith said. 'I heard what you didn't say, as well. We need only the Incarnate of Death, not Nagash. The solution seems obvious to me.' He looked at Nagash. 'We slay him, and bind Shyish to another... Someone more trustworthy.'

'More tractable, you mean,' the Emperor said.

'And what if I do? Better a weapon under our control than a maddened beast which might turn on us at any given moment,' Malekith said. He looked at Teclis. 'Tear Shyish from him, wizard. We shall bestow it on another, of our choosing.'

'Aye, that's the way,' Hammerson muttered, nodding slowly. Jerrod looked down at the dwarf. Hammerson met his questioning gaze. 'My folk have grudges aplenty against the liche-lord. The spirits of our ancestors will know peace, once that skull of his is pounded into dust.' He blinked. 'Though, come to think of it, Malekith has just as many.' He frowned and shook his head. 'Isn't that always the way? The wolf-rat or the squig, which is worse? Both want to gnaw on your beard, so which do you kill first?'

'Squig,' Volker said, absently, as he stared at Nagash.

Hammerson and Jerrod looked at him. Volker shook himself and returned their look. 'What?' he asked.

'Why the squig?' Hammerson said.

'Bigger mouth, obviously,' Volker gestured to his face. 'Fit more of the – ah – the beard in, as it were.'

Hammerson was silent for a moment. Then his broad face split in a grin. 'Ha! I do like you, for all that you smell like a wolf den in winter, manling.' He gave Volker a friendly slap on the arm, almost knocking him from his feet. Jerrod shook his head and turned back to the debate.

Teclis stood between Malekith and Nagash. The elf looked tired. His robes were torn and faded, and his face was white with exhaustion. Jerrod felt a moment of pity – they were all worn down by constant battle, but something in Teclis's face told him that the elf's battles had started much, much earlier than their own, and that even here, he found no respite.

'There is no being in existence capable of containing so much death magic, who would not be as dangerous as Nagash,' Teclis said. He leaned against his staff. 'Human, elf or dwarf... it matters not. Shyish would change them, and for the worse, into something *other*. Also, like calls to like.' He looked at each of the Incarnates in turn. 'In each of you, there was something – some kinship – with the wind which chose you as its host. *Like calls to like*.' He glanced at Nagash. 'Nagash is the first, and the greatest necromancer the world has seen. Master of an undying empire, and ruler over the dead.' He glanced at Malekith. 'And all because your followers had the bad luck to wash up on the shores of Nehekharu so many centuries ago,' he added, waspishly.

'Necromancy can be taught,' Gelt said.

'And if it's the symbolism of the thing, we have plenty of dead empires about... including Bretonnia,' Malekith added. He gestured to Jerrod. 'Why, we even have the de facto ruler of that dead land here among us.'

'What?' Jerrod said. 'What are you saying?'

'You are a duke, are you not?' Malekith said. 'The only one amongst your barbaric conclave of horsemen, if I'm not mistaken. Your claim is superior.'

'Bretonnia is not dead,' Jerrod said. He looked around, seeking support. He found only speculation and calculation, in equal measure. 'My people still live. Else what is this for?' he asked, helplessly. Helplessness turned into anger, as Malekith gave a harsh caw of laughter.

'Hope is the weapon of the enemy, human,' the Eternity King said. 'Your land is ashes, as is mine, as is everyone's. A haunt for daemons and worse things. The quicker you accept it, the more useful you'll be.' His eyes glittered within the depths of his mask.

Jerrod's hand fell to his sword hilt. He heard Hammerson say something, but he ignored the dwarf's warning rumble. Malekith had said nothing that Jerrod himself had not thought a thousand times since the fall of Averheim. But to think it, to fear it, was one thing. To say it aloud – to make sport of it – was another. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to draw his sword and strike. Hammerson was right: Malekith was as much a monster as Nagash. The world would be better off without him.

Cool fingers dropped over his hand before he could draw his blade. He whirled. Lileath released his hand and stepped back. 'No,' she said, softly. 'If you do, you will be slain in the attempt. And then where will your people be, Jerrod of Quenelles? Would you abandon your duties so casually? Is your honour so frail as to be torn by the words of such a spiteful creature?'

'You forget yourself, woman,' Malekith said. 'I am king.'

Lileath looked past Jerrod. 'It is you who forget yourself. King you might be, but I am Lileath of the Moon, and Ladrille of the Veil, and it is by my will that you have survived to take your place on that throne. My power may have dwindled to but a spark, but I am still here. And I know you, Malekith. Deceiver and hero, arrogant and wise. The best and worst of your folk, housed in iron and forged in flame. You are as dangerous as the Sword of Khaine itself. But I was there when that sword was nothing more than a lump of metal, and I was there too when you were torn squalling from your mother's womb.'

She extended her staff and used it to gently push Jerrod back as she stepped forwards. 'If you do not put aside your differences, if you do not unite, then this world will be consumed. There is no time to pass petty judgements, or to exclaim in horror at the choices you have made, or the allies who offer their fellowship. The world is ending. The End Times are here. And if you would not be swept away like spent ashes from a cold hearth, you will heed me.'

Jerrod stared at her, wondering why her names struck such a chord in him. *Who are you?* he thought. He saw that Mannfred too seemed to recognise Lileath. The vampire's eyes met his, and the creature smirked, as if he and Jerrod shared some awful secret. Jerrod turned away with a shudder. Hammerson, in a rare display, patted his arm.

'He was lying, lad. That's what the elgi do,' the runesmith said. The words were scant comfort. Jerrod shook his head.

'No, Gotri. I don't think he was.'



Hammerson looked up at the knight, and felt a tug of sympathy. Despite what he'd said, he knew that what Malekith had said was more than likely the truth. Or some version of it, at least. From his expression, Jerrod felt the same.

It was no easy thing to lose kin or a home. To see all that was familiar torn away in an instant and reduced to ash. Hammerson glanced up at Volker, and saw a similar expression on the other man's face. Aye, the humans were now getting a taste of the bitter brew that his folk had been drinking for centuries. And the elves as well, come to that, though Hammerson felt less sympathy for them. They'd brought it on themselves, after all. The humans, though... Hammerson sighed. Humans had many, many flaws, as any dwarf could tell you. But they didn't deserve the ruination that had befallen them.

Then, who does? he thought. He looked at Mannfred. *Except maybe that one.* The vampire had a smug expression on his face, as if he were enjoying the bickering that surrounded him. Hammerson frowned.

He had been at Nachthafen the day that Konrad von Carstein had slaughtered the Zhufbarak. He'd been but a beardless, apprenticed to a runesmith, but he still had the scars from when Konrad and his accursed Blood Knights had attacked their position, overrunning it in moments. He remembered the king's fall, his throat torn open by the creature calling itself Walach Harkon, and he remembered the surging tide of corpses.

Mannfred was cut from the same grave shroud as Konrad. He'd waged war on Zhufbar as well, when he'd come to power, and many a dwarf had perished at his hands. If grudges had physical weight then Athel Loren would have long since sunk deep into the earth, between Malekith, Nagash and Mannfred.

No dwarf would ally himself with such creatures, even in the face of destruction. That, in the end, was the difference between his folk and the humans and elves. For a dwarf, better destruction than compromise, better death than surrender. *If the thing must be done, let it be done well,* he thought. It was an old

proverb, but one every dwarf knew, in one form or another. All things should be approached as a craftsman approached his trade. To compromise was to weaken the integrity of that work. To allow flaws, to invite disaster.

Not for the first time, Hammerson wondered if he should simply take his folk and go. They would return to Zhufbar and see what remained of it, either to rebuild or avenge it. It was a nice thought, and it kept him warm on cold nights, staring into the dark of the trees, pipe in hand without even a good fire to provide light and comfort.

But that was all it was. If the thing must be done, let it be done well. And the dwarfs had made an oath long ago to the human thane, Sigmar, to defend his people for as long as there was an empire. And dwarfs, unlike elves, knew that an empire was made not of stone or land or castles, but of hearts and minds. Stones could be moved, land reshaped and castles knocked down, but an empire could survive anything, as long as its people still lived.

While one citizen of the Empire yet lived, be they soldier, greybeard, infant or Emperor, the Zhufbarak at least would die for them. Because that was the way of it. An oath was an oath, and it would be fulfilled, come ruin or redemption. Even if the humans chose to throw in their lot with the King of Bones himself, the Zhufbarak would stand shield-wall between them and the ravages of Chaos until the end.

Speaking of which, he mused, studying the giant of bone and black iron where he stood in an ever-widening circle of yellow, brittle grass. For a creature whose very existence was under threat, Nagash didn't seem altogether concerned. Which, to Hammerson's way of thinking, was worrying.

Malekith obviously felt the same. He was in fine form, arguing passionately with Lileath and Teclis. Hammerson could almost admire the Eternity King, if he hadn't been a deceitful, backstabbing kinslayer. Kings had to be harder than stone, and colder than ice, at times, and Malekith was both of those and no mistake. But too much cold, and even the hardest stone grew brittle.

He heard a hiss from Volker, and glanced at the knight. The white-haired man was staring hard at Nagash. Hammerson looked more closely at the liche and saw that the creature was stirring. One great claw rose, and silence fell over the glade. *'YOUR FEAR IS WITHOUT CAUSE,'* the liche said. His voice spread through the glade like a noxious fog. *'THE WORD OF NAGASH IS INVIOLENT. AND NAGASH HAS SWORN TO FIGHT FOR THIS WORLD.'*

Hammerson shuddered. The liche's voice crept under your skin like the cold of winter, and fastened claws in your heart. He wasn't alone in feeling that way. The Incarnates stared at the creature the way birds might regard a snake. Malekith reacted first. 'Any betrayer would say the same, if it suited his interest,' the Eternity King rasped, glaring down at Nagash from his dais. Nagash stared at the elf, as if sizing him up. Then he inclined his head.

'INDEED. AND SO I OFFER A GIFT, AS TOKEN OF MY INTENT.'

Malekith laughed. 'A gift offered by one such as you can hardly be considered proof of anything. I know, for I have used the same trick to great effect more than once.'

'I HAVE WRONGED YOU. YET THE INITIAL OFFENCE, THE FIRST LINK IN THE CHAIN, WAS NOT AT MY INSTIGATION,' Nagash grated. If a skeleton could look amused, Hammerson thought, then Nagash was it. The wide, fleshless rictus seemed to grow wider still, less a smile than a tiger's grin. *'THE EVERCHILD'S DEATH WAS NOT MY DOING.'*



Teclis flinched as the words rolled over the glade. He closed his eyes. He could feel the heat of Tyrion's rage beginning to build. Nagash's words had stoked fires that could never truly be extinguished. Malekith too must have sensed it, for he moved quickly to speak. But he fell silent, his words dying on his lips, as Alarielle rose from her throne.

'You speak of my daughter as if you were fit to say her name,' the Everqueen said coolly. Her voice was composed, and controlled, but Teclis could sense the fragility beneath. 'More and more, you insist on your own destruction.'

'MY DESTRUCTION WILL NOT BRING HER BACK. NOR WILL IT AVENGE HER.' Nagash looked around the glade. *'IT WILL ONLY BRING RUIN.'*

'Listen to the dead thing plead,' Tyrion snarled. He had not drawn his sword, but his hands were balled into fists, and the light within him was beginning to stir. 'We will not bargain for Aliathra's soul,' he spat. Alarielle looked sharply at him, but said nothing. Teclis could feel the Wind of Life beginning to stir as well. *Is this how it ends, even as it began... over the soul of the Everchild?* he thought.

His brother's sin, come home to roost. The child he'd fathered, against all logic, reason and tradition, the child who had been the hope of Ulthuan, and its destruction. Aenarion's curse made flesh, in a moment of passion and stupidity. Teclis's grip on his staff tightened. *Brave child. I failed you, as I failed your father and our people. But I failed you most of all.* Sorrow washed over him, leaving only numbness in its wake.

It seemed like only weeks ago that Aliathra had been sent to the dwarfs of Karaz-a-Karak as part of the Phoenix Delegation of Ulthuan. As royalty, and a sorceress in her own right, the Everchild was thought fit to treat with the High King, Thorgrim Grudgebearer. Aliathra had her mother's grace and poise and her father's courage, and the old alliances had been renewed and invigorated. But then, death had swept down on tattered wings and put paid to the plans of dwarfs and elves.

Teclis studied Mannfred von Carstein, taking in the sharp contours of a face that shifted constantly between regal indifference and bestial malice. The name the creature went by was an assumed one, just another falsehood tacked on to the ledger that contained his crimes. Once, Teclis had sought to unravel that particular mystery – to find the source of the von Carstein bloodline and perhaps even eliminate it. Of all the vampiric infestations which blighted the world, theirs was the most militant, if not the best organised, and thus a potential threat to Ulthuan in the future. And of all the von Carsteins, Mannfred was the most dangerous.

His defeat of Eltharion the Grim in Sylvania proved that, if nothing else. The Grim Warden had attempted to rescue Aliathra at Tyrion's behest. The army he had taken into death with him had been sorely missed in the days and weeks which followed. Teclis could not say for certain that Eltharion's counsel would have ameliorated the tragedies that occurred after Tyrion had gone mad and their people had fallen to civil war, but his presence might have been enough to avert at least some of the anguish of those terrible days.

Instead, he'd died. And the hopes of Ulthuan had died with him. And now his killer stood smirking in the heart of Athel Loren, protected by an even greater evil. For a moment, Teclis wished that he were his brother, that he had even an ounce of Tyrion's fire in him, so that he might put aside reason and caution and drive his sword through Mannfred's twisted heart. But he wasn't, and he never had been. Instead, he watched and thought, and wondered why Nagash was offering anything at all.

When the answer occurred to him, he smiled. *Ah, clever. Of course. Why else insist on bringing the creature into the forest?*

Nagash faced Tyrion and Alarielle. Perhaps the creature judged them the greatest threat, or maybe he simply wished to enjoy their agony. *'YOU HAVE NO NEED TO BARGAIN. THE SOUL OF THE EVERCHILD IS NOT MINE TO GIVE. LIKE ALL OF YOUR KIND, SHE IS ALREADY FODDER FOR THE DARK PRINCE,'* Nagash said. Alarielle's hand lashed out, catching Tyrion in the chest, stopping him before he could lunge at the liche.

Teclis could feel the other Incarnates gathering their powers now. Malekith and Gelt would act first, before the others. Caradryan would act last, despite being bound to the most impulsive of winds. He would wait for Alarielle, or Tyrion. The Emperor, as ever, stood to the side. Teclis could almost see the wheels turning in the human's mind. The Emperor glanced at him, and gave a barely perceptible nod. He had figured out Nagash's ploy as well.

'INSTEAD,' Nagash went on, *'I WILL OFFER YOU THE ARCHITECT OF HER DEATH, TO DO WITH AS YOU WILL.'* As he spoke, Mannfred threw a triumphant look at Arkhan the Black. That look crumbled into abject horror, as Nagash turned and fastened one great metal claw on the back of the vampire's head, hoisted him from his feet, and tossed him towards Tyrion and Alarielle without hesitation.

Mannfred struck the dais with a resounding crack, and flailed helplessly for a moment, his face twisted in shock. 'No,' he shrieked. 'No, it wasn't me! I didn't kill her, it was...' Whatever he'd been about to say was lost as Tyrion's blade descended like a thunderbolt. Mannfred barely avoided the blow, scrambling to his feet, his own sword in hand. He whirled, looking for an exit, some avenue of escape, but a crackling flare of amethyst light rose and spread between the trees at the merest twitch of Nagash's talons.

'No, I've come too far, sacrificed too much to be your scapegoat,' the vampire snarled. He turned back and forth, blade extended, trying to keep everyone at bay simultaneously. He looked at Nagash. 'I served you! I brought you back, and this is how I am to be repaid?'

'YOU STILL SERVE ME, MANNFRED VON CARSTEIN. YOU HAVE SERVED ME IN LIFE, AND YOU WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO BY YOUR DEATH.' Nagash cocked his head. *'REST ASSURED THAT IT IS APPRECIATED.'*

Mannfred threw back his head and howled. He sprang from the dais, quick as a cat, and lunged for Nagash. His blade slammed down. Nagash caught the blow on his palm, and wrenched Mannfred from the air. The vampire tumbled end over end. He struck the ground, bounced, and lay still. Nagash held up the trapped sword, and his talons flexed. The blade shattered as if it were spun glass. The pieces fell to the ground in a glittering cascade, one by one, thumping into the dead grass.

Mannfred pushed himself to his feet. His eyes were empty, void of emotion. Teclis felt nothing. This was not victory of any sort or kind. It was a thing which had to be done for the greater good, and that drained it of any satisfaction it might have otherwise provided. Mannfred was to be but one more body for the foundations, rather than a conquered enemy. He met the vampire's gaze, and saw a spark in the blackness. A refusal to surrender to fate. In the end,

that was all vampires really were. Survival instinct given form and voice.

Mannfred made to speak.

Nagash cut him off with but a gesture. Bonds of amethyst formed about the vampire, mummifying him in dreadful light. Soon, a cocoon of death magic hovered above the ground, occasionally twitching as its occupant tried to free himself.

A hush fell over the glade. Nagash stood silent and still, his gift hovering behind him, ready to be delivered into the hands of his prospective allies, if they agreed. No one spoke, however. Some were shocked by Nagash's actions. Others wondered if it were merely a ruse. Teclis wasn't shocked, nor did he believe it was a trick.

The liche's skull creaked as it swivelled to face him. The eerie light that flickered within Nagash's sockets flared. Teclis stared back, unperturbed, at least outwardly. He had faced Nagash twice before, once in the quiet of Nagashizzar, many years ago, when he had tried to enlist the Great Necromancer's darkling spirit as an ally against the growing shadow in the north. Nagash had refused then. Teclis wondered if the creature regretted that refusal now, when he was being forced to give up one of his servants as the price for what he could have once had freely. *No*, Teclis thought. *No, you regret nothing. Such emotions have long since turned to dust in the hollow chasms of your memory.* He smiled sadly. *Lucky for you, I have regret enough for all of us.*

Teclis looked at his brother. 'Well, brother?'

Tyrion glanced at Teclis, and then looked at Alarielle. He made as if to offer her his hand, but turned away instead. 'Honour is satisfied,' Tyrion said. Alarielle stared at him for a moment, and then returned to her throne.

'Honour is satisfied,' she repeated, softly.

Malekith, who had watched them in silence the entire time, gestured sharply and returned to his seat. 'Time itself is our enemy. As such, if... honour is satisfied, then I withdraw my objection.'

Teclis looked at Gelt. 'And you, Balthasar Gelt?' Gelt said nothing. After a moment, he nodded tersely. Teclis looked at the others. Caradryan shrugged. The Emperor nodded. Teclis sighed in relief. He turned his attentions to Nagash. 'You heard them, necromancer. Mannfred is ours, and in return, you will be allowed a place on the Council of Incarnates.'

'A PRETTY NAME. AND WHAT IS THIS COUNCIL, LOREMASTER?'

Teclis ignored the mention of his former position. 'That should be obvious, even to one as removed as you.' He met Nagash's flickering gaze directly.

'It is a council of war.'



NINE



Somewhere beneath the Eternal Glade

Mannfred von Carstein cursed himself for a fool. It had become his mantra in the days following his betrayal and incarceration. He sat in the dark, constrained by a cage of living roots. The enchantments which had been laid upon his prison were a source of constant discomfort. He could not even muster the smallest cantrip.

This, he thought, *this is how I am repaid?* He had been loyal, hadn't he? Loyalty must run both ways, though. He had served faithfully and honestly, and how had he been repaid? With the loss of all that he had fought for, with betrayal and punishment for a crime he had not even committed. It had been Arkhan who had slit the elf maiden's throat, and used her blood to revive Nagash. Why hadn't Nagash dispensed with the liche instead? Arkhan had served his purpose – he was a shell now. Nothing but an extension of his master's will.

Maybe that was it. Neferata had said it herself – Nagash despised anything that wasn't Nagash. And what Nagash despised, he feared as well. *Do you fear me, Undying King? Even after all I have sacrificed on your behalf?*

For the first few hours of his imprisonment, he had raged and ranted, hoping to attract the notice of guards, or, even better, one of the Incarnates. He thought that if he could but tell them the truth of things, they would see how Nagash had tricked them. He couldn't say what he thought that might accomplish. He knew, now that he was imprisoned, he would not be freed, even if he proved his relative innocence. But to see Nagash defeated, or even destroyed, and Arkhan with him, was too tantalising a dream to relinquish.

But no guards came, if there even were guards. None of his enemies came, to gloat or to accuse. He was left alone in the dark, without the sorcery that was his birthright. Worse than his lack of magics, he could feel the very stuff of him draining away, as if the trees above him were drawing sustenance from his bones. The magics that permeated him were being siphoned off, and likely transmuted into new and vibrant growths above. *A vampire being vampirised*, he thought, and not for the first time. Under different circumstances, he might even have seen the humour of it all. As it was, he filled his days with plotting ever more savage revenge schemes for the day of his inevitable freedom.

And he would be free. That was the certainty which sustained him, even as his prison sought to suck the life from him. He had been buried before, more than once. Trapped in the dark. But he had always returned. Like Nagash himself, he had mastered death. It was not the end. He pushed himself to his feet. He looked up. 'Do you hear me? It is not the end! I still live, and while I live, I...' He trailed off. Someone was clapping. He whirled, a snarl splitting his features. 'Who dares mock me? Show yourself!'

'Who dares mock me,' he asks. Would you like a list?' Vlad von Carstein said, as he stepped out of the shadows and stood before the cage. He seemed healthy for a dead man, Mannfred thought. For a moment, he allowed himself to hope that Vlad had come to free him. Then common sense reasserted itself, and he took a wary step back.

'Come to gloat, old man?' Mannfred said. He glared at Vlad, wishing that he could kill with a glance. 'Or maybe you've come to finally put me out of my misery. Well, took you long enough. I was beginning to wonder how many assassination attempts it would take...'

'I'm not going to kill you, boy. The world has seen enough change, in my opinion.' Vlad leaned against the roots that made up the bars of Mannfred's prison and stared at him. 'You are only alive because I asked him to spare you.'

'Did you really?' Mannfred spat.

Vlad smiled. 'Well, not exactly. I pointed out that your suffering would make a better peace offering than your death. And Nagash, being, well, Nagash, thought that made sense.'

'Remind me to thank you at the first opportunity,' Mannfred said.

Vlad frowned. 'I did it for you, boy. Whatever you think, whatever self-deluding lie is even now burrowing into the sour meat of what passes for your brain, know that what I did, I did for you.' He leaned forwards, gripping the ancient roots. 'You are still my... friend. My student. Even now. Even here.'

'And that is all I will ever be, as long as you walk this world,' Mannfred said. He slid down the wall and sat. Hands dangling across his knees, he laughed bitterly. 'I will always be in the shadow of giants. You, Neferata, Abhorash... even that old monster W'soran. You carved up the world before I realised what was happening.' He smiled. 'I wonder where they are now.'

'Neferata is doing what she has always done, boy. She rules.'

Mannfred grunted. 'Yes. She rules the land we bought in blood and fire.'

Vlad chuckled. 'Such is the way of queens.' He leaned his head against the roots. 'W'soran is dead, I think. If such a thing can die. Otherwise he would be here, with us, scheming away.'

'And Abhorash?'

Vlad was silent for a moment. Then, 'Abhorash fights. But he fights alone. He will not serve Nagash, or any man. Even so, some small part of the world will survive the coming conflagration, thanks to him. Where Abhorash stands, the enemy will never triumph.'

Mannfred looked at him. 'You know where he is,' he said finally.

'I've made it my business to know where my people are. Especially him. Walach's bloodthirsty lunatics were but pale shadows of the Red Dragon. Even Krell would not be able to match him. There is nothing alive or dead in this world that can, I think.' He sighed. 'What I wouldn't give to fight beside him once more.' His gaze turned inwards, and his expression lost its mask of jocularly. Mannfred studied him in silence. For the first time in their long, often bitter association, Vlad looked his age – old beyond reckoning, and battered on the rocks of existence. 'We should, all of us, the last sons and daughters of Lahmia, be here. We were the first, and we should be here at the last.'

'Life's just not fair, is it?' Mannfred said, spitefully. Vlad glared at him. He pushed away from the cage, and shook himself, as might one who has just awoken from a long dream.

'No, it is not. It is a beast, and it is always ravenous. It eats and eats, but is never satisfied.' He tilted his head. 'Do you remember the day we met? Do you remember the first lesson I taught you?'

Mannfred said nothing. Vlad looked disappointed. 'The first lesson was this... nothing stays the same. No matter how hard we fight, no matter how much we struggle, the world moves on. The world will always turn, empires will rise and fall, and if we are not careful, we will be drowned in the ocean of time. We must adapt and persevere.'

'That is what I was attempting to do, before you came back and *ruined everything*,' Mannfred snarled. He shot to his feet and flung himself at the bars of his cage. He slammed into the roots and thrust his arm through, clawing for Vlad's face.

Vlad stepped back, out of reach. 'Whatever ruin has been wrought, it was not my doing, but yours. It was your foolishness that saw Nagash resurrected, that saw the elven realms thrown into turmoil, and the Empire weakened in its darkest hour. You pulled down this house of cards, boy, not me. The Dark Gods exploited your hubris, and now we all must pay the price.'

'From where I stand, I seem to be paying the price for us all.'

'You might be the safest of us, boy. Here, hidden away in your living tomb. You'll be safe from the fires that flicker on the horizon. It is my last gift to you.' Vlad pulled his cloak tight about him. He smiled. 'Rest now, my son. Your labours are over.'

'Vlad, do not leave me here,' Mannfred hissed. 'You *cannot* leave me here. You need me. Nagash needs me. I know things, Vlad – about your so-called allies, about our enemies – but I can't tell you if I'm trapped here!'

'Nor can you try and use those secrets to benefit yourself at the expense of everyone else. I know you, boy. I know what monster drives you, and I know that if we are to have any hope at all, you must be left here, and forgotten.' Vlad turned away. 'Close your eyes and sleep, boy. Dream, and learn from your mistakes.'

'Vlad,' Mannfred called out. Then, more loudly, 'Vlad!'

The elder von Carstein did not stop, or even glance back.

And soon, Mannfred was left alone in the dark once more.



The King's Glade, Athel Loren

Vlad von Carstein flexed his hand, and admired the way the dappled light which dripped through the verdant canopy overhead played across his ring. He felt better than he had in months. His death and resurrection had cleansed his system of Otto Glott's blight, freeing him from the pain and weakness which had afflicted him since the Battle of Altdorf. The light stung his flesh, but he relished the clarity that came with such aches. It would help keep him focused in the hours and days to come.

He glanced up at Nagash. The Great Necromancer stood silent and still, as if he were some ancient idol, dug up from the sands of Nehekara and carted to Athel Loren. Only the ever-shifting shroud of spirits which draped over him, and the flickering witch-light in his eye sockets, betrayed his awareness.

Arkhan, as ever, stood at his master's right hand. Equally immobile, he nonetheless gave the impression of being far more alert than the Undying King. Vlad smiled. Arkhan made for an effective watchdog. Though he'd been stripped of flesh, the soul of the man yet remained. He was no dull, dead thing, his senses muffled by time and Nagash's will. For all that he pretended otherwise, there was still enough of the back-alley gambler in the liche to make him dangerous. Much like Vlad himself.

His smile faded as he thought of Mannfred, buried down in the dark. *Ah, my boy, what a disappointment you turned out to be. Too ambitious to see the trap laid out before you.* Then, if it hadn't been Mannfred, it would have been someone else. The world was winding down, and had been for centuries. It could not be turned back. It could only be stopped – frozen at the last moment of the last hour, eternally poised on the precipice. But that was better than nothing. The world would survive, in some fashion.

He looked across the glade. As before, only a select few were present. The elven Incarnates, of course, and the Emperor as well. Teclis and the woman, Lileath. The Bretonnian duke, and the dwarf runesmith. And, of course, Balthasar Gelt. Vlad met the wizard's gaze, and inclined his head respectfully. Gelt too had cleansed himself, his mind and will no longer infected by the spiritual malaise which had been eating away at him when they'd first met on the Auric Bastion. Gelt had fallen, and been reborn as something new and powerful. Vlad smiled again, thinking of his own rebirth; the first, and the hundreds which followed, down the long road of years. He rubbed his thumb over his ring.

Gelt didn't return his nod. Then, Vlad hadn't expected him to. He let his attentions wander. He could hear the sounds of battle in the distance, to the west. That would be the elf-prince, Imrik, fighting against one of the many marauding herds of beastmen which threatened Athel Loren. The creatures grew bold, as the world weakened. They had penetrated the forest's defences, and got farther into its depths than ever before. The elves hunted them now, where they were not fighting them openly, and not alone. As a gesture of good faith, men, dwarfs and even Nagash had lent their forces to that effort.

The Emperor's man, Volker, led woodsmen from Middenland and Averland as well as foresters from Quenelles in daily patrols through those parts of the forest safe for human travel, and thus likely to be stalked by beastmen. Dwarf gyrocopters patrolled above the pine crags, and Vlad had set loose a few of his more over-eager followers, including Eldyra, on the hunt – a task which the elf-turned-vampire seemed to relish. He frowned. She was self-destructive, that one. Her new life did not sit well with her, and she was ever at odds with her fellow Drakenhof Templars. He had been forced to break up more than one confrontation in the past few days, and his patience with the former princess of Tiranoc was wearing thin.

Vlad glanced speculatively at Tyrion. The Incarnate of Light stood, as ever, near the throne of the Everqueen, one hand resting on his sword. Like Caradryan, Tyrion said little at these gatherings. Instead, he stared west, as if he could see the battle taking place there and longed to be at its forefront. From what Eldyra had told him of her old master, Vlad thought that the latter was exceedingly likely. He wondered if, perhaps, it might not be wise to bring master and former apprentice together once more. Eldyra would be of great help in the battles to come, but she needed focus. She needed to see that there was only one path open to her, and that path was Vlad's. Whatever the elf thought of the changes wrought in her, he would surely strive to aid her.

And in the lending of that aid, common cause might arise between Vlad himself and the elf-prince. Vlad had no illusions as to the disgust and mistrust his presence engendered among the others. It had ever been such, and it was no less than he expected. But if the Emperor could put aside his distaste, and even Gelt could be civil, then there might be hope yet. The time was coming when Nagash would dispense with him and return him to the dust from which he had been drawn. To Nagash, his champions were but tools, and easily disposed of.

Vlad had no intention of going back into the dark. Not now. Not while Isabella still walked the world, held in thrall to the Dark Gods. And not while the empire he was owed could yet be salvaged. He reached up and touched the tattered seal affixed to his cuirass – the official seal of Karl Franz, and the sign of an elector. Yes, he would speak to Tyrion and the Emperor both, and ingratiate himself to his enemies as only one who had manoeuvred through the adder-pits of the Courts of the Dawn could.

But later, I think, Vlad thought. When Nagash's presence was not such a sore point for the others, they might be more inclined to think charitably of him and his. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of argument. It was a familiar sound, and almost depressingly so. Teclis and the others were, Vlad reflected, finding that forging such an assemblage of disparate powers was one thing, but getting them to work in harmony was another entirely.

Elven voices outweighed those of men and dwarfs here, and it was only thanks to the mediating efforts of Karl Franz that violence had not already erupted between the haughty exiles of Ulthuan and their guests. And the less said about Nagash, the better. Everyone had their own opinion as to what action the gathered Incarnates and their ever-dwindling followers must take next, but none could convince the others. The pendulum of discussion swung back and forth from civil discourse to squabbling arguments, and Vlad watched it all in amusement. This time, it was the sorcerer, Teclis, trying to sway the so-called Council of Incarnates to his strategy.

'The fate of the eighth wind is of the utmost importance,' Teclis was saying.

Lileath stood beside him, her face grave. She added, 'The Wind of Beasts is loose somewhere in the world, and while it is lost to us, your power cannot hope to match that of the Chaos Gods. If we are to have any hope of victory—'

'And what victory would that be? To save a world already infected by the taint of Chaos?' Malekith snarled. 'No, that is no victory at all.' He rose from his throne. 'With our powers we might yet seal the great breaches through which the winds of Chaos roar. Imagine it, a world free of Chaos, and of the tyranny of wild magic.'

'And without magic, what then?' Alarielle said. 'Our world only thrives because of it. Rather than dispensing with it, we should combine our abilities, and infuse Athel Loren itself with the very stuff of magic. We can return it to the splendour of ancient days, and make it a fitting final redoubt which might stand against the Dark Gods for an eternity.'

'No,' Arkhan the Black said. He stepped forwards, to the consternation of the others. Vlad hid a smile. Nagash rarely deigned to speak to the living, preferring that either Vlad or Arkhan handled such a tedious chore. The living undoubtedly considered it to be arrogance; in truth, Vlad knew that Nagash was ever at work attempting to bring the untold millions of mindless, unbound corpses which had wandered the world since his resurrection under control. Such a feat required every iota of Nagash's attentions.

'No,' Arkhan went on, '*Nagash shall not sacrifice that which is his by right. Not on behalf of the demesne of another.*'

'Indeed,' Vlad said, speaking up. He smiled and gestured airily. 'Especially when there are better ways to use such things.'

'You will be silent, leech. You are only here on sufferance,' Malekith snapped.

'No,' Gelt said. The wizard stepped forwards. 'Whatever you think of him, in his time Vlad von Carstein was a military commander without equal. For that reason, if no other, we should heed him.' Vlad hid his surprise. Gelt was the last one he had expected to speak for him, except for Hammerson, possibly. Vlad inclined his head.

'The lands from here to Kislev are swarming with the walking dead – bodies without life or consciousness, uncontrolled, but waiting.' He indicated Nagash. 'With the power of the other Incarnates added to his own, Nagash would be able to control the dead in their entirety. An army of billions, waiting to be utilised howsoever we see fit. Imagine it,' Vlad said, gesturing. 'The Everchosen may have armies aplenty, but they are not limitless, and with every battle, our numbers would swell.'

'Pah. Why bother with the dead at all? We should send emissaries to my folk,' Hammerson barked, pounding a fist into his palm. 'There are mighty holds yet in the mountains. Copper Mountain is but a few days travel east of here. My kin would open their doors to me – to us. And we would have an army capable of smashing us a path wherever we wish to go, or to hold these forests and crags indefinitely if that is your wish.'

'Hammerson is right,' Gelt said. He looked at the Emperor, as if seeking support. 'The dwarfs have always been the staunchest allies of the Empire, come what may. They would not abandon us now.' Hammerson nodded fiercely.

'Aye. But say the word, and I'll send my rangers into the crags. They'll use the dwarf paths, the routes known only to the dawli, and bring us back an army...'

'Time is short enough, without wasting it begging for aid from those who've already made their cowardice clear,' Tyrior said scornfully. Hammerson snarled an oath, and made as if to attack the elf, but Gelt held him back. Tyrior looked around, seemingly oblivious to the dwarf's mounting anger. 'Besides,' he continued, 'we have an army. The finest in the world – Aenarion himself would have been proud to lead it.'

'And you would know all about that, wouldn't you?' Malekith said.

The Emperor spoke up before Tyrior could reply. 'And what do you suggest we do with this army?' he asked.

Tyrior laughed. 'Isn't it obvious? We take back your Empire, my friend. We rally your folk, province by province. We drive the enemy back, back into the north, back into the void whence they came.'

'There are no provinces to rally, Tyrior,' the Emperor said, after a moment. His voice was rough with barely restrained emotion. 'There are no armies to raise, no sieges to lift. There are no embers of resistance to fan into rebellion.' He spoke slowly, as if every word was painful. 'The Empire that I – that Sigmar – built is done and dust. It has been ground under and made as nothing.'

Gelt hunched forwards, leaning against his staff. 'The Emperor is correct. The forces we have here are all that remain to us. To all of us.'

'All the more reason then, to take control of the limitless dead,' Vlad interjected. 'We can bury them in hungry corpses.' He looked at the Emperor. 'And perhaps take some measure of vengeance for the atrocities they have wreaked on our lands.'

'Not to mention the power that would give your master,' Caradryan said, speaking up for the first time. 'What would he do with that army, once our common foe was defeated?'

'Aye, the elf has the right of it,' Hammerson grated. He pointed a stubby finger at Vlad. 'The living cannot trust the dead. My people know that better than most. Bad enough that we must fight alongside elves, but at least the pointy-ears are alive.'

Vlad smiled and spread his hands. 'You think far ahead for one dangling from a precipice, Master Hammerson.' He looked around. 'There is no guarantee that even with the dead under our sway, it would be enough to throw back the enemy. Why worry about the future, when it is the present which is under threat?'

'Because it is for the future that we fight,' the Emperor said. He looked around. 'Survival is not enough, my friends. Nor is victory. One without the other would be a hollow triumph at best, and pyrrhic at worst.' His eyes met those of Vlad, briefly. Vlad stepped back, his pretty words suddenly so much ash in his mouth. 'This world is all that is, and will be, for our peoples. There is nowhere that can be made safe, nowhere that we can run.'

As the Emperor spoke, Vlad saw Lileath blanch and step back, her hand at her throat. He wondered idly what secret she hid that made her react so, even as he said, 'Then what are we even doing here?' He gestured about him. 'Beautiful as this forest is, I do not fancy it as a tomb.'

'Nor do any of us,' the Emperor said. 'Which is why whatever else is decided here, it must be unanimous. We must stand as one, or we will fall separately.'

Vlad glanced up at Nagash, and then away. He smiled and shook his head.

It was a pretty sentiment. But it was going to take more than sentiment to sway any of the gathered powers to a single cause.

Middenheim, City of the White Wolf

The Temple of Ulric rang with the sound of footsteps. Robed, huddled shapes scuttled into the dark, hissing and murmuring in abominable fashion. Strange, inhuman figures cavorted in the shadowed alcoves and aisles. Bestial forms clambered through the chains strung across the curve of the dome, feeding off the rotting bodies which hung there.

Pale shapes swayed and danced to the piping sound of flutes before the throne of the Three-Eyed King. They were clad in silks and damask, smelling of sweet oils and perfumes, and their hooves and claws were sheathed in gold. They sang and laughed as they danced, delicately clawing one another and scattering the blood about them as if it were rose petals. The pipers, slovenly, fat-gutted plaguebearers, crouched on the dais and played duelling melodies, as cackling pink horrors clapped and kept time.

Canto Unsworn strode forwards, through the silently arrayed ranks of the Swords of Chaos. To the best of his knowledge, the Chaos knights hadn't moved since they had taken up their positions some weeks earlier. The daemonettes, in their dance, moved amongst them, but not a single one of the knights so much as twitched. Canto gestured sharply as one horned and cloven-hoofed beauty pirouetted towards him, and the creature dashed away, favouring him with a sulky smile as she spun past him. Her claws clicked across the side of his helm as he moved away.

As Canto drew close to the throne, he tossed the still-smoking helm of Nalac the Eschaton onto the floor. 'The Changer of Ways sends his regards,' Canto said, as the pipes went still and the horrors ceased their laughter. The helm, composed of millions of shards of tinted glass, caught the light in a thousand ways. It reminded him of another helm, belonging to another devotee of Tzeentch, long ago and far away. He pushed the thought away.

Archaon, heretofore slouched on his throne, sat up. 'Nalac. I do not know him.' He had Ghal Maraz across his lap. Even now, the hammer terrified Canto. No mortal hand would ever wield it again, but even so, it seemed to hunger for death and destruction. His death, and the destruction of those he served. Others had encouraged Archaon to dispense with it, to shatter it, or hurl it from the city walls. Their bodies now hung from the chains above, along with the others who had tested Archaon's patience.

'And you never will, my lord,' Canto said. 'He was one of Vilitch's disciples, and was trying to rouse the tribes occupying the Sudgarten District. I thought it prudent to – ah – head that off at the pass, as it were.' He gave the helmet a kick.

'Did he die well?'

'I'm not entirely certain. A flock of purple ravens burst out of his armour after I cut his head off. They flew off. I think that means I won.' He looked up at Archaon. 'The army grows restless, my lord.'

'The army eats itself, Unsworn,' Archaon corrected. 'Like a fire, swelling to fill a room and snuffing itself in the process. That is the nature of Chaos. Like the serpent eating its own tail, it feeds on itself, until there is nothing left to devour.' Archaon stroked the hammer gingerly, as if afraid it might bite him. 'And then, it begins again.' He shoved the hammer from his lap. It struck the dais and tumbled down the stairs. Daemons scrambled out of its path with shrieks and yowls. Canto stepped back as the hammer smashed into the floor at the foot of the steps. 'It always begins again,' Archaon said.

'Yes, my lord,' Canto said carefully, bowing his head.

When he looked up, Archaon was studying him. 'Have I thanked you yet, Unsworn? While I sit here, in my seclusion, you wield sword and shield in my defence. You fight battles so that I do not have to. Do you begrudge me, my executioner?'

Canto did not meet Archaon's gaze. He could feel its weight on his soul, and knew that his answer might determine his survival. Archaon had dispensed with most of his advisors and confidants in the days following the fall of Averheim. The lands of men were fallen, or of little consequence. The lands of the elves had sunk beneath the sea, and the dwarfs had retreated into the roots of the earth. The sour redoubt of Sylvania was ringed about by armies of beasts and daemons and skaven, and its crushing was of minor importance with Nagash's departure. There were no enemies left that Canto could see, save Archaon's own lieutenants.

Chaos feeds on itself, Canto thought. He lifted his head. 'I do not, my lord. I am content with my lot.' As he spoke, he hoped Archaon couldn't see that he was lying.

In truth, Canto had been preparing to leave for days. Every time he thought he might slip out of the gates and ride hell for leather for Araby or Cathay, some champion or chieftain got it into their head to cause trouble. If it wasn't a schemer like Nalac the Eschaton, it was a brute like Gorgomir Bloodeye, being spurred on by a suspiciously pale courtesan. Finding a vampire amongst the daemon-worshippers wasn't that surprising. There was at least one other in the city, to Canto's knowledge.

And a frightening creature she is, he thought. The Countess kept to herself, for the most part, and stayed within the plague gardens that had sprung up in what had been the merchant district. They said that she spent her days humming and singing to herself. On a whim, Sigvald the Magnificent had tried to hack his way into the gardens only to be put to flight, his tail between his legs.

'I do not remember what contentment feels like,' Archaon said. 'Maybe I never knew.'

Before Canto could even attempt to formulate an answer to that, the heavy oaken doors of the temple were smashed open. The sound of splintering wood

filled the rotunda, silencing all else. Then, a thunderous voice boomed, 'You mock me!'

The temple shuddered as a heavy form entered Archaon's throne room, stinking of fire and blood. Ka'Bandha strode through the swirling daemonettes, scattering the handmaidens of Slaanesh as it strode towards the throne. One of the Swords of Chaos was caught a glancing blow from Ka'Bandha's axe, and fell. Before the knight could get to his feet, the bloodthirster sneered, raised one great hoof, and brought it down on the warrior's helm, pulping it. As if the death of one of their own had been a signal, the Swords of Chaos swept into motion. As one, they drew their swords and turned towards the daemon.

Canto took up his position on the dais, his own blade drawn. He doubted if he would last much longer than any of the others but there was no place to run that the daemon couldn't catch him, if it so desired. That was what he told himself, at any rate. Why else would he put himself between Archaon and the daemon? Better to stand with the Everchosen than perish. There was no telling what had driven the beast into a rage. The servants of Khorne longed for battle the way other beings desired food.

Archaon said nothing as the daemon thundered forwards. He merely raised his fist, and, in eerie rhythm, the Swords sheathed their weapons and retreated to the chamber's perimeter. Canto hesitated, but then sheathed his own blade. There was no sense in making himself a target, after all.

'You forget yourself, daemon,' Archaon intoned as he slowly rose from his throne. 'I am the Everchosen, and I am the edge of Khorne's axe on this world. Would you approach his throne in so rash a manner?' His words echoed through the rotunda, and a ripple of daemonic titters followed in its wake as the watching daemons twitched in glee to see Ka'Bandha spoken to in such a manner. There was no love lost between the beasts, even here, united beneath Archaon's standard. They were worse than men, in some ways. 'Remember, daemon. In this world, you serve at my whim.'

'You are but a mortal speck,' Ka'Bandha snarled. 'I serve you only so long as you lead us to slaughter. But there is no slaughter here, Everchosen. Where is the ocean of blood we were promised? Where are the skulls you have tithe to the Lord of Carnage? I see nothing before me but the dried leavings of crows and jackals.'

The bloodthirster straightened, wings unfurling. A wash of heat billowed outwards, rippling from the daemon's form and filling the rotunda. The stones at Ka'Bandha's feet blackened and grew soft from that heat, and the chains dangling above its hunched shoulders turned white hot and dripped to the floor, link by link. 'You mock me, king of filth. You mock Ka'Bandha, and *make him an overseer for puling slaves*,' Ka'Bandha roared out, shaking the chamber to its foundations. The daemon smashed the flat of its axe against the brass cuirass which clad its hairy torso. The sound of metal on metal echoed through the temple and lesser daemons fled the sound of it, their paws pressed to their ears.

'Those slaves toil and die in the cause of the Four-Who-Are-All. What they uncover, what they feed with their broken bodies and blistered souls, will, when it awakes, spill more blood than all of the axes ever forged. But it must be excavated, and it must be fed.' Archaon paused. He cocked his head. 'Unless the great Ka'Bandha fancies excavating it himself.'

The bloodthirster lifted its axe and drove it into the ground, splitting stone and rocking the chamber. '*I will not be mocked*,' the creature roared, as it wrenched its axe free of the floor and lashed out, splitting one of the chamber's support pillars in two.

Stone and dust cascaded down as part of the ceiling collapsed. Canto ducked aside as a chunk of stone smashed into the dais. Archaon didn't so much as twitch, even as Ka'Bandha advanced on the throne. 'No. I see that,' Archaon said, as Ka'Bandha loomed over him. His hand fell to the hilt of his sword. He looked up at the daemon. Their faces were only bare inches apart. 'What is it you wish, then?' he asked quietly. 'Would you have me dispense with you, as I dispensed with the Fateweaver?'

Canto shivered. The two-headed daemon had grown agitated in the aftermath of the Emperor's escape from Averheim. It was a given that the Fateweaver had been working to undermine Archaon; treachery was second nature to the servants of the Changer of Ways. When the beast had openly challenged Archaon, demanding that he pursue the Emperor into the Grey Mountains, a confrontation which had been simmering for weeks occurred in the blink of an eye. There had been no speeches, no grand gestures. Merely a sword, flashing in the dark, and the sound of two monstrous heads falling to the floor. What was left had been fed to the thing in the depths of the Fauschlag.

Ka'Bandha was silent. For a moment, Canto wondered whether it might attempt to strike Archaon down. Part of him hoped it would try. Part of him hoped it would succeed. The creature glared down at Archaon, axe half-raised. Archaon waited. When no blow was forthcoming, he said, 'I am fulfilling your lord's wishes, Ka'Bandha. If you doubt that, then strike me down.' He spread his arms. 'Let us see whether Khorne rewards you... or punishes you.'

The bloodthirster snarled and took a step back. 'Blood must flow,' the daemon snapped. 'There is no blood here, Everchosen. Let the servants of lesser gods guard slaves. I would have battle.'

'There has been battle aplenty. Enough to glut even the King of Murder himself. The world drowns in blood, mighty Ka'Bandha. Only a single lone island resists the tide, and it matters little, isolated as it is.' Archaon lowered his arms.

There was something about his voice, his manner, which Canto found confusing. Archaon wasn't trying to calm the beast – no, he was trying to aggravate it. It wasn't just mockery. *What are you up to?* he thought.

'The Emperor escaped you,' Ka'Bandha growled.

Archaon shook his head. 'And so? What is a ruler with no land to rule? And what power he stole from the heavens, I stripped from him with my own two hands. His power, temporal or otherwise, is gone. He is broken, his armies scattered, his land... ash. The lie of him has been exposed to the world, as I swore to do. And now I shall fulfil my oath to our masters, Ka'Bandha. I shall crack the world open, so that they might feast on it at last. What is the Emperor, compared to that?'

Says the man who has spent weeks brooding because Karl Franz slipped through his fingers at Averheim, Canto thought. His eyes were drawn to Ghal Maraz, where it sat at the bottom of the steps. Even Ka'Bandha avoided it, and cast occasional wary glances at the weapon. Archaon was up to something – but what?

'It is a mistake to think him defeated,' Ka'Bandha rumbled. 'His skull belongs to Khorne.'

'Then, by all means... go collect it,' Archaon said, gesturing towards the doors to the temple. 'Karl Franz's life is yours. I give it to you freely, and without stipulation, save one.' He held up a hand, as Ka'Bandha growled. 'Let Khorne have his skull, by all means. But his skin is mine. Promise me this one small gesture, and I shall release you from my service, so that you might hunt your prey wherever he seeks to hide.'

The bloodthirster snorted. 'Aye, so it shall be. I shall collect skin and skull both. I shall drown the trees in blood, and bury the mountains in offal.' The creature threw back its head and roared in satisfaction. 'Let the Blood Hunt ride once more, before the end of everything!' The daemon spun on its heel and stormed from the chamber, smashing aside another pillar in its exuberance.

'Well, that's one way of handling it,' Canto said, as the dust cleared.

Archaon descended the steps, and sank down on the bottom one. He looked down at Ghal Maraz. He reached out, and traced the intricate pattern of runes which covered the hammer. 'Time... fractures, Unsworn. A thousand-thousand possibilities flare bright, and burn out before my eyes with every moment. But there are fewer and fewer of them with every passing hour. Our path grows narrow and thorny, and I am forced to play a game of death and deceit to ensure the proper outcome.'

The Everchosen picked up the hammer and held it out, as if weighing it. 'The hours grow short, and the shadows long. I would have vengeance, not because I desire it, but because it must take place, else what was it all for?'

Canto's hand fell to the hilt of his sword. Archaon was not looking at him. One blow, and he would be free. *Or dead*, he thought, as he lowered his hand. 'I do not know, my lord.'

'The beast will not succeed.' Archaon touched the shimmering gemstone set into his helm. 'I have seen its failure, spread across the skein of possibilities. The only question is one of time. When will the pieces fall? And where?' He spun Ghal Maraz gently in his grip. 'It must be here. There is a moment here, waiting to be born. It has weight, and draws every other moment towards it, like a stone drawing the man whose leg it is tied to down into the dark water. It will happen in Middenheim.' He glanced at Canto. 'The end must justify the means. The world is a lie, and the truth must out.' Archaon rose to his feet, Ghal Maraz in hand. 'I cannot rest until that is done, Unsworn. Even if I must defy the gods themselves, I will have the truth.' He climbed the steps slowly, the hammer dangling from his grip.

Canto watched the Everchosen sink back onto his throne, and thought of Araby.



TEN

 *The Silvale Glade, Athel Loren*

Duke Jerrod drove his blade down into the hairy back of the slaving beastman, severing the creature's spine. He wrenched the blade free and twisted in his saddle, lopping off the arm of another. The creature howled and staggered back, clutching at itself. His stallion whinnied and lashed out, killing the creature with a single blow from its hoof.

The beasts were wild with madness. The bloodlust so common to the minotaurs had spread to every gor and ungor loping beneath the trees. For days they had hurled themselves into death on the spear points and sword blades of the elves, and for every thousand that perished, another thousand prowled forth, slaving and berserk. For the most part the bulk of the enemy were held at bay by the elves, but some small groups had slipped through the wall of spears and shields to ravage behind the static positions. It was these isolated fragments of the horde that the Incarnates had roused themselves to destroy.

The elves, led by the Dragon-Prince, Imrik, were on the verge of exhaustion. But to give in, to surrender even a single glade, was to threaten the safety of the King's Glade. And that was too steep a price for even an hour's respite. But such was the fury of this latest onslaught, that even the Incarnates had been stirred from their interminable debate.

Or so it seemed to Jerrod, at least. Endless hours of argument, back and forth, accomplishing nothing tangible save to put folk who should be allies at each other's throats. It seemed inconceivable to him that such a thing was possible, that even now men and women broke and shattered beneath the weight of their own hubris.

Then, not everyone had the Lady to guide them onto the proper path as he and his knights did. Around him, the Companions of Quenelles fought with courage and honour, lances and swords red with the blood of abominations. He murmured a silent prayer as an axe hacked away one of the frayed strips of silk which decorated the crown of his helmet, and nudged his horse around. The flat of his shield caught the minotaur on the side of the head, knocking it aside. It stumbled, and then fell, as a spear erupted from its side. The beast collapsed onto all fours. Its hide bristled with arrows, and despite the spear in its side, it tried to struggle to its feet. An armoured boot caught it in the head, shoving it back down.

Wendel Volker caught the haft of the spear and jerked it free, before plunging it down through the minotaur's bulging, bloodshot eye. The Reiksguard looked up at Jerrod and smiled. It was a fierce, unnatural expression, lacking in humour. 'Much better than listening to all that bickering, eh?' Volker said.

'I never knew you to be so eager for a fight, Wendel,' Jerrod said.

Volker left his spear where he'd planted it. He drew his sword, and a single-bladed axe, from his belt, and hefted them meaningfully. 'What else is there?' he rasped. 'There's nowhere to run now. May as well take what I'm owed, before the end.'

Volker had changed much in the weeks since they had arrived in Athel Loren, Jerrod reflected. It was as if something grew within him, remaking him in its image. What that image was, and what form it would eventually take, Jerrod could not say. Whatever it was, it frightened him. The white-haired knight had always been a brave, if hesitant man, with too much love of the bottle for Jerrod's taste, but in the past few weeks he had become a fierce warrior, staying out on the borders of Athel Loren for days at a time, leading his band of foresters and scouts in hunting down any beastmen that slipped through the defences of the elves. The men who followed him included priests of Ulric and Taal, shrieking flagellants and howling, fanatical worshippers of the wolf-god. The mad and the lost, formed into a murderous pack that even the most bloodthirsty beast hesitated to cross.

Volker's eyes blazed, and Jerrod's horse whinnied nervously as the temperature dropped suddenly. He followed Volker's gaze, and saw that he was staring at the elf mage, Teclis. The mage fought beside Lileath, the elf-woman who was neither Incarnate nor noble, as far as Jerrod could tell. He could not, in fact, say what she was. Lileath of the Moon, and Ladielle of the Veil – that was what she had called herself. But what did those names mean? Why did they sound so familiar to him, as if he had heard them before? *In a dream, perhaps*, he thought. Volker took a step towards them, weapons raised. Jerrod nudged his horse between them, blocking Volker's line of sight. 'Your Emperor has said that the mage is not to be harmed, my friend,' he said.

Volker grunted. 'So he has.' He twitched, and looked up at Jerrod. For a moment, his face was that of the man Jerrod had first met in Averheim, so many months ago. Then the mask was in place once more, and something feral looked out through Volker's eyes. He nodded to Jerrod and turned, raising his weapons. He howled. Jerrod's stallion stepped sideways in agitation as Volker's band of lunatics ghosted through the glade, following into step with their commander. They flowed smoothly towards a point where the elven battle-line was beginning to buckle, and smashed into the beastmen with howls and wild screams.

Jerrod saw the enemy reel from the sudden onslaught. *Another charge might put them to flight*, he thought. He signalled for one of his Companions to sound his horn. At the first quavering note, the Bretonnian knights broke off from the melee with an ease born of hard-won experience and formed up about him. Jerrod had lost his lance in the first crashing charge, but he wouldn't need it. Momentum, and the blessings of the Lady, would see him through. And if not, well... death would not find him a coward.

He spurred his horse into a canter and the Companions followed suit, falling into position behind him, arranging themselves by instinct without need for his command. The horses began to pick up speed as they drew closer to the main thrust of the battle. His blood sang in his veins as the canter flowed smoothly into a gallop. It had been too long since the Companions of Quenelles had ridden out and faced the enemy head on. There had been too much skulking behind walls or in glades; such was not the proper way of it, and he relished the chance to show the haughty inhabitants of Athel Loren how a true son of Bretonnia fought.

Elves turned as the thunder of hooves filled the glade. They had knights of their own, but their steeds moved with the grace and silence of a morning mist. The warhorses of Bretonnia on the other hand shook the earth and sky with their passing. They were not graceful or silent. They were a force of destruction, a mailed fist thudding home into the belly of the enemy. They were the pride of Bretonnia, and the sound of their hooves was the roar of a doomed people, proclaiming that they would not go meekly into the dark.

Jerrod hunched forwards in his saddle as the elven lines parted smoothly before them, as he'd hoped they would. And then the knights of Bretonnia smashed home in a rumble of hooves and a splintering of lances, driving into the ill-disciplined ranks of the beastherds with a sound like an avalanche. Those creatures unlucky enough to be in the front seemed to simply evaporate, torn apart or ground under hooves at the moment of impact. Those behind were dragged down seconds later, or else speared on the ends of lances. Those beasts closest to Jerrod were knocked aside, sent sprawling or trampled by his stallion as he hacked at the enemy. The knights pressed on, their formation spreading like a fist opening up. Behind them, the elves reformed their lines.

Jerrod laid about him until his arm ached and his heart shuddered in his chest. The beasts began to fall back, but not all at once, and not as he'd hoped. They were too disorganised for that, he realised. One herd cared little for what befell the next, and whatever fury drove them had yet to relinquish its hold on their stunted brains. Cursing, he made to signal for withdrawal. They could fall back, and charge again.

His horse reared as a number of ungors thrust spears at him. One glanced off his thigh, and another slashed through the strap of his saddle. Before he

could stop himself, he was sliding ignominiously off his mount. He crashed hard to the ground, and was forced to roll aside to avoid being trampled by his own horse. Spears dug for his vitals and he flailed desperately, chopping them aside. Hairy hands grabbed for him, and cruel skinning knives or cut-down sword blades crashed against his armour as the creatures swarmed through the forest of stamping hooves and falling bodies.

A strong grip fixed itself on the back of his tabard, and he found himself dragged upright. An arm clad in black armour extended past him, clutching a long blade. An ungor spitted itself on that sword, and its malformed body withered and shrank within moments. The blade pulsed red for a moment and then returned to its original hue as its wielder ripped it free of the husk. Jerrod looked up into the smiling features of Vlad von Carstein.

'I thought you might require assistance,' the vampire said, as Jerrod parried an axe and opened its wielder's belly. 'I was nearby, and saw no reason not to lend it. You are from Quenelles, are you not? I thought I recognised your heraldry.'

'I am,' Jerrod said stiffly. He took a two-handed grip on his sword. He'd lost his shield in the fall, and his hip and shoulder ached. But the pain could wait; as long as he could move, however stiffly, he could fight. Vlad took up a position beside him.

'Ah, Quenelles... such a lovely land. I whiled away many a night there in the company of fine ladies. And the dumplings, ah...' Vlad kissed his fingertips in a gesture of appreciation. He beheaded a beastman with a casual swing of his blade. 'I taught young Tancred the proper way to hold a sword; this was the first Tancred, of course. Long dead now, poor fellow. Ran afoul of some detestable necromancer, I'm given to understand.'

Jerrod fought in silence. The vampire moved too quickly for his eye to follow. Vlad chopped through the neck of a beast and whirled to face Jerrod.

'You're the latest to bear the dukedom, I'm told. I too know the pain of being the last ruler of a fallen province.'

'Quenelles still stands,' Jerrod said.

'Of course it does, of course,' Vlad said. 'How could it not? But its people face much difficulty in the days to come, my dear duke. Have you considered the possibility of an alliance, for the days ahead?' He ducked beneath the wild swing of a club, and sent a beastman sprawling with an almost playful slap.

'With you?'

'Who better? We are both men of royal blood, are we not? And in the years to come, both the Empire and Bretonnia will need each other – humanity must stand together, Jerrod.'

'Humanity?' Jerrod blurted, as a beastman lunged for him. He stepped aside and brought his blade down on the creature's back. He heard the tramp of feet, and saw that the elves were moving forwards, spears levelled. They were taking advantage of the momentary lull the Bretonnian charge had caused, and were now moving to take back the ground they had lost. Jerrod raised his sword, signalling for his knights to withdraw.

'I was as human as you, once, and unlike some, I have never forgotten it,' Vlad said smoothly. He stepped back as the elves marched past them. 'Too, I am an elector of the Empire, and as such view it as my duty to put forth the idea of alliance, come our eventual victory.'

'You are so confident in our survival, then?' Jerrod said. His stallion trotted towards him, its flanks heaving, its limbs striped with blood. He stooped to check the animal, relieved that it had survived. Vlad watched him for a moment. He reached out, as if to stroke the animal's nose, but the horse shied away. Vlad let his hand drop, a tiny frown creasing his features.

'Of course,' the vampire said. 'As the Emperor said, we fight for the future. To countenance defeat is as good as accepting it. And I have come too far, and accomplished too much, to accept the ruin of it all.' He looked at Jerrod. 'The world stands, Duke of Quenelles.' He put his hand on Jerrod's shoulder.

'And I would see that it do so for many years yet to come.'



Gotri Hammerson clashed his hammer and axe together, summoning fire and heat. Beastmen fell, consumed and turning to ash even as they charged towards the Zhufarak line. The runes of fire dimmed as he lowered his weapons. The dwarfs had taken up the flank, without asking permission. The elves had, in a rare display of sense, left them to it without protest. Now guns and good Black Water steel threw back the Children of Chaos again and again.

The beasts poured out of the trees in a disorganised mass. The giant, gangly shapes of gorgons and cygors roared and smashed aside ancient oaks as they lumbered after their smaller cousins, and knots of bellowing minotaurs carved a path through their own kind to get to the dwarf lines. All of them were thrown back, again and again.

'Ha! We're hammering them just like the Ironfist did at Hunger Wood, Master Hammerson,' one of his Anvil Guard barked, his broad face streaked with powder burns and blood. 'They'll remember the Zhufarak, sure as sure.' He swung his axe and beheaded an ungor as it scabbled ineffectually at his shield.

'Aye, and if you don't pay attention, Ulgo, they'll be the only ones to do so,' Hammerson snarled. He smashed his hammer down, shattering a crude blade as it sought his gut, and gave its wielder an axe in the skull by way of reply. As he wrenched his weapon free, he raised his voice. 'I want a steady rate of fire. I want them pummelled into a greasy patch on the topsoil, lads, and an extra tankard of Bugman's best to whoever brings down that Grimnir-be-damned gorgon over there.' The rhythmic snarl of gunfire answered him as the lines revolved, fresh Thunderers stepping forwards to take the places of those who had just fired. The Zhufarak were a millstone, grinding over the enemy. They had plenty of powder and shot, and a sea of targets. Some beastmen inevitably made it through the fusillade, however, and when that happened, it was time for the rest of the throng to earn their ale.

The ground trembled. He craned his neck and saw Jerrod and his knights smash into the enemy centre like a hammer striking an anvil, and couldn't restrain a smile. 'Good lad,' he grunted. The Bretonnians fought like it was what they were bred for, and they hit almost as hard as a proper cannonade.

Something flashed at the corner of his eye, and he turned. His smile faded. Gelt stood at the heart of the battle-line, standing head and shoulders over the two dwarfs set to guard him – they were members of Hammerson's own Anvil Guard, clad in gromril armour and bearing heavy shields marked with runes of resistance and shielding. *Stromni and Gorgi, good lads*, he thought. Hard lads, like ambulatory boulders with as much brains between them, but once they'd set their feet and locked shields, nothing short of death would move them. Gelt was safe with them.

Not that he needs much in the way of protection, Hammerson thought, as a wave of shimmering light erupted from Gelt's hand and turned a number of beastmen to solid gold statues. Around Gelt, runes glowed white-hot, and the guns of the Thunderers seemed impossibly accurate. Axes hewed without going dull, and hammers broke through even the toughest armour and splintered the thickest bones.

A flash of runes caught Hammerson's eye. They lined the edge of a ragged cloak, which swirled about a figure who stood where the fighting was thickest. The dwarf was old, older even than Hammerson himself, to judge by the icy whiteness of his plaited beard. His features were hidden beneath the hood of his cloak, and he bore no clan markings on his armour. The axe in his hands hummed with barely contained power as it lopped off a beastman's head. The mysterious dwarf spun to smash a lunging beastman from the air, and his eyes caught Hammerson's as he did so.

For a moment, the din of battle receded, and Hammerson heard only the sounds of the Black Water, and the rhythmic crash of the great forges of Zhufarak. He heard the rolling work-songs of his clan, and smelt the forge-smoke. He saw the shimmer of a thousand clan standards gleaming in the sun, and the glint of rune-weapons raised in defence of ancient oaths and old friends. All of this and more he saw in the eyes of the white-bearded dwarf, and a name came unbidden to his lips.

'Eyes forward, Master Dwarf,' a smooth voice purred. Hammerson whirled, the name slipping from his mind as he came face to face with a bulky beastman. Its teeth were clenched and its eyes rolled wildly, but it had been stopped from reaching him by a quintet of pale fingers which were sunk knuckle-deep into the meat of its back, just between its shoulders. Vlad von Carstein smiled in a neighbourly fashion and then, with a wink, ripped a section of the creature's spine out. It toppled forwards with a single moaning bleat, and Hammerson instinctively crushed its skull with his boot.

The vampire bounced the chunk of bone on his palm for a moment before pitching it over his shoulder. 'I would have thought a warrior such as yourself would know better than to become distracted in battle, Master Hammerson,' he said.

'And I'd have thought you'd have the sense not to save a fellow who means you ill, vampire,' Hammerson grunted. Ulgo had noticed the vampire at last, and the Anvil Guard raised his axe threateningly. Hammerson glared at him until he lowered it. *Aye, and we'll be having a chat later, lad, about why it was the vampire who saved me and not you, eh?* he thought sourly.

'Still, and after I prevented that beast from braining you?'

'Who asked you to? I owe you nothing,' Hammerson said. He looked around, trying to spot the strange, white-bearded dwarf, but the old one had vanished into the eddies of battle. Hammerson shook his head, trying to banish the unease he suddenly felt.

'Perhaps I didn't do it for you, eh?' Vlad said. He stepped over the creature and smoothly took up position beside Hammerson in the shield-wall. The closest dwarfs looked askance at the vampire, and more than one gun-barrel drifted towards him. Hammerson gestured sharply. No sense starting a second fight when they were already in the middle of one. He signalled for those closest to fall back a step.

'Then why did you do it?' Hammerson clashed his weapons together again. Fire roared out, earning them a moment of respite. He looked at the vampire. 'And why aren't you with your master?'

'Which one?' Vlad asked. 'I am as much a son of the Empire as I am a child of death, Master Hammerson. And it is in my capacity as elector that I—'

'Who says you're an elector?' Hammerson snapped. 'Last I heard, electors carried runefangs – good dwarf weapons, those – and not whatever that monstrosity is.' He gestured towards the blade in von Carstein's hand.

Vlad smirked. 'I am an elector because the Emperor says I am. And that means that we are allies, bound by old and sturdy oaths.'

Hammerson said nothing. Through the smoke, he saw Gelt slam the end of his staff down. The ground squirmed as great thorn-vines, composed of precious metals, rose from the earth and ensnared beastmen.

'He is quite talented, for a mortal,' Vlad said softly. 'He served me for a time, did you know that? And now he is redeemed and host to powers greater even than ours, runesmith.'

Hammerson hadn't known, and the thought didn't please him. Old doubts about Gelt, ones he'd thought he'd put aside, came back stronger than before. He looked at Vlad. 'What do you mean?' he growled.

'Things change, dwarf,' Vlad said. 'The world we pry from the jaws of destruction will not be the same as the one we remember. And old enemies might even be new friends, come that happy day.'

'Speak plainly, leech,' Hammerson spat.

Vlad sniffed. 'Fine. The Emperor is but a man. He will die, in time. Perhaps even in this war. As sole remaining elector, I will take his place. I would ensure that the ancient oaths between the Empire of man and the empire of the dwarfs are upheld, despite old grudges.'

Hammerson stared at him. Then he laughed. Great whoops of amusement tore their way from him, and he bent forwards, gasping with breath. Vlad stared at him in consternation. Ulgo and the others joined in, guffawing. The vampire turned, eyes narrowed.

'Oh, if that isn't the funniest thing I've heard in days,' Hammerson wheezed. He grinned at Vlad. 'And you accused me of paying too much attention to what might be. Ha! Trust a manling to start portioning out the stew before the pot's even warm. Even the dead ones, it seems.' The runesmith shook his head. 'Aye, vampire, we'll honour the old oaths, come what may. We'll defend the empire from *whatever* seeks to harm it.' He met Vlad's gaze and poked him in the chest with a finger. 'Be it living, or dead. Remember that, blood-drinker.' He turned away. 'Now be off with you. This is a time for fighting, not for talking. We have a battle-line to maintain, and I'll not have you flitting about, distracting my lads.'

Hammerson didn't bother to watch the vampire depart. He smiled grimly. *One battle at a time, Gotri*, he thought. *One battle at a time.*



'This is a waste of time,' Lileath said. She whipped her staff about, crushing skulls and splintering bones with a strength far beyond what her slight frame seemed capable of. Teclis stood at her back, his hands extended and the air sizzling with his magics. 'Every moment we stand undecided, is another moment lost,' she continued. Her staff shot forwards, puncturing the muzzle of a snarling gor in a spray of blood and broken fangs.

'I agree, but there is nothing to be done, my lady,' Teclis said. 'The others will not be swayed by pretty words or promises – especially not from me. Not now. My crimes are too numerous, my betrayals too fresh.' His sword hummed out, drawing blood and howls of agony from the enemy. He set his staff and lightning crackled from the tip, arcing out to smash into the ranks of beastmen. Contorted bodies were flung high into the air, to land smoking on the churned earth.

'Then you should have hidden your crimes better,' she snapped. Teclis almost snapped off a retort, but held his tongue. Though she had given the last of her power to slow the blight of Chaos, Lileath was still one of the ancient gods of elvenkind. And she was still the closest thing he had to a guide on the path he now trod.

In fact, it had been Lileath who had first set him upon that path. It was her staff he wielded, and her strength which had flowed through it, once, into him. As a goddess, prophecy had been amongst her gifts, and she had foreseen the End Times, and perceived the shape of their coming, long before his birth. It was she who had warned him of Aenarion's curse, and how it would twist Tyrion and doom their people. It was she who had convinced him of Malekith's legitimacy, and the need for the Incarnates. And it was she who had shown him how to bring Tyrion back from death, and what sacrifices would be required.

It had all been Lileath, and he had performed every task to her expectation save one – he had not been able to control the winds of magic. The shattering of the vortex had failed, and now the eighth wind was lost, somewhere in the east. If he strained his senses, he could feel it, just barely. It had found a host, he knew, though what sort of host he couldn't say. What he did know was that the Incarnate of Beasts was steadily moving west, pulled by the same sorcerous signal which had drawn the other Incarnates. But the host, whoever or whatever it was, would not reach them in time. Not unless they went out to meet it.

Then, united, the Incarnates could throw back Chaos once and for all. Or so Lileath had assured him. Even now, however, he wasn't sure. He watched her as they fought, studying her. Her determination was inhuman, greater than any save perhaps Nagash's, but was it truly bent in service to his cause? Was she truly fighting for the elves, or was there some other game being played? Some deeper purpose that the once-goddess had not seen fit to share with her servant.

His mouth twisted into a frown. Was that all he was now? A servant of fate? The thought did not sit well with him. Fate had ever been his enemy, from the first moment he had learned of the curse that had lurked in his and Tyrion's bloodline. Without thinking, he sought out his brother. As ever, Tyrion was deep in the maelstrom of battle, his form glowing brightly as he rode Malhandir through the press, striking down beastmen with every blow. The Emperor rode beside him on his screeching griffon, and though the human did not glow with power, his sword, and the claws and beak of his beast, took an equal toll.

The two were accompanied by Imrik and his fellow Dragon Princes, who crashed and swirled through the enemy ranks like lightning. The finest cavalry in all of Ulthuan, it was all but impossible to force them to maintain proper battle order. The Bretonnians too had joined with them, carving out a trail through the heart of the warherd. And above the massed charge flew Caradryan and his Phoenix Guard. The captain unleashed torrents of flame which burned only beastmen, and spared elves, men and trees alike.

And still, it was not enough. Teclis could feel the awful pulse of dark magics which hissed through the blood of the enemy. The Children of Chaos had ever been the fodder of the dark armies, and they had been called to Athel Loren in their thousands, united at last in common cause. They were not meant to succeed, he knew. They were but chaff, sent to die and keep the last redoubt under siege, until the Everchosen bestirred himself to launch a final attack.

The question was, why hadn't Archaon yet launched that attack? Why did he still sit north of the Grey Mountains, rather than flowing down and engulfing Athel Loren in fire and steel? Why not make an end of it?

There was something they were missing, some piece of the puzzle not yet fitted into place. Frustrated, Teclis whirled his staff over his head and brought it down. Crackling talons of lightning shot forth, catching nearby beastmen in their grasp. The creatures fell, wreathed in smoke. *What have we missed?* he thought. He heard the sound of a signal horn, and saw the Dragon Princes and the Bretonnians retreating. They flowed through the ranks of spearmen, who formed up behind them as the beastmen pressed forwards. He could hear elf nobles shouting out orders up and down the lines. They were buckling, and there was nothing anyone, even the Incarnates, could do. *And will we survive long enough to find out?*

He saw Imrik's standard bearer gallop past. The spearmen were falling back in good order, covered by bowmen and Alith Anar's Shadow Warriors as well as the dwarf Thunderers, but there were too many bodies in white and silver left behind. The battle-line was swinging inwards, folding in on itself as the press of the enemy became too great. Teclis set his staff, and readied a spell. It would not end here, but they would lose the Silvale Glade, and the enemy would draw ever closer to the heart of the forest-kingdom.

Then, a wash of cold, foul air filled the glade. The beastmen, once braying in triumph, began to edge back, suddenly uncertain. Teclis turned, and felt his blood turn to ice in his veins. Nagash had at last decided to act. The Great Necromancer had stood at the rear of the army, accompanied by Arkhan the Black, seemingly content to do nothing more than observe. But now, the Undying King moved slowly to the centre of the glade. The bodies of the dead twitched and stirred as he moved through them, and moaning souls were drawn in his wake. His nine books thrashed in their chains and snapped like wild beasts.

A minotaur charged towards him, roaring. Nagash's claw snapped out and caught the creature by the throat. Without slowing, or any visible effort, he broke the beast's neck and slung the body aside. Horns sounded and the elves retreated, streaming back from the liche. Teclis forced himself forwards. He doubted Nagash needed any help, and he wasn't inclined to offer it besides, but he was curious about what the Incarnate of Death was planning.

Nagash raised his staff in both hands, and brought it down. The ground groaned, and a circle of dead grass spread out from the point where the staff touched. Amethyst light blazed through ruptures in the soil. It grew brighter and brighter, and where it passed, beastmen died in untold numbers. Hundreds fell in moments, and fear swept through those who survived. Soon, those that the light hadn't touched were fleeing back into the trees. The herd was broken. Teclis released a shuddering breath.

Nagash lowered his staff and turned.

'IT IS DONE.'

'You... have our thanks,' Teclis said. Silence had fallen over the glade in the wake of Nagash's spell. Nagash strode past him without reply. Arkhan fell in step beside him. Vlad hesitated. He looked around, a slight smile on his face, and sheathed the sword he'd been holding. The vampire looked as if he'd participated in the fighting, at least.

'Well, I trust you're now seeing the benefit to our presence,' the vampire said. He grabbed Lileath's hand and bowed low. 'My lady,' he murmured. He released her and nodded to Teclis. 'Loremaster,' he said. Then he straightened, turned on his heel, and strode after Nagash.

'Though you did not choose him, I am forced to admit he is impressive,' Lileath murmured. She cradled her hand to her chest, and for a moment, Teclis wondered whether she was talking about Nagash or Vlad.

'I would be more impressed if he'd done that to begin with,' a harsh voice said. Teclis turned to see a familiar figure clad in blue and silver armour approaching, leading a horse in his wake.

'Well met, Imrik,' Teclis said. The Dragon Prince of Caledor looked as tired as Teclis felt, and worse besides. His once-proud bearing was bent beneath the weight of exhaustion, and his fine armour was hacked and torn and covered in gore. Imrik nodded curtly.

'The beasts are retreating, for now at any rate,' he said. His voice was hoarse from strain. He pulled off his helmet and ran a hand through his sweat-matted hair. 'They will return, though. In a matter of days, if not hours.' He turned his helmet over in his hands. 'There are more of them every time. It is as if every beast left in the world has gone mad, and come to Athel Loren.'

'You're not far wrong,' Teclis said. He looked up at the blistered sky, where the clouds seemed to congeal into leering faces which came apart as soon as he caught a glimpse of them. 'The Dark Gods muster their strength for some final blow – one which I fear will fall here, and soon.' He looked at Imrik. 'Can you hold them, if they come again?'

Imrik looked away, across the glade. 'Yes,' he said, after a moment. 'After that, however...' He trailed off. He shook his head. 'Your brother fought well, mage. He helped turn the tide here, as he did when the daemonspawn attacked the Oak of Ages. Hard to believe... what he was. It is almost as if it didn't happen.'

'Is it, Prince of Caledor? I find it all too easy to remember,' Teclis said. He watched as Tyrion picked his way through the carnage, sword held loosely in his hand. Even now, suffused by Light, he looked as if he belonged nowhere else.

'Aenarion come again,' Imrik said. 'And gone as quickly.' He looked at Teclis. 'Something must be done, mage. And soon... My forces are bled white while the Eternity King consorts with savages and worse things,' he muttered, casting a wary glance at Nagash.

'I know,' Teclis said. He leaned against his staff. His limbs felt like lead. 'I know.'



ELEVEN



Somewhere beneath the Eternal Glade

Mannfred's eyes opened slowly. He had not been sleeping. His kind did not sleep, no matter how much it might have passed the time. He had been thinking, plotting his course should the opportunity for freedom present itself.

There were few paths open to him. Sylvania was a trap that would be his unmaking, if he dared cross its borders. Neferata would send his fangs back to Athel Loren without hesitation. The rest of the world was being consumed in a conflagration the likes of which even he had never seen, and he had no intention of dying alone and forgotten in some hole. No, there was only one route that promised even a hint of a chance at victory.

Middenheim, he thought bitterly. *Middenheim*, the heart of enemy territory. Having been rejected by his allies, he had no place to go but the arms of his former foes. Would they welcome him? He liked to think so. How could they not? Was Mannfred von Carstein not a pre-eminent sorcerer and tactician, a master of life and death? And did he not know many valuable secrets?

Indeed I do, he thought. So many secrets, including the presence of the goddess of the moon herself. He smiled cruelly. His brief association with the branch wraith Drycha had yielded much, including the revelation that the Lady so assiduously worshipped by the Bretonnians was, in fact, the elven goddess Ladielle, albeit in disguise. And since Ladielle had kindly revealed that she and Lileath were one and the same, in the King's Glade earlier, it wasn't hard to see the weapon such information could be in the right hands.

But first, he would have to escape. And he judged that the opportunity to do so had just presented itself. A faint stirring of the air had brought him fully alert, and now his gaze roamed the shadows. There was a new smell on the air, indefinable but nonetheless familiar. Something was watching him. 'I smell you, daemon,' he said, acting on a hunch.

A shape moved out of the shadows on the other side of the bars. Great wings folded back as a horned head bent, and a voice like the grinding of stone said, 'And I smell you, vampire. You stink of need and spite.'

'And you smell like an untended fire-pit. What's your point?' Mannfred asked. 'I'd heard that the elves had chased you out of the forest with your tail between your legs, Be'lakor.' He gestured. 'They cast you out, as is ever your lot. It must get tiring, being thrown out of places you'd rather not leave. Shuffled aside and forgotten, as if you were nothing more than an annoyance.'

Be'lakor cocked his head. 'You are one to speak of being forgotten, given your current situation,' the daemon murmured.

'True, but you have fallen from heights I can but dream of,' Mannfred said. 'Be'lakor, the Harbinger, He Who Heralds the Conquerors, the Foresworn, the Dark Master. Blessed at the dawn of time by all four of the dark powers, you ruled the world before the coming of the elves. And now look at you... a shadow of your former glory, forced to scabble for meaning as destinies clash just out of reach.' He smiled. 'One wonders what victory you seek here, in my guest quarters.'

'No victory, vampire. Merely curiosity,' Be'lakor said. 'And now that I have satisfied that, I shall take my leave.' The daemon prince turned, as if to vanish back into the shadows. Mannfred recognised the ploy for what it was. For an ageless being, Be'lakor had all the subtlety of a brute.

'Free me, daemon,' Mannfred said.

'And why would I do that, vampire?' Be'lakor asked. He stopped and turned. 'Will you promise to serve me, perhaps?' Obsidian claws stretched out, as if to caress the roots of Mannfred's cage. 'Will you sign yourself over to me, and wield those not inconsiderable powers of yours at my discretion?'

Mannfred laughed. 'Hardly.' He smiled. 'I know you, First Damned. I know your ways and your wiles, and our paths have crossed more than once. I saw you slip through the streets of comet-shattered Mordheim, and I watched from afar as you tried to break the waystones of a certain foggy isle in the Great Ocean. Your schemes and mine have ever been woven along parallel seams, though until now we have not met face to face.' Mannfred sniffed. 'I must say, I wasn't missing much.'

'You mock me,' Be'lakor rumbled.

'And you mock me, by implying that you would free me in return for my loyalty. We both know that such an oath, made under duress, would be no more binding than a morning mist.'

Be'lakor's hideous features twisted into a leer. 'Even if it were not made under duress, I would no more trust you than I would trust the Changer of Ways himself. You are a serpent, Mannfred, with a serpent's ambition. Power is your only master, and you ever seek it, even when it would be wiser to restrain yourself.'

'Ah, more mockery... Be'lakor, hubris made manifest, warns me of overreach. Did I not say that I know you, daemon? I have read of your mistakes, your crimes, and you are the last being who should warn anyone of the perils of ambition. There is a saying in Sylvania... grave, meet mould.' Mannfred chortled. 'I leave it to you, to decide which you are.'

'Are you finished?'

'I'm just getting started. I have nothing but time here, and nothing to do but to sharpen my wit. Shall I comment on your many failures next?'

Be'lakor growled. Mannfred subsided. He sat back, and smirked at the daemon. He'd planned to provoke the creature into attacking, and thus freeing him, but he had the sense that Be'lakor was too canny for such tricks, despite his lack of subtlety. 'No, instead, I think I shall offer thee a bargain. A titbit of some rare value, in return for thy aid in shattering the cage which so cruelly detains me.'

'And what is this bibelot, this morsel, that I should exert myself so?'

'Oh, something of great value, for all that it is but a small thing... a name.' Mannfred cocked his head. 'Much diminished, this name, but valuable all the same, I think.'

'Speak it,' Be'lakor said.

'Free me,' Mannfred replied.

'No. Why should I? What good is this name to me?'

'Well, it is not so much the name as the soul upon which it hangs. A divine soul, Be'lakor. One which has supped at the sweet nectar of immortality, but now is but a mortal. Helpless and fragile.'

'A god,' Be'lakor rasped. The daemon's eyes narrowed. 'The gods are dead.'

'Not all of them. Some yet remain.' Mannfred stepped back. He spread his arms. 'One, at least, is here, in this pestilential forest. Hidden amongst the cattle.'

'A god,' Be'lakor repeated, softly. The daemon's features twisted. Mannfred could almost smell the creature's greed.

'An elven god,' he said. 'One whose blood, mortal or not, contains no small amount of power, for one who knows how to extract it. I had considered it myself, but, well...' He motioned to the cage. 'I will gladly offer their identity in exchange for but the simple favour of cleaving these pestiferous roots which do bind me.'

Be'lakor was silent for a moment. Then, with a gesture, a sword of writhing shadows sprouted from his hand. He swept the blade across the bars, and Mannfred clapped his hands to his ears as he heard the trees which made up his prison scream in agony. He made to leave, but found the tip of Be'lakor's blade at his throat. 'The name, vampire.'

'Lileath, goddess of moon and prophecy,' Mannfred said, gingerly pushing the blade aside. It squirmed unpleasantly at his touch.

'Where?' Be'lakor growled.

'That was not part of the bargain,' Mannfred said. 'But, as I am an honourable man, I shall tell you anyway. The King's Glade. She sits on the Council of Incarnates, and listens to their bickering, no doubt plotting some scheme of her own.'

Be'lakor grinned. Then, in a twist of shadow, the daemon prince was gone. Mannfred sagged. Free of the deadening effect of the magics, he suddenly realised just how weak he truly was. Hunger gnawed at him.

He heard the rattle of weapons, and realised that Be'lakor's destruction of the cage had roused the guards. Mannfred smiled, and as the first elf entered the chamber, he was already in motion, jaw unhinged like that of a serpent and claws sprouting from his fingertips. He bowled the elf over with bone-shattering force and tore the spear from his grip. He hurled it with deadly accuracy, spitting the second and driving her back against the wall. With a growl, he tore the helm from the first guard's head and fastened his jaws on the helpless elf's throat.

Pain lashed across his back, even as he fed. He turned, jaws and chest stained with blood, and twisted aside as the sword came down again. The elf pursued him as he slithered away. Mannfred caught the blade as it stabbed for his midsection, and hissed in pain as the sigils carved into its surface burned his flesh. He drove the claws of his free hand into the elf's throat and tore it out.

He fed quickly, knowing that more guards were on their way. When he had supped his fill from each of the guards, he fled into the labyrinth of roots, taking care to keep to the shadows and to hide himself from the spirits which haunted Athel Loren. Freed of his cell, his magics had returned, and he had little difficulty in reaching the surface.

As he reached the open air, he tilted his head and sniffed. Escape was his most pressing concern, but he hesitated. He had been betrayed and humiliated. All of the plots and schemes he had concocted in his confinement came rushing back, and he savoured them. No, it wouldn't do to leave without saying goodbye. Nagash was beyond the scope of his powers. But he could still poison the well.

Which one will it be? he thought, as he glided through the trees, moving swiftly, conscious of the alarms which were even now being raised. The Incarnates were all, like Nagash, beyond him, though he hated to admit it. That left only certain individuals. And only one whose scent was close at hand.

Mannfred smiled as he set off in pursuit of his quarry. *How appropriate*, he thought. *Maybe fate is on my side after all.* If nothing else, it might prove amusing to take Be'lakor's prize off the table before the daemon got a chance to claim her. And if in doing so he could rend his faithless former would-be allies from a safe remove, all the better. Moving swiftly, he navigated the ever-shifting trails of the forest, avoiding the kinbands likely dispatched to bring him to heel, until he found the one he sought.

And then, with the surety of a serpent, he struck.



Duke Jerrod rose to his feet and spun, his sword flying from his sheath and into his hand. The point of the gleaming blade came to rest in the hollow of Mannfred von Carstein's throat. 'Do not move, vampire, or I will remove your foul head,' Jerrod said.

The Council of Incarnates was squabbling again, arguing over which course of action to take. He'd hoped that the battle with the beastmen would have seen them united at last, but such was not to be. Even as they'd returned to the glade, arguments had started anew. While Hammerson seemed to take a perverse pleasure in watching such rancorous discussion, Jerrod no longer had the stomach for it. It reminded him of the last days in the king's court, before Mallobaude's civil war. An enemy on the horizon, and all of them more concerned about getting their own way. Even demigods, it seemed, were not immune to foolishness.

He had been kneeling in the glade, praying to the Lady, asking for some sort of sign which might show him the way, when he'd heard a stick snap beneath the vampire's tread. Mannfred smiled and spread his hands. 'Why would I move, when I am where I wish to be, Duke of Quenelles?' He stepped back slowly, and bowed low. 'At your service.'

'I doubt that,' Jerrod said. He kept his sword extended, ready for any attack the vampire might make. His blade had been blessed by the Lady herself, and would cut through magic and flesh with equal ease. That said, he felt little confidence that he could do much more than distract the creature before him until aid arrived. Even in Bretonnia, the name of von Carstein was a watchword for savagery and death. 'I did not expect you to escape. Few make it out of the depths of Athel Loren alive.'

'Well, I'm not really alive, am I?' Mannfred said. His smile slipped. 'I am not much of anything now.' He paused, as if gathering his thoughts, and said, 'We are two of a kind, you and I... lords without lands, deceived by those we placed our trust in, and fought for.'

'We are nothing alike, vampire,' Jerrod said. A part of him screamed for the vampire's head. The creature deserved death for his crimes. But another part... He blinked. 'What do you mean "deceived"?' he asked, without thinking.

Mannfred pulled his cloak tight about him. 'You do not know, then. How unfortunate. But how in keeping with the selfishness of such creatures, that even now, when you have sacrificed so much, she still refuses to tell you.'

'She,' Jerrod said. He knew who the vampire meant. *Lileath*, he thought.

As if he'd read Jerrod's thoughts, Mannfred nodded. 'Yes, you know of whom I speak.' He frowned. 'I come now to warn you, Duke of Quenelles, as I wish I had been warned. A final act before I depart this malevolent grove, to perhaps rectify at least one wrong in my misbegotten life.'

'Say what you have come to say, beast,' Jerrod readied his sword. 'And be quick. I hear the horns of Athel Loren sounding in the deep glades. Your jailers will be here soon.'

Mannfred glanced over his shoulder, and then back at Jerrod. 'Lileath of the Moon, and Ladielle of the Veil,' he said. 'I knew I had heard those names before, secret names for a secret goddess. A goddess of the elves... and of men.'

Jerrod hesitated. 'No,' he said, softly.

'Oh yes,' Mannfred said. He stepped close as Jerrod's blade dipped. 'They do like their amusements, the gods. How entertaining it must have been for her to usurp the adoration of your people, and mould you like clay.' He leaned close, almost whispering. 'Just think... all of the times you've sworn by the Lady, well, she was right there, within arm's reach. She heard every prayer, witnessed every deed.' Mannfred grabbed his shoulder. 'And said *nothing*.'

'No,' Jerrod croaked in protest. But it all made a terrible sort of sense. He could feel the connection between them, though he had not known what it was. And why else would the Lady have fallen silent, save that she was no longer the Lady, and had no more use for Bretonnia? He lowered his sword. For the first time in his life, he felt unsure. It was a strange feeling for him, for he'd never doubted himself before, not in battle or otherwise. But now...

He turned. Mannfred was gone. He shook his head. It didn't matter. The vampire wasn't important. Only the truth mattered. *He was lying, he had to be*, he thought as he hurried towards the King's Glade. But what he'd felt when he'd first laid eyes on her and every time since. The way she would not meet his gaze. The way she had stepped between him and Malekith. *Lying, oh my Lady, let him have been lying*, he thought.

No guards barred his way, for which he was thankful. He burst into the glade where the council was being held. His sudden appearance had interrupted Malekith's latest snarling rant, and all heads turned towards him. All save one.

'Lileath,' he said hoarsely. 'Face me, woman.'

Silence fell over the glade. Malekith waved his guards back to their positions. The Eternity King slumped back into his throne, and said, 'Well, face him, Lileath. Give the ape what he wants and maybe he'll slink back off to wherever he goes to hide when someone raises their voice.' Jerrod looked at him, one hand on the hilt of his sword. Malekith sat up. 'Ah, I was wondering when he'd figure it out,' he said softly, glancing at Alarielle. 'Such dim-witted beasts. Unable to recognise divinity, even when it is right beside them.'

'Be silent,' Hammerson barked. The dwarf stepped towards Jerrod, ignoring Malekith's sputtering outrage. 'Lad, what is it?'

'I know her name now,' Jerrod said. Hammerson frowned, but before he could speak, Lileath turned.

'And who told you that, Duke of Quenelles?' she asked.

'Is it true?' Jerrod replied.

'There are many truths,' Lileath said, after a moment's hesitation.

Malekith laughed bitterly. 'This is pointless. I shall have my guards remove the ape and the dwarf both. How are we expected to proceed with such distractions?'

'Proceed where?' Hammerson said. Thumbs hooked in his belt, the dwarf scanned the faces of the Incarnates. 'It's been weeks, and all you've done is given yourselves a pretty name. Even the great councils of Karaz-a-Karak move faster than this, when the enemy is on our doorstep. Distraction – pfaugh.'

I'd think you'd welcome it.' He patted the hammer stuffed through his belt. 'And I'll crack the skull of the first elf to lay a hand on me or the lad here.'

'There is no need for skull-cracking, Master Hammerson,' Lileath said. 'I shall speak to Jerrod alone, away from the council, if he wishes.' She looked at Jerrod and a wash of images flowed across the surface of his mind, memories and dreams, and for a moment, he was tongue-tied, humbled by her presence. He wanted to kneel.

Instead, he turned and began to leave. Lileath followed. They left the glade where the council met, and walked in silence to a nearby grove. For a while, the only sounds were those of the forest. The quiet shudder of branches, the rustle of leaves. And then, the sound of a sword being drawn from its sheath.

'Is it true?' Jerrod said.

'As I said...' Lileath began.

'No,' he croaked. 'No, do not play the mystic with me. I am only a man, and I would know whether or not my life has been a lie. I would know whether my people died for the games of a goddess not even our own.'

'Who told you this?'

'What does it matter?' Jerrod snarled. 'All you have to do is say that it is untrue. Say that you are not the Lady, and I will apologise. I will renounce my seat on the council, and we shall ne'er meet again. But *tell me*.'

Lileath was silent. Her face betrayed no anxiety, only calm. 'I do not deny it,' she said. Her voice was icy. 'Indeed, I am proud of it. I am proud of what I made of your primitive forebears.'

'You used us,' Jerrod said. 'We were but pieces on a game board, dying for a cause that did not exist.' He raised his sword. 'We thought you were our guiding light, but instead you were merely luring us to our doom. Now the best of us are dead, and the rest will soon follow.'

'There was no other choice,' Lileath said. 'Prophecy was my gift, and I foresaw the End Times at the moment of my birth. I needed an army, and your people provided one.'

'Why us?'

Lileath looked away. 'Asuryan would never have countenanced the creation of a new race. Not after what was provoked by the crafting of the elves.' She turned and swatted aside his sword with her staff. 'I chose your forefathers to serve a greater purpose. I drew them up out of the muck, and gave them nobility and honour second only to that of the elves. Without the codes and laws that I gave you, your ancestors would have wiped each other out, or else been trampled into the muck by orcs or worse things.' She extended her staff, nearly touching his chest. 'Make no mistake, human. What you have, your honour, your lands, your skill, all of that is my doing. You owe me your life and loyalty, whether I be Lady or Ladielle. And I make no apology for collecting on that debt.'

Jerrod heard a low, animal sound and realised it was coming from him. His sword arm trembled with barely restrained fury, and his blood thumped in his temples. The point of his blade rose. 'You are no goddess,' he whispered. 'You are a daemon.'

'No,' Lileath said. 'No, I am merely one who does what must be done.' She lowered her staff. 'It was necessary, Jerrod.' Her voice lost its ice, and became sorrowful. Her poise crumbled, replaced by resignation. 'The world is doomed. But that does not mean that hope is lost. There is a world – a Haven – where life may yet continue, even as this one is consumed in the fires of Chaos. Without Bretonnia's sacrifices, I could not have created it. Surely that is worth something?'

She stepped towards him. Her hand stretched out, and Jerrod flinched back. 'Listen to me,' she pleaded. 'This war could never have been won. Not by you, or any of your brothers who died in service to the Empire, or in the civil war. But part of them, part of those who died, lives on in my Haven, protecting it from the evil which even now seeks to infect it. Even now, the spirits of your brothers, of all the knights who have ever died in service to the Lady – to me – fight on for a new world. A better world.'

'So even in death, you use us as weapons?' Jerrod said. A chill crept through him. 'Even our ghosts know no peace?'

Lileath dropped her hand. Her eyes were sad. 'What is a knight, but one who sacrifices for others?' she said, softly.

Jerrod stepped back. 'Small consolation, given that you were the author of that creed,' he spat. He shook his head. 'Is that all, then? Is that the story of us? Dogsbodies in life and death, serfs to immortal masters who see us only as weapons to be used and discarded?'

'Is that not what one does with serfs?' Lileath said.

Jerrod said nothing. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Why was he here? Had it all been for nothing? Lileath sank down to her knees, her skirts pooling about her. She bowed her head. 'If you do not believe me, then kill me, Jerrod, Duke of Quenelles. Kill me for what I have done. I ask only that after your honour – the honour I instilled in you – has been satisfied, you hold true to your oath and fight beside the Incarnates. Fight to hold back the darkness, so that a new world may be born.'

Jerrod hesitated. Then he raised his sword, taking a two-handed grip. He was ready, in that moment, to bring it down on Lileath's head. It was too much for him. The whole of his world, the philosophy by which he and all of his people had lived their lives, was nothing but a goddess's gamble. A game between inhuman forces, in which he and his were but pawns, raised up and spent with no more thought than a child might give to her toys.

'Why?' he croaked. 'Why did you do this to us?'

'I have already told you,' she said, softly. 'Saying it again will not help you understand. I made your people into the point of my spear, and used you as such. And now, you have turned in my hand, and your tip rests above my heart. Strike if you must.' Lileath looked up at him. 'But I would have your oath, before you do.'

'I... no,' he said. 'No, no more oaths, no more lies.'

'You will give me your oath,' Lileath continued, as if he had not spoken. 'You will swear to me, Jerrod of Quenelles, that you will fight alongside the Incarnates. That you will die for them, as you once might have died for me. You will swear this.'

'I will not,' Jerrod said. 'No more games of death on your behalf, or on the behalf of any other. You have broken us, ruined us, and my course is set. I...' He trailed off. The blade in his hand trembled. Before his eyes, he saw the faces of every slain Companion, and every fallen friend and family member. They had believed, and they had died, thinking that the Lady was watching over them. Instead, it had all been nothing more than a cruel hoax by a goddess who cared nothing for her people, or his.

But something held him back. Some tenuous strand of the man he had been, before Lileath had broken his certainties. Some small part which whispered to him that the deed he contemplated was unworthy of him. That to kill her, was to prove her right. To prove that her meddling and scheming had been necessary... That his people would never have found the light without her.

Jerrod looked down at her. He met her cool, alien gaze and said, 'You're wrong.'

Lileath blinked. Jerrod lowered his sword. 'You're wrong,' he said again. 'We owe you nothing. It is you who owe us, and you will not get out of our debt so easily.'

Lileath's eyes widened. She made as if to speak, but no sound passed her lips. She snatched up her staff and rose to her feet so quickly that Jerrod thought she meant to attack him. Then he heard the snap of great wings, and knew that Lileath hadn't been looking at him. He spun, and saw a dark shape explode from the shadows of the glade. Though he had never seen the creature before, Lileath clearly recognised it.

'Be'lakor,' she spat.

'Yes,' the daemon thundered as he charged forwards. 'I have come for you, fallen goddess. You denied me once, but now I will have both your soul and the Haven you boasted of for my own.' Wreathed in smoke and darkness, the daemon prince charged towards Lileath, shadow-blade raised, the glade shaking beneath his tread.

There was no time to think, no time to fear. Instinct took over. Jerrod stepped forwards, between the daemon and his prey. Be'lakor's sword smashed down against Jerrod's upraised blade, and the knight's arm went numb from the force of the blow. For all that the creature seemed barely substantial, it had a strength greater than any he'd ever known. Be'lakor's hell-spark eyes widened and his wings snapped, pushing him aloft. Leaves swirled about Jerrod, caught in the updraught as the daemon rose into the air.

He wished briefly that he'd thought to bring his shield. Then Be'lakor was dropping towards him, shadow-blade extended like a spear. Jerrod readied himself to meet the creature's attack but at the last second Lileath shoved past him, her staff in her hands. She raised it, and bolts of blinding light lanced from its tip to strike the approaching daemon. Or they would have, had they not passed through Be'lakor's form like arrows punching through fog. Jerrod reached out and grabbed the goddess by her shoulder, flinging her aside as Be'lakor swooped down over them.

He caught the creature's blow on his sword once again, and pain pulsed through his shoulder joint. As he stumbled, Be'lakor's free hand sliced towards him. The creature's black talons tore bloody furrows in his face and hurled him to the ground. Jerrod skidded backwards through the mud and fallen leaves. He slammed into a tree and rolled onto his face, struggling to suck air into his abused lungs. He was blind in one eye, and his cheek felt like a punctured water skin. Everything hurt, and thin rivulets of what could only be his blood crept across the ground.

With a groan, he levered himself up onto one knee. Using his sword, he tried to push himself to his feet, but his arms lacked strength. Be'lakor strode slowly towards him, trailing fire and smoke. 'Why do you fight?' the daemon prince gurgled. 'I heard all that passed between you, mortal. Your goddess has

used you as badly as my gods once used me. She raised you up, and cast you down when you were of no more use.'

'While I can stand, monster, I will fight,' Jerrod groaned. He made to rise again, but his strength was gone. He toppled backwards. Be'lakor studied him for a moment. Then, with a grunt, the daemon lifted one clawed heel and slammed it down on Jerrod's left leg. Jerrod screamed as the force of the blow split his armour and pulverised the flesh and bone beneath.

'Now you cannot stand.' Be'lakor smiled. 'Do not feel obliged to interfere further, mortal. This is a matter for demigods.' Seemingly satisfied, the daemon prince turned away. Jerrod rolled awkwardly onto his side, and tried to pull himself towards his fallen sword as the creature closed in on Lileath.

Her eyes were closed, and spirals of glowing white energy began to form about her. Those spirals lashed out at Be'lakor as he drew close, and he bellowed in agony as wisps of his shadow thinned to nothing or were plucked from his body. Snarling, Be'lakor brought his blade down, smashing the staff from Lileath's hands and knocking her to the ground. 'You think to banish me?' Be'lakor roared. He smacked a fist into his chest. 'I am the First Damned, and older than any exorcism or rite of banishment. I have more right to stride this world than you, and I will not be cast out – not now, not ever!'

Jerrod's fingers closed on his sword. Biting back a scream, he plunged it into the ground and used it to haul himself upright. He lurched on his good leg, using the sword as a crutch, his eyes locked on Be'lakor's broad back.

Lileath scrambled away, her eyes wide. Be'lakor laughed. 'Is that fear I see in your eyes, little goddess? Prophecy was once your gift... Did you see this moment? Have you feared it all of this time? Is that why you offered your neck to the ape, so that you might escape your destiny?' He reached for her. 'Take it from one who knows, woman... There is no escaping destiny. There is only pain. Inevitable and unending.'

Lileath shied back from his outstretched talon, and Be'lakor leaned in. But he immediately reared back with a wail of pain as Jerrod lunged and slammed his sword into the daemon prince's back. Be'lakor thrashed wildly and Jerrod lost his grip on his sword, falling heavily to the ground. He rolled aside as Be'lakor's foot came down. The daemon prince's screams threatened to burst his eardrums, and he clapped his hands to the side of his head as the sound rose to agonising heights.

With a howl, Be'lakor finally tore the sword free of his back and flung it aside. But before he could move to finish its incapacitated wielder off, he was distracted by an ear-splitting roar that shook the trees to their roots. Large talons slammed into the daemon prince and knocked him sprawling.

The black dragon landed in the middle of the glade, giving vent to a second roar, louder than the first. Jerrod saw Malekith perched on the beast's back, sword in hand and a shroud of shadows curling about his lean frame. Be'lakor scrambled to his feet with a snarl and whirled as if to flee, but a thunder of hooves made him hesitate. A figure glowing as brightly as the sun hurtled into the glade and cut off the daemon's path of retreat.

Jerrod stared as Tyrion urged his horse up. The light which poured from the elf-prince incinerated the shadows which made up Be'lakor's form. The daemon prince reeled, and his body shrank and twisted, losing mass. Be'lakor lunged away from the newcomers and dived towards the welcoming shadows beneath the trees.

Malekith gave a sharp, mocking laugh and gestured. The shadows about Be'lakor seemed to twitch and stretch, and the daemon prince snarled as he was dragged backwards. He fell, clawing at the ground for purchase, but to no avail. Even as he struggled, chains woven from light snagged him by his limbs and wings and horns, imprisoning him. The daemon was like a child before the power of the Incarnates, and soon, Be'lakor, who had thought to seize a goddess, had himself been made a prisoner.

Jerrod saw Lileath running towards him, and he wanted to speak, but no words came. Darkness crowded at the edge of his vision, and he fell back into oblivion, accompanied only by the frustrated shrieks of the First Damned.



TWELVE

 *King's Glade, Athel Loren*

Gotri Hammerson chewed on his cold pipe and stared into the dark. The sounds of celebration had died away quickly after Jerrod had entered the vast glade where the Bretonnians and the other refugees from Averheim had made camp. Now, there was no noise at all, as people retired to their cold meals or ragged tents and the glade fell into darkness. But it was no darker than a mineshaft, and so Hammerson sat and thought.

The duke had survived, but only thanks to the efforts of Athel Loren's healers. Even so, he was crippled, missing a leg and an eye. And all to save an elf woman who was not what she seemed. Hammerson sighed and adjusted his posture. He'd waited to welcome the lad back with the rest, after hearing of his heroism. But Jerrod had been in no mood for celebration or exultation. He had taken his men and retreated to the far edge of the glade, away from the other refugees and the Zhufbarak. Now the great camp was quiet, and Hammerson sat in the dark, wondering what had happened.

It was the elf's doing, he knew that much. Whatever else, he knew he'd been right to warn Jerrod away from her at the start. You couldn't trust elves, especially ones who claimed to have been goddesses. He tugged on his beard, wondering what he should do, or if he should do anything at all. Was there even anything he *could* do?

His hand fell to his hammer as he smelt warm metal and forge-smoke. He didn't look around as someone eased out of the dark to sink down beside him. 'The manling will live, then?' a rough voice asked. It was a voice such as the mountains might have spoken with.

'He will,' Hammerson said, after a moment.

'That is good.' There was a flash of heat, as a pipe was lit. 'They're fragile, humans.'

'But brave.'

'Aye, they are that. Too brave. Too rash.' Hammerson's companion puffed quietly on his pipe for a moment before continuing. 'Then, maybe these are the days for the foolhardy among us. The days of sealed holds are done. There will be no barred gates strong enough to resist what is coming, I fear.'

Hammerson turned to look at the white-bearded dwarf. Even now, a hood obscured his features, and he had his great, single-bladed rune-axe balanced on his knees. 'Is this to be it, then? Is there no hope, old one? Are our people to vanish into the hungry dark, unmourned and unremembered?'

'Aye,' the old dwarf said, softly. Then, he smiled and reached out to clap a heavy hand on Hammerson's shoulder. 'But we'll not go alone, lad.' He heaved himself to his feet, axe in hand. 'We'll march proudly into the dark, son of the Black Water, axes sharp and shields raised. We'll make the enemy pay for every inch of ground, and water the roots of the world to come with their blood, young Hammerson. That I swear.'

And then he was gone, as if he'd never been. Hammerson did not look for him. Grombrindal went where he wished, and no dwarf, daemon or god could hinder or follow him if he did not wish it.

'Who was he?' a voice asked.

'Who was who, manling?' Hammerson turned. 'I was wondering where you were. Not in a celebratory mood?' he asked.

'Not as such,' Wendel Volker said. 'I think they're planning to leave.'

Hammerson looked at the man. 'And why would you think that?'

'I heard Jerrod say as much, when I was eavesdropping,' Volker said. He held up a small cask as Hammerson glared at him. The little barrel was some unlucky dwarf's personal supply of drink, designed to hang from his belt or the inside of his shield. 'I didn't mean to. I was just going to get this,' Volker said, shaking the cask.

Hammerson's glare intensified. 'Is that one of ours?'

Volker popped the plug on the cask and took a swig. He smacked his lips. 'Yes,' he said, handing it to Hammerson. 'I got it off poor old Gorazin, after that last fight with the beastmen. He wanted me to have it.' The dwarf shook his head and accepted the cask. He took a long pull and handed it back.

The liquid burned going down. 'Gorazin knew his Bugman's, I'll say that for him,' he muttered. 'Not done, giving an ancestral cask on to a manling, though. Remind me to admonish him, when we get to the halls of the ancestors.'

'How am I going to do that? Seeing as I'm not a dwarf, I doubt I'll be going to those particular halls, lovely as they sound.' Volker took another swig.

'You've drunk enough Bugman's over the past few weeks to be a dwarf. I think the gods will overlook your abnormal height,' Hammerson said. He stuffed his pipe back into his armour and added, 'Did you come out here just to get a drink, or did you have something to say?'

'The council requires your presence. Or so the wizard says,' Volker said, stuffing the plug back into place. He belched and rose to his feet. 'Gelt convinced the rest of them that the daemon should be interrogated. The wizard thinks knowing what Archaon's up to might help the council come to some sort of decision. They're about to question the beast. Gelt thought you'd like to be there for it.'

'Aye, that I would,' Hammerson said. He rose to his feet and gestured. 'Lead on.'

When they reached the King's Glade, Be'lakor had already been brought before the council. The daemon prince had traded his chains of light for shackles of silver and starlight, and he looked the worse for wear, surrounded by the levelled halberds of Malekith's Black Guard. Be'lakor knelt at the centre of the ring of heavily armoured elves, his body shrunken and battered. His wings had been clipped and broken, and one horn had been smashed. The elves had not been gentle on their captive.

Not that I blame them, Hammerson thought as he and Volker joined the Emperor and Gelt. The dwarfs too had their stories of the Shadow-in-the-Earth, and his fell deeds were carved into the record of grudges for many a clan and hold. It was said that Be'lakor had been responsible for the destruction of Karak Zhul, among other crimes.

Malekith reclined on his throne, Alarielle beside him. Tyrion stood to the left of them, and Caradryan to the right. Teclis and Lileath stood at the foot of the dais. The latter looked hale and healthy for a woman almost stolen away by a daemon, Hammerson thought. Then, maybe the gods of the elgi were made of sterner stuff than gossamer and moonbeams. Nagash, as ever, stood away from the rest, accompanied only by Arkhan the Black and Vlad.

'I heard the other vampire escaped,' Hammerson murmured, looking at Gelt. 'Slipped clean away in all the confusion.'

'He can't have got far,' the Emperor said. 'Athel Loren is a trap from which there is no escape, I'm told.'

Gelt shook his head. 'You don't know Mannfred. He's escaped, otherwise Vlad wouldn't be here,' he said, nodding towards the vampire. 'If Mannfred were still loose in this forest, Vlad would be on his trail. That he's here instead...' He shrugged.

'What's one more monster loose in the world, eh?' Hammerson said. He fell silent as Malekith rose from his throne.

The Eternity King looked down at Be'lakor. 'Well, beast. What have you to say for yourself? I would have thought that you'd have learned your lesson when you came for the Oak of Ages and we sent you scuttling off back into the dark.'

Be'lakor looked up, eyes smouldering with hatred. 'Did you ever learn from your many, many attempts to conquer Ulthuan, Witch-King?' Be'lakor looked at Teclis. 'Or did you have to wait for someone to do it for you?' The daemon prince laughed.

'At least I accomplished it in the end,' Malekith said. 'You, unfortunately, have been descending ever further into cosmic irrelevance with each passing century. Look at you – you're barely a ghost now. Just a flickering blotch at the corner of my vision, a whisper easily ignored.'

Be'lakor looked at the halberds pointed at him. 'You do not seem to be ignoring me.'

'No,' Alarielle said. She did not rise, but her voice commanded immediate attention. 'You have made that impossible, beast. You must be dealt with.'

'And yet here I kneel,' Be'lakor growled.

'Destruction is far too merciful for a creature like you,' Malekith said. He glanced at Lileath as he spoke. 'Besides, who knows how long you've been flitting about, listening to our councils? Why send you back to the Realm of Chaos, where your dark spirit would merely inform your masters of what you've learned?' Malekith gestured derisively. 'No, I think we can do better than that.'

Be'lakor laughed. 'I do not fear you.'

'*THEN YOU ARE A FOOL,*' Nagash said. '*LONG HAVE I BEEN CURIOUS AS TO THE DURABILITY OF CORPOREAL MANIFESTATIONS SUCH AS YOURSELF. HOW MUCH IS FLESH AND HOW MUCH IS THOUGHT? I SHALL DISCOVER THE ANSWER AT MY LEISURE. AND YOU? YOU WILL HOWL.*'

Be'lakor stared at the liche, as if trying to gauge the truth of his words. Then he laughed. The sound was a bitter one, full of malice but also resignation. It was the laugh of a master who had met his match. 'I know you, Nagash of Khemri. I saw you place yourself on your father's throne, blood still wet on your hands. And I know that you will do as you say, and worse besides.' He looked at Malekith. 'What must I offer, to escape the tender mercies of the Lord of the Charnel Ground?'

Gelt stepped up. 'Information, daemon. We wish to know why the Everchosen sits in Middenheim, and allows beasts to lay siege to this place. Why has he not come himself?'

'Perhaps you're just not that important,' Be'lakor said. Malekith gestured, and the shadow-stuff which made up Be'lakor's form writhed for a moment. The daemon shrieked and shuddered. Malekith lowered his hand, and Be'lakor sagged, panting. The daemon prince laughed weakly. 'It is the truth,' he hissed. He looked at Gelt. 'Three times, I have sought to pre-empt the Everchosen's successes with my own, and three times I have failed. But there will not be a fourth. So I will speak. I will tell you all that I know.'

He shoved himself to his feet. The Black Guard stepped back as one at Malekith's gesture, giving the creature room. Be'lakor looked around. 'Archaon has no reason to come to Athel Loren, for he already has what he desires – what the gods themselves desire. You think them directionless. You think them to be mad, idiot intelligences, but they are anything but. There is purpose in the random, and direction in the storm. The destruction of your petty Empire was never the goal,' he said, leering at the Emperor. The latter didn't so much as bat an eye, and Hammerson felt his respect for the human grow.

'The gods care little for the slaughter of nations, or the deaths of kingdoms. Oh, they dine well on the souls offered up so, but Middenheim is the true prize. Middenheim, and what lies beneath it,' Be'lakor continued. His eyes strayed to Volker and the daemon twitched back. Volker shuddered and made a low sound in his throat, but the Emperor placed a hand on his shoulder, calming him. Be'lakor blinked, and said, 'There is an artefact there, a device from an earlier age, before the coming of Chaos. Even now, Archaon works to excavate it.'

'What sort of artefact?' Teclis demanded, voice hoarse. Hammerson was startled by the elf's expression. He had never known one of that race to ever show such raw horror so openly before. The mage was white-faced and trembling.

'One which, if certain rites are performed, will detonate. It will create a rift in the fabric of your colourless reality. A rift to equal those which occupy the poles of this broken world.' The daemon prince smiled. 'So you see, you are not important, for you have already lost.'

'Well, I don't see it,' Hammerson blurted out. 'What is this overly talkative soot-stain hissing about?' He looked at Gelt, who shook his head helplessly.

'It means the end of everything, dwarf,' Teclis said. 'The end of the world.'



Teclis sagged. He felt as if his strength were but a memory. Everything he had done, every sacrifice he had made... all for nothing. He felt Lileath reach out to steady him, but he flinched away from her. He forced himself up, and looked around. Every eye was upon him now, waiting for answers only he could provide. Answers that he did not wish to provide. He closed his eyes and cleared his throat. 'The Loremasters of Hoeth theorised that our world only survived the coming of Chaos because a terrible equilibrium formed between the two polar rifts. They cancelled one another out, and became stable. But if a similar rift is opened in Middenheim, with no counterbalance...' He trailed off, unable to get the words out.

'*THE WORLD WILL BE CONSUMED,*' Nagash said.

'It might take years, or days or mere moments,' Teclis said. 'But if that rift is called into being, if it hasn't already been called into being, the end is certain.' He looked around. Horror and fear was etched onto every face.

I did this, he thought. If he hadn't taken the Flame of Ulric, Middenheim might have withstood the siege. Tyrion would be dead, but the world might have survived. He had sacrificed everything to resurrect his brother, and now it was all for nothing. The world was doomed regardless. He closed his eyes and pressed his head against his staff. *My fault,* he thought. *Forgive me, please.*

When he opened his eyes, he saw the man, Volker, staring at him. The human's eyes had gone yellow, and something terrible and lupine was superimposed over his own features. It was invisible to the others, he knew, save perhaps Lileath and Nagash. But the godspark was there, crouched in the dark of Volker's soul, waiting. The wolf-god met his gaze and licked his chops. Teclis shuddered and looked away. No wonder the god persisted. Teclis had bet the world and lost, and now his debt was fast coming due.

'*THE ARTEFACT MUST BE SEIZED,*' Nagash rasped.

'Middenheim is too far, liche,' Malekith said. 'Too much territory to cover, and too many enemies between us and it. The worldroots have withered, and we do not have the manpower to make such an invasion feasible.' The Eternity King sank back into his throne. 'The daemon is right. We lost this fight before we even drew our blades.'

Silence fell. Teclis tried to think of something. He had always had a plan, even in the darkest moment. But nothing came to him now. There was no path to take that did not lead to destruction. He felt a hand on his back, and turned as Lileath stepped past him. She was shaking slightly, and he wondered again what had passed between her and Jerrod, before Be'lakor's attack. He had had no time to ask, and he doubted she would tell him.

'Impossible or not, it must be accomplished,' she said, her voice cold and hard. 'The artefact must be destroyed. Together, you have the power to do it, and to thwart this madness before it overtakes us all.'

'Were you not listening, woman? There is no way,' Malekith snarled. He thumped his throne with a fist. 'We do not have the troops or the time.'

'Then use magic to make up for both,' Lileath said coolly, not looking at him.

'I know such magics – I used them to help us escape Averheim – but I cannot transport so many such a distance,' Gelt said. 'And even if I could, to unleash such magics in close proximity to the rift might prove disastrous. We might precipitate the very catastrophe we hoped to stop.'

'Nonetheless, it must be done,' Lileath said. 'There are no more options. There is only this path, this certainty – if we do not act, the world dies.'

'The world is already dead,' Be'lakor said. 'You merely seek to postpone its burial.' He looked up at Malekith. 'Well, Witch-King? Have I bargained for my life satisfactorily?'

Malekith sat silently for a moment. Then he laughed harshly. 'Oh yes, I'd say so. You will have life, of sorts.' He gestured. 'You shall be broken on the Anvil of Vaul, daemon, and sealed in ithilmar.' He looked at the Everqueen.

Alarielle reached up, and plucked a ruby from her crown. She handed it to Malekith and said, 'This ruby shall be your cell. The essence of you shall be sealed within its facets, once my... husband has cracked your bones and stripped you of your flesh.'

If Malekith had noticed Alarielle's hesitation in referring to him as her husband, he gave no sign. Instead, he held up the ruby and continued, 'Thus bound, you shall be sealed away, deep beneath the Glade of Starlight, in a prison of root and stone which shall outlast even the Rhana Dandra. You shall live, in the dark and the quiet, while the world lives or dies about you.' Malekith leaned in. 'Your story is done, daemon. It has come to its final ignominious conclusion.'

Be'lakor snarled and made as if to lunge up the dais, but the halberds of the Black Guard flashed and the creature fell, squealing. He cursed and screamed as he was dragged away, Caradryan and Malekith following in his wake to see to his imprisonment. Teclis watched them go. The council had broken up without making a decision, but he had expected as much.

'Fools,' Lileath said, watching as the Incarnates drifted away to discuss events with their advisors and allies. 'Can they not see what is made plain?'

Teclis did not reply. He took a deep breath. The air was thick with the dry smell of changing seasons, as winter overtook the forest. Finally, he said, 'You told me that we could win. Is that still the truth?'

Lileath looked away. 'No.'

'Was it ever the truth?' Teclis asked softly.

Lileath looked up. 'I knew from the first that this doom would come upon us.' She laughed bitterly. 'What sort of prophet would I be otherwise?'

'You lied to me,' Teclis said, fighting to keep his voice even.
'You told me once that you could not fight without hope,' Lileath said. She looked at him. 'So I gave it to you. I needed you, Loremaster.'
He felt sick. 'It was all for nothing then.'
'Not at first,' Lileath said. She spoke hurriedly, her words clipped and forceful. 'By the sacrifices you made, I wrought a great working – a Haven. A place of safety that would have seen your people – *our people* – through the coming storm.' She smiled sadly. 'But... I cannot feel it any more.'
'What happened to it?'
She turned away. 'I do not know. Maybe it still exists. Maybe the Dark Gods found it, and have already consumed it and the untold souls within, including my brave Araloth and... our child. My daughter.' Her voice cracked. 'I cannot feel my daughter, Teclis.'
Teclis stood helplessly as she began to weep. Then, without a word, he turned and walked away.



'You will not stay, then?' the Emperor said, as he helped Jerrod onto his horse. 'Your sword will be missed, Duke of Quenelles.'
It had been several days since Be'lakor's interrogation and imprisonment. The elven healers had done what they could in that time for Jerrod, but the marks of the daemon's claws remained. His face was a ruin, one eye covered by a ragged length of cloth torn from a standard. His leg was almost useless, a lump of dead meat held together only by his armour. Even so, Jerrod felt he had got off lightly.
Jerrod looked down at the other man, and smiled sadly. Volker and Hammerson were there as well to see the Bretonnians off. The dwarf looked glum, and Volker looked drunk. Jerrod thought it was appropriate, seeing as they'd looked much the same when he'd first met them. He shook his head. 'We cannot stay. I have told you why.' He looked out at the western edge of Athel Loren, where the trees grew thin and gave way to the vastness of Quenelles, and felt his heart grow heavy.
'I know,' the Emperor said. He reached up and clasped Jerrod's forearm. 'And I do not begrudge you your anger. I hope... I pray that you find some sanctuary in this world, Jerrod. I hope your people survive and flourish, and that one day, we again feel the ground tremble beneath the hooves of the true sons of Bretonnia.'
'Thank you, my friend,' Jerrod said. The Emperor nodded and stepped back. Jerrod looked at Volker and Hammerson. 'Goodbye, my friends. It has been an honour to fight beside you. Both of you.'
Volker clasped his hand, and stepped back to join the Emperor without speaking. Hammerson glared up at Jerrod for a long moment. Then, with a sigh, he said, 'If you ever have need of the Zhufbarak, lad, you have my oath that we will come. So long as your kith and kin exist, we shall stand at their side.'
'And will you lead them, then?' Jerrod said, smiling.
'If I don't die in the next few days, certainly,' Hammerson said. He hesitated, and then patted Jerrod's leg. 'Maybe I'll even make you a new leg, eh?'
Jerrod laughed softly. 'I look forward to it, Master Hammerson.'
Hammerson nodded tersely and stepped back. Jerrod watched the three of them return to the forest, and did not feel slighted at their departure. There were plans to be made and a war to be won or lost. But it was not his war, not any longer. The elves had lied to them, and no knight in his company wished to fight alongside those who had used them so.
Before he could set his horse into motion, however, he heard the drumming of hooves, and turned to see four riders approaching out of the dark. He tensed as he recognised Vlad von Carstein in the lead. 'Well met, Duke of Quenelles,' the vampire called out, as he drew close. 'Might I have a word, before you leave?'
'A quick one,' Jerrod said brusquely.
'I wished to impart a story I heard, not long after my resurrection,' Vlad said, dismounting as his steed drew up beside Jerrod's. 'I think you'll find it interesting.'
'I do not have time for stories, vampire.'
'You have nothing but time,' Vlad said. 'And this is no ordinary story. It is about a monastery.' Jerrod blinked in confusion, but said nothing. Vlad leaned forwards. 'There is said to be a monastery, somewhere in the Grey Mountains, where Gilles le Breton has decided to make his stand,' he murmured. 'I had it from the mouth of one who rides with us now – a mad creature, whom your folk knew as the Red Duke.' He turned and gestured to one of the other riders. Jerrod looked past him, and met the malignant gaze of a nightmare out of legend. The Red Duke sat proudly in the saddle of his skeletal steed, one hand on the pommel of his infamous blade. At first, he scowled at Jerrod, but then, after a moment, he dipped his head in a gesture of respect. Jerrod returned the nod before he could stop himself. He looked back at Vlad.
'In that place, it is said that your king fights beside a knight garbed in crimson, in defence of what remains of your people,' Vlad went on.
'A red knight...' Jerrod murmured. He looked at Vlad. 'He is one of your kind. Like... the Duke. Like you.'
'No. Not like that sad, mad warrior or like me. Abhorash is the best of us,' Vlad said softly. 'He owed a debt to your king, and swore an oath, and while he fights, Bretonnia lives. In some small corner of your shattered land, the heart of all that was Bretonnia *survives*.'
'Why do you tell me this?' Jerrod asked hoarsely.
'Because I know that it was Mannfred who broke your faith, and set you at odds with Lileath. And because I too know what it is like to lose everything. To lose your home, your people, even your gods.' Vlad turned away. 'I would not wish it on anyone.' He looked back at Jerrod and smiled. 'Even a man who, under other circumstances, would be doing his level best to remove my head.' He stepped back. 'The Red Duke knows the way. He will lead you to your people, if they yet live. And two others will go with you, to see that you and your men arrive safely, and that your guide does not... get out of hand. Erikan Crowfiend and Elize von Carstein, a daughter of my blood and a son of the Bretonni. They are old, and strong in the ways of our kind.'
Jerrod looked at the other two vampires, on their mummified steeds. One was a haughty-looking, crimson-haired woman, the other a dishevelled, broad-faced man. Their steeds stood so close together that the knees of their riders touched. As Jerrod watched, the man took the woman's hand. He blinked, and looked down at Vlad.
'You can trust them. And when you reach your sanctuary, tell Abhorash that...' Vlad hesitated. He laughed and shook his head. 'Tell him that he was right, in the end.'
'About what?' Jerrod asked, without thinking.
Vlad chuckled and turned away, pulling his cloak tight about himself. The vampire hauled himself into the saddle and rode away, leaving Jerrod staring after him. After the vampire had vanished, Jerrod turned. His people waited. He looked at the Red Duke.
'Well?' he asked, softly.
The creature turned his skeletal steed about. 'West,' he growled. 'To the fires beyond the horizon, and into the mountains.' With a shout, the vampire kicked his mount into a gallop. The other vampires shared a look, and then followed suit.
Duke Jerrod, the last son of Quenelles, inhaled the clean air of Athel Loren one last time. Then he spurred his horse into motion. And the knights of Bretonnia followed.



The Winterglade, Athel Loren

'I should not be here,' Eldyra of Tiranoc said. Even marred as it was by a predator's rasp, her voice was still a thing of beauty. Measured and graceful, more so than any human could hope to mimic. 'I have no right to this place.' She looked from side to side slowly, staring at the trees and the shadows. 'Not any longer.'
'And who told you this?' Vlad said, softly. He walked beside her, hands clasped behind his back, seemingly at ease. In truth, he was as nervous as she, for Athel Loren contained dangers even for creatures like himself. Nonetheless, he felt a sense of satisfaction. After the revelations of the council, it felt good to accomplish something, anything. Even if it was only honouring an old debt.
He wondered if the Bretonnians would make it. He hoped so. There was little enough nobility in the world, and for it to pass away entirely was not something he wished to see happen. *What might you have made of them, Abhorash, if you had not made that oath?* He smiled. What might he make of them still?
Too, it was good to know that at least one of his bloodline might survive the coming conflagration. Whatever else happened, the von Carstein name would not die. *Oh Isabella, you would be so proud of your little Elize*, he thought, and then frowned. He rubbed his neck where Isabella's blade had hacked his head from his shoulders, only a few months before, and thought of his loving paramour and the twisted fate which had befallen her. The gods were

cruel, and cunning. They had snatched Isabella's soul from Nagash's grasp, and brought her back. They had bound her tortured soul up with that of a daemon of plague and pestilence, in an act equal parts malice and mockery, and set her loose on Sylvania.

It was that attack which had roused Nagash, and convinced the Undying King that he required allies. And it was that attack which had convinced Vlad of his course. In order to save Isabella, he had to save the world. And that meant making alliances, and binding together the separate strands of the remaining forces opposed to the Ruinous Powers, whether they liked it or not. And the only way to convince them to stand together was to give them hope that there would be a world, come the morning.

Of course, it would be helpful if I believed that, he thought sourly. In the attack, he and Isabella had met, and she had killed him. Granted, it wasn't the first time Isabella had stuck something sharp in him, but it was the first time she'd done so with such an excess of malice. He growled softly, and pushed the thought aside. The Dark Gods wanted him to agonise over her fate, to falter and hesitate. But he was not one to crumble beneath the pangs of loves lost or imperilled. He loved her, and he would do what he could to save her. He would free Isabella one way or another, even if he had to take her head to do it.

That was one lesson Mannfred had never bothered to learn. Loyalty went both ways. He owed as much to those of his bloodline as they did to him. Thinking of Mannfred gave him pause to wonder where his former disciple had vanished to. That he had escaped Athel Loren was obvious. As to where he had gone, well, he had had several days to get there. Vlad pushed the thought aside. Mannfred was a problem for another day, if another day ever dawned.

'No one had to tell me I wasn't welcome here,' Eldyra hissed. She wheeled about, perfect features cracked and uncertain. The beast poked through her bones. Then, it was never very far from the surface in elves. They were as savage as any barbarian hillman, for all the airs they put on. Perhaps even more so. He smiled.

She had been waiting at the edge of the forest while he saw the others off. Given the events of the council, he'd thought it best to clear up all lingering questions, debts and worries. One needed to be free of mind to properly enjoy a cataclysm, after all.

'Then how do you know? Does your flesh burn? Does your soul cringe? If not, then there is no bar to your presence here. Indeed, I had hoped that a walk through these woods might even soothe your unquiet spirit somewhat.' Vlad gestured airily about him.

Eldyra stared at him. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead turned away, hugging herself. Vlad frowned and reached for her. She whirled and slapped his hand aside. She hissed, eyes red and wild. Vlad backed away, hands held out in a pacifying gesture. 'You have not fed. The beast is harder to control when you are starving.'

'Blood will never cross my lips,' she spat.

'It already has, otherwise you wouldn't be in this situation, my dear,' Vlad snarled, letting his own mask slip. 'And if you continue down this path, you will lose what little sanity remains to you.' He spread his arms. 'We do not die of starvation, princess of Tiranoc. We merely shed our skins, like snakes, losing all pretence of humanity. *Vargheist*,' he said. He gestured. 'Too much feeding, the same. Varghulf, then. The beast is always lurking, just below the skin. It rages like a fire, and like a fire, it requires careful tending.'

'Better to snuff it entirely, then,' she croaked. She looked down at her hands. 'I will not be a slave to darkness.'

'You are not a slave. You are one of night's dark masters,' Vlad said. He held out his hand. 'Take my hand, and I will teach you, as I have taught so many. You have been given a gift, and I would not see it go to waste.' Eldyra strode past him. He laughed and caught up with her. She needed to be taught, even as Isabella had. As they all did. And he had brought her here, so that she might speak to the only man who might help her learn.

They found Tyrion in a clearing, but he wasn't alone. The Emperor stood beside him. They were speaking quietly as they watched the burning sky. He held up a hand, and Eldyra halted. Her eyes were fixed on Tyrion, and she trembled slightly. Vlad gestured for her to remain silent. Despite the distance, he could hear their conversation as clearly as if he stood beside them.

'I see little cause for hope,' Tyrion said.

'Meekly spoken, for one who has returned from the dead,' the Emperor said. Tyrion glared at him. Vlad smiled. *A point for the man without a kingdom*, he thought.

'It will take more than clever words to survive the coming doom,' Tyrion said. 'Even for you, god-king.' Vlad blinked. Had that been a turn of phrase? If so, it was surely an odd one. Vlad cocked his head, considering. There was something about the Emperor, it was true... Vlad felt a vague sense of unease whenever he drew too close to the man. As if there were some force within him which threatened the vampire's very existence. Until now, he'd put it down to the lingering traces of the magic which had reputedly been torn from the Emperor. But what if it were something else?

'That is why you and I must persuade the others to go to Middenheim,' the Emperor said. 'Lileath is right. Archaon must be stopped. At any price.'

'The city lies many weeks' march away, through territory swarming with foes. Do you honestly believe that we can prevail against such odds? Even with the aid of our... allies, it will be almost impossible.'

The Emperor grunted. 'I shall not sit back and wait for death.'

Tyrion was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head. 'No. Nor shall I. To Middenheim we shall go, then. And whatever fate awaits us there.'

'Not immediately, one hopes,' Vlad said, smoothly.

Tyrion and the Emperor turned, and Vlad winced. The elf glowed with an internal light that was almost impossible to bear. He heard Eldyra whimper, and clamped a hand on her shoulder. 'Stand, for his sake, if not your own,' he murmured. Still clutching her, he bowed low. 'My Emperor, I have come before you, seeking a boon.'

'I was under the impression that your master was Nagash,' the Emperor said, with what might have been a slight smile on his face.

'Ah, but a man may have many masters,' Vlad said, straightening. 'Some, even, by choice.' He smiled ingratiatingly. 'I am Elector of Sylvania, am I not? Indeed, I fancy I am the last elector, besides your gentle self, my lord.' Vlad's smile turned feral. 'Aye, if you were to die I would, by default, become emperor, would I not?'

'No, you would not,' the Emperor said.

'No?'

Karl Franz smiled. 'The emperor must be elected by a majority of electors.' His smile turned hard and cold. 'The dead, unfortunately, do not have a vote.'

Vlad frowned. He was about to reply, when Tyrion said, 'Why are you here, vampire?'

'I believe you know my companion, O mighty prince,' Vlad said, stepping aside. Eldyra twitched, as if she might flee.

'Eldyra,' Tyrion said, softly. She froze, quivering. She took a hesitant step. Tyrion, his face sad, held out his hand. 'I feared you dead, sister of my heart.'

'I am dead,' she hissed. Her fangs flashed in the moonlight. 'I died in Sylvania. I failed and died, cousin. And now I pay the price.'

Tyrion said nothing. He merely held out his hand. Eldyra hesitated. Then, she reached out and took his hand. Vlad watched as Tyrion led her off, out of earshot. The Emperor looked at him. The human showed no fear, no disgust. Only curiosity. Vlad was impressed. The Empire had improved the calibre of its aristocracy since he had last walked abroad, he thought. 'Why did you bring her here?' Karl Franz asked.

'What else could I do?' Vlad said. He shrugged. 'She is of no use to me as she is. Maybe he can make her see sense.'

'Meaning to accept her fate,' the Emperor said, looking at Tyrion and Eldyra. 'To surrender to the curse which has been thrust upon her. To give herself up, like a lamb to the slaughter.'

'No,' Vlad said. 'To fight. To live!' He shook his head. 'We all must make sacrifices if we are to survive. She has only two paths before her – acceptance or madness. And the world is mad enough already.'

'There are always other paths,' the Emperor mused. Vlad made to reply, when he heard the sound of a sword being drawn. He turned, and his eyes widened. Eldyra knelt before Tyrion, her head bowed. Tyrion stood over her, sword raised, his face expressionless.

'No,' Vlad snarled. He reached for his sword, but froze as he felt the edge of the Emperor's runefang slide beneath his chin. Karl Franz had drawn the blade so swiftly, so silently, that Vlad hadn't noticed.

Before he could react, Tyrion's blade fell. Vlad closed his eyes and looked away. Anger pulsed through him, but he fought it down. He looked up, at the Emperor. 'Why?' he growled.

'She asked me to,' Tyrion said. Vlad turned to him.

'You had no right. She was mine,' Vlad hissed. 'She was of my blood.'

Tyrion sank down beside the body, which was beginning to smoke and crumble into ash. He drew his fingers through it, and sent it swirling into the air. 'She was my friend,' he said, after a moment. 'How could I refuse her?' He looked at Vlad, and the vampire turned away, raising his cloak to cover his face as the light seared him. 'Go now, Vlad von Carstein. You have my thanks, for what it is worth.'

'I do not require your thanks,' Vlad spat.

'You have it, all the same,' the Emperor said. He sheathed his blade. 'You will find us in the King's Glade tomorrow, as ever.'

Vlad backed away. 'Yes, another day of acrimonious indecision ahead of us. How thrilling.' He stopped as the Emperor looked at him.

'No. No, one way or another, tomorrow will see the path ahead made clear. I expect to see you there, Elector of Sylvania.' The Emperor turned away, and placed his hand on Tyrion's shoulder.

Vlad hesitated. He had seen something there, a shadow-shape superimposed over the man's frame, a giant made of starlight and the sound of clashing steel. Part of him wanted to kneel and swear fealty to the thing. Another part, the oldest part and the wisest, wanted nothing more than to run away. Vlad listened, and fled.



THIRTEEN

 *The Silvale Glade, Athel Loren*

Prince Imrik, once of Caledor, now of Athel Loren, coughed as the tainted smoke clawed at his lungs. Smoke from the pyres stained the sky, and a film of ash clung to everything in the glade. As fast as they burned the bodies of the beastmen, new pyres had to be lit. The creatures came again and again, heedless and mad.

Nagash's display had only scared them off for a few days. They had returned, in greater numbers, driven forward by inhuman impulse. The entire glade stank of that madness, and whole seas of blood had been spilled. Whatever else happened, the glade would never recover from the carnage which occurred beneath its boughs.

How did it all come to this? The same thought had rattled in his mind since Ulthuan had broken apart and vanished into the hungry ocean. Could it have been prevented? Could any of it have been changed?

Imrik did not think so. At least not by him. He knew who was to blame, whose schemes had unravelled the very thread which bound their world together. But there was no refuge in recrimination. And revenge – well, there was no time for that either. Whatever Teclis had done, he had done because it had seemed the right thing to do. Imrik knew what that was like well enough. He had made similar decisions himself.

He had joined Malekith's side during the war for the promise of dragons, and unity in the face of the storm seeking to devour them all. He had sacrificed his own ambitions on the altar of necessity, on the advice of a ghost. Caledor the First had spoken to him in his dreams, and showed him what must be done. Tyrion had gone mad, his mind and soul subsumed by Khaine. Malekith was the lesser of two evils, and whatever else, he was the true heir of Aenarion. Too, he had glimpsed chinks of nobility gleaming through the calloused soul of the Eternity King. In those moments, he knew that Malekith was the only one who could lead the elves into a new, better world.

Unfortunately, the world seemed to have other ideas. Horns sounded, and he signalled his men to regroup. The beasts were coming again. 'Archers to the rear, spears to the fore,' he roared. The tactic lacked elegance, but it had served them well so far. Arrows thinned the herd, and the spears did the rest. He and his knights would break any knot of beastmen too strong to fall to arrow or spear. *Like Vul at his anvil*, he thought, with grim amusement. He readied himself, testing the weight of his lance. He looked around at his knights.

They were the finest knights in the world, survivors of the battle at the Isle of the Dead. To an elf, they looked tired, worn down. Only duty sustained them. Imrik had long ago run out of words and speeches. He met the eyes of the closest of the knights, and said, 'Princes of the Dragonspine, ride with the speed of Asuryan, and fight with the valour of ages.'

He turned back to the battle as the first herds burst from the treeline. They pelted full-out, with no discipline or order or hesitation of any sort. Arrows flew, and those first herds died. Imrik sat up in his saddle. There was something different this time. There was something on the air, some thickening of the light and stink of battle. He looked up. Red clouds roiled above the trees, as they had for weeks. Some said that they could see faces in those clouds, but thankfully, whatever lurked in the sky had never revealed itself to him. His horse grew restive, pawing at the earth. Its eyes rolled in fear. He reached down to stroke the animal, and found it was trembling.

The din of battle grew muted and faint, but a new sound quickly intruded. It was as if all sound and fury had been drawn to a single point and squeezed into a throbbing pulse. Imrik saw an arrow take a beastman chieftain in the throat. As the arrow sank into the hairy flesh, it seemed to reverberate with a sound like thunder.

And then, with an ear-splitting crack, the world burst asunder.

The ground churned as the blood-soaked meadows ran like water drawn into a whirlpool. Trees were uprooted and smashed, and beastmen exulted as they were swept away by the bloody tide. Those elves closest to the writhing vortex of blood and darkness tried to scramble back, out of reach of the ground that snagged and grasped at them. Some made it, some did not. 'Fall back,' Imrik roared. 'Fall back!'

The beastman assault had ended, but he could feel the earth screaming, and knew that something much worse was coming. His horse stamped and whinnied in terror, but he held tight to its reins. Whatever it was, it would not find Imrik of Caledor a coward.

Horned figures, red and lanky, burst from the roiling firmament and threw themselves at the collapsing battle-line of the elves. They were joined by baying daemon-hounds, and behind them came shapes even more monstrous – larger than any minotaur, with wings and horns and great roaring voices which called down the blessings of the Blood God.

Imrik shouted orders, but it was no good. There was no discipline, only fear, and his army bent in two and broke as the daemonish horde smashed through their centre like the tip of a blade. He urged his horse forwards, through the broken ranks of fleeing elves. *King's Glade, they're heading for the King's Glade*, he thought. He had to stop them, though he knew not how. His knights followed, picking up speed as the army dissolved around them. Imrik lowered his lance and pointed his charger towards the largest of the daemons.

His lance splintered as it struck the creature, and it reeled with an angry bellow. But before his steed could carry him past, Imrik found himself smashed from the saddle by a fist the colour of dried blood. He hit the ground and rolled, his body convulsing with pain. He coughed blood as he tried to rise, but his legs refused to work. He struggled to draw air into his bruised lungs as he clawed weakly for his sword.

A heavy weight came down on his back, pressing him flat to the ground. He was enveloped in the stink of butchery and slaughter, and could only glare up at the being holding him down. 'You are not the one I seek, little elf,' the bloodthirster growled. 'And anyway, the Lord of Pleasure has claim on your pathetic soul. But you struck a blow, and for that, I give you your life, such as it is. Take it and run, and do not seek to put yourself between the Blood Hunt and its prey.' Then, with a triumphant roar, the beast sprang into the air, its powerful wings flapping.

Unable to move, wracked with pain, Imrik could only watch in horror as the daemonish tide flooded towards the King's Glade.

 *The King's Glade, Athel Loren*

'Then we are decided. Middenheim must be taken,' Lileath proclaimed. The elf woman stood in the centre of the glade, staff in hand, the focus of every eye and thought. 'Even if it costs our lives to do so.'

Gotri Hammerson let out a sardonic cheer. He had anticipated another day of acrimonious wrangling, but had been pleasantly surprised to find that the Incarnates were, for once, of one mind. Even Malekith and Nagash had no objections to raise. Privately, Hammerson wondered whether it had been the departure of the Bretonnians which had motivated the accord. The absence of Jerrod and his men further reduced the forces available to the council, should the need for battle arise. They couldn't take the chance that others – like the Zhufbarak – might follow suit.

You might have done us a favour, lad, though you'll be sorely missed, he thought. He glanced up to find the Emperor looking at him. The man had a slight smile on his face as he turned away, and Hammerson shook his head. He knew for a fact that Karl Franz had visited most, if not all, of the Incarnates the night before. *Was that why you didn't stop him from leaving, then? Did you need a pair of tongs to stir the fire with?*

He was a cool one, was the manling Emperor. He moved people like pieces on a board, and was always two or three moves ahead. Not that it had helped him at Averheim. Nonetheless, he was more formidable than the dwarf had expected. Hammerson looked at Vlad von Carstein where the vampire stood, as ever, beside Nagash. He recalled what the creature had said in the Silvale Glade, and he snorted. *You'll have a hard time supplanting that one, blood-sucker, elector or no. He's already divided your loyalties, and you don't even realise it.*

Suddenly, alarm-horns sounded from the outer glades. Hammerson looked around, one hand following to his hammer. The air in the glade grew thick, and he could taste smoke and ash in the back of his throat, though he was nowhere near a fire. He saw Gelt stagger, and reached out to steady the human. 'What is it, lad?' he growled.

'My... my head,' Gelt said, cradling his skull. 'I can feel it – feel them!'

Hammerson whipped around as Alarielle screamed and fell from her throne, to collapse on the dais. Both Malekith and Tyrion went to her side. 'What in the name of Grímnir is going on?' he snarled.

The glade was filled with a sound like tearing metal, and then a body flew into the glade. It crashed down, broken and bloodied. Hammerson recognised it as having been one of the ceremonial guards stationed outside the glade. Even as the body struck the ground, the air was filled with the stamp of cloven hooves and howls of eagerness. Nightmares made flesh streaked into the glade, before the dead guard's body had even settled or the echoes of Alarielle's scream had faded.

The daemons loped towards the dais, steaming blades bared, seeking flesh. And then they combusted into crackling ash as Tyrion rose to his feet, drew his blade and seared them from the fabric of the world with a blinding wave of light. Caradryan was the next to act, his halberd spinning in his grip, creating a vortex of hungry flame which enveloped another group of daemons and reduced them to greasy motes on the air.

Even before the ashes of the Incarnates' victims had settled, a chorus of howls announced the arrival of a second, larger wave of daemons. The creatures burst into the glade from all sides, tearing through the undergrowth. Black blades glistened in the crimson hands of the hissing bloodletters as they loped towards their intended prey.

Caradryan flung out a hand and a wall of flame roared to life, catching a score of bloodletters in mid-leap. Some of the daemons survived the flames, however, and they came on, skin aflame. Caradryan set his feet and swept out his Phoenix Blade, killing one even as the rest bowled him over.

Hammerson was about to go to his aid, when he heard a screech and saw the elf's firebird plummet into the glade like a flaming comet. The great bird tore the daemons from its master, flinging them across the glade, and Caradryan sprang onto the animal's back as it swept back towards him.

'Master Hammerson, to your left,' the Emperor shouted, as his runefang snaked out to block a blow that would have taken his head. Hammerson turned and caught a descending blade on the crossed hafts of his weapons.

He forced the bloodletter's blade aside and rocked forwards, slamming the front of his helmet into the creature's snarling features. The daemon shrieked and fell back, clawing at its face. 'Why bother putting runes on your helmet, Gotri?' Hammerson said, mimicking the voice of the runesmith who'd trained him. 'That's why, you old goat,' he spat, as he cut the bloodletter's legs out from under it and crushed its skull with his hammer.

The Emperor fought beside him, his steel caked in daemonic ichor. The human fought in silence, moving with the precision of a hardened veteran.

Though the power he'd once wielded had been ripped from him, he was no less a warrior. Hammerson felt a moment of pride as he watched Karl Franz fight, and knew that he had made the right choice in staying. This was a man who was worthy of a dwarf oath. Even if he did ride an oversized buzzard.

Hammerson glanced at the dais as lightning flashed over his head. A nimbus of light played about Tyrion's head and rippled from his blade to scour daemons from existence. Beside him, Teclis swept his staff out, wrenching lightning from the air and sending it snarling outwards to throw back the encroaching daemons. Near the twins, Malekith wielded his own magics, shadow-claws tearing at daemonic flesh.

As the tide of daemons pressed in, intent on reaching the Incarnates, the three were forced to fight back to back to protect the unconscious form of Alarielle. In that moment, all differences, all past conflicts, were forgotten and the last of Aenarion's bloodline fought as one against an enemy as old as time itself.

Hammerson shook his head and smashed a leaping daemon-hound from the air, before he spun to crush the skull of another with his axe. 'Come on, filth! Come and taste the steel of Zhufbar!' he roared, clashing his weapons. 'Though the Black Water might have fallen, her people still fight – come and take what you've got coming to you.' The runes on his weapons flared and the air became as hot as a forge, to burn and blacken the flesh of the scuttling daemons. They fell twitching and squealing, and he finished them off quickly.

More took their place. They charged towards him, howling out hissing prayers to the Lord of Skulls, and Hammerson felt a twist in his gut. There were too many for him to fight alone. But he set his feet and hunched forwards. 'You want me? Come and get me,' he muttered. Before the first of the creatures could reach him, however, he heard a scream and felt a breeze. A massive wing smashed the daemons aside as the Emperor's griffon, Deathclaw, landed in the glade. Hammerson glanced nervously up at the beast as it prowled past him, tail lashing. That nervousness faded as he saw more daemons bounding forwards. The griffon crouched, and Hammerson knew that even with the beast at his side, they'd be hard pressed. He looked up as a shadow fell across him, and saw Arkhan the Black, mounted atop his monstrous steed.

The liche seemed unconcerned with the battle raging below him. 'A little help?' Hammerson bellowed. Even as he spoke, he knew his words were futile. To such a creature, he was likely more use dead than alive. Arkhan turned away, as if the conflict below bored him. A knot of daemons burst past Deathclaw and flung themselves at the runesmith. Hammerson was knocked sprawling, his weapons flying from his hands. He drove a bunched fist into a leering face, and felt a flush of satisfaction as fangs snapped and the creature pitched back. But the others bore him down.

As his back hit the ground, however, the weight of the daemons vanished. He looked up and saw the creatures turning to dust. As they dissolved on the breeze, he saw Arkhan the Black looking down at him. The inscrutable liche held his gaze for a moment, and then turned away. Hammerson snorted and retrieved his weapons.

'Don't expect me to say thank you,' he grunted, as he clashed his weapons and readied himself to face the next wave of foes.



Vlad von Carstein did not wait for Nagash's permission before he leapt into battle. Let the Great Necromancer do as he saw fit; Vlad wanted nothing more than to lose himself in combat, if only for a little while.

He was frustrated and angry, and the daemons paid the price. He whirled and stamped, fighting with all the fury of an Arabyan dervish one moment, and then with the blunt force of one of the war-monks of Cathay the next. He slid from style to style, indulging in the raw physicality of combat. His sword flashed as he recalled lessons in peach orchards and vineyards, on dusty training grounds and ice-floes.

The bloodletters responded, coming for him like flies to spoiled meat. He spun, parried and thrust, using their numbers and his speed to his advantage. As he fought, he heard again the sound of Tyrion's blade striking home, and the soft whisper of Eldyra's essence fading. Again and again, he saw it, heard it, felt it, and his rage grew.

He knew why she had done it. Indeed, he was surprised she hadn't done it herself. But he did not understand, and he cursed himself for a fool. If he had not taken her into the grove, then she would have lived. Unhappily, perhaps, but she would not have tossed away her life to no purpose. That, in the end, he could not forgive.

Fool, he thought, you had the power to make a difference. The power to set your world right, and instead you threw it away and for what – honour? Disgust? Fear? Mannfred should have known better than to allow his servants to turn Eldyra and give her their dark gift. Elves were too fragile, at their core. Too enamoured of their life as it was, to see the glory in becoming something else. Like the dwarfs, they were stagnant, trapped in themselves.

Thinking of Mannfred, he wondered where his student had fled to. He had set the Drakenhof Templars on his trail, but Mannfred had eluded them all. Now he was loose in the world, doing who knew what. *I wish you well, boy. May you at last have learned something from your mistakes.*

Vlad bent backwards with serpentine ease, avoiding the sweep of a black blade. He righted himself and drove his sword home, impaling the daemon. It folded over his arm, clawing at him weakly. He shoved it aside with a disdainful sniff.

He heard the screech of metal on metal and turned to see another of his former protégés, Balthasar Gelt, fighting side by side with Lileath. They had joined their magics, unleashing a molten storm of metal on the pack of flesh hounds bounding towards them. Several of the creatures were torn apart by the storm, but still more made it through, the brass collars about their necks glowing white hot. One of the slavering hounds leapt for the former goddess, jaws wide. Its pounce knocked her sprawling, and Gelt was too distracted to lend aid.

Vlad was at her side in an instant. He snatched the daemon from the air and dashed it down. As it struggled to right itself, he thrust his blade through its

throat. He tore the sword free and spun, slashing a second hound in two in a single motion. As one the remaining hounds bayed and loped towards him, ignoring Gelt and the elf-woman, as Vlad had hoped.

He dispatched them efficiently and quickly, moving among them like a bolt of dark lightning. Wherever he struck, a flesh hound fell dead. When the last sank down with a querulous whine, he stepped back, and helped Lileath to her feet.

'You... saved me,' she said.

'One does what one can, in these trying times,' Vlad said. He inclined his head to Gelt. 'And are we not allies? Sworn to defend one another, against a common foe?'

'And what about your master?' Gelt said. The wizard swung his staff out in an arc and the air was filled with glittering shards of silver, which plucked a bevy of bloodletters off their feet and sent them crashing down some distance away. Vlad turned.

Nagash stood alone, at the heart of a writhing amethyst vortex, surrounded by heaps and piles of withered, steaming daemon corpses. Fragments of broken bone and torn flesh swirled about him, dancing upon the unnatural winds he had called into being. The air about him was thick with wailing spirits, and at his merest gesture, daemons fell.

'Nagash needs no aid,' Vlad said, with a shrug.

'No,' Lileath murmured. She looked pale, and Vlad could smell the fear on both her and Gelt. Even his fellow Incarnates, it seemed, were not immune to the horror that was the Undying King. 'Nor is he alone in that.' She looked up. Vlad followed her gaze.

Above them, Malekith's black dragon twisted through the air, breathing dark, poisonous fumes wherever daemons clustered. And where the dragon's shadow touched, blackfire constructs in the shape of Malekith himself rose to howl across the glade, immolating any creature which stood against them.

Then the air was stirred by thunder and heat, and Vlad could taste the coppery tang of blood in his throat as roaring shapes, larger than any bloodletter, dropped towards the glade from above, crashing down like the fists of Khorne himself. Vlad was nearly knocked from his feet by the force of their arrival. Lileath fell with a cry, and Gelt was only able to remain standing thanks to the support of his staff. 'Bloodthirsters,' the wizard said, as Vlad hauled Lileath to her feet once more. The wizard whistled sharply, and the sound was answered by a shrill whinny as his pegasus darted through the upper reaches of the glade.

'More than that,' Lileath hissed. 'It is the Blood Hunt – bloodthirsters of the Third Host.'

'You say that as if I should care,' Vlad said. 'One daemon is much the same as another.'

'The same could be said of vampires,' Lileath said.

Vlad looked at her. He smiled. 'I stand corrected. I – Look out!' He caught hold of her and jerked her aside as Caradryan's firebird crashed down into the glade, its body entangled in the whip of one of the bloodthirsters. The Incarnate of Fire was hurled from the saddle, and skidded through the carnage.

'One side,' Gelt said. The wizard caught hold of his pegasus's mane and hauled himself into the saddle as the animal galloped past Vlad and Lileath.

With a snap of its great wings, the pegasus thrust itself into the air and hurtled towards the fallen Incarnate, even as daemons pressed close about him. Vlad was tempted to join Gelt in his rescue attempt, but there were enemies aplenty, closer to hand.

Besides which, it was clear enough to him that Gelt had matters under control. The wizard cast chains of gold and air about the bloodthirsters as they descended on his fellow Incarnate, and held them back through sheer force of will. Caradryan rose to his feet, halberd in hand, and flames rose with him, reaching out to incinerate the roaring daemons where they struggled against Gelt's magics.

Vlad stepped back as a bloodletter lunged for him. The creatures reminded him of the more feral of his kind, all brute instinct and no skill or finesse. Back to back with Lileath, his sword reaped a deadly toll on the bloodletters that careened towards him without an ounce of self-preservation between them. Lileath thrust out her hand and bolts of cold moonlight speared forth, causing daemonic flesh to smoulder and sear where it touched.

'Well struck, my lady,' Vlad laughed. 'We might win the day yet!'



'We are outmatched, brother,' Teclis said, as he caught a daemon's blade on his staff and forced it aside. As the creature staggered, off balance, he drove his sword into its side and angled the blade to catch its foul heart. The creature came apart like a fire-blackened log as he pulled his sword free. His arm ached from the force of the blow, and sweat stung his eyes. 'There are too many of them,' he panted. He couldn't catch his breath.

'And what would you have me do? I'm killing them as fast as I can,' Tyrion snapped. He beheaded a bloodletter with a swipe of his sword and turned, pressing two fingers to his mouth. He whistled sharply.

'Calling for your steed, then? Planning to leave us so soon?' Malekith growled. 'I never thought you a coward, whatever else you were.' Shadow tendrils lanced from the Eternity King's form and speared a pack of howling flesh hounds as they loped up the dais.

'No – he's right,' Teclis said, forcing himself to stand up straight. 'There are few of us, and many of them. We must keep moving and spread out, unless we wish to be overwhelmed. Make them divide their forces, and draw them to the strongest Incarnates. We will destroy them piecemeal.'

Malekith grunted. He looked down at Alarielle. The Everqueen was still unconscious. 'What of her?' he asked, his voice softening, though only slightly.

'I shall guard her with my life,' Teclis said.

The Eternity King looked at him and laughed hollowly. 'I am sure she will appreciate it.' He raised his hand, and with a roar that shook the glade, his dragon swooped towards him. Malekith shot skywards on a column of twisting shadows, and was in the saddle moments later. The dragon roared again and Malekith laughed wildly as the beast crashed into one of the newly arrived bloodthirsters, coiling about it like an immense black serpent.

Two more of the bloodthirsters raced towards the dais, their mighty hooves churning the soil. One leapt into the air with a single flap of its leathery wings and flew towards them with a bone-rattling bellow. 'This one's mine,' Tyrion said. He extended his sword and a burst of cleansing light shot from the blade, clipping the daemon's wing. The bloodthirster smashed into the dais with a startled roar. Before it could recover, Tyrion reversed his blade and leapt, driving the sword into the beast's skull with both hands. As he tore the blade free, the second hurtled past him, towards Teclis.

Teclis gritted his teeth and smashed the end of his staff down. Magic flowed through him, and out, assailing his opponent. All eight winds were his to command, and he did so now, battering the daemon with amber spears, thorny growth, blistering starlight and searing flame. Blinded, bleeding and burned, the creature crashed down onto the dais, and did not move again. Teclis met Tyrion's gaze, and the latter nodded curtly.

Tyrion turned as his steed, Malhandir, galloped through the press of battle, bowling over flesh hounds and trampling bloodletters. He vaulted into the saddle, hauled on the reins and turned the horse's head east, towards the spot where the Emperor and Hammerson fought. Teclis silently wished his twin well.

Every muscle in his body ached and he could feel his strength beginning to ebb. The Incarnates had reserves of power he did not possess, and he was drawing near his limits. He looked down at Alarielle. There was no telling why she had collapsed, but he thought it likely had to do with the eruption of a daemonic portal so close to the heart of Athel Loren. As the Incarnate of Life, she was tied body and soul to the living world. The opening of such a portal would have felt much like a red hot blade being driven into her flesh.

A shadow fell over him, and he looked up in horror as another bloodthirster dropped towards he and Alarielle. His exhaustion forgotten, he raised a hand and hurled a bolt of cerulean lightning at the daemon. The creature roared as the bolt struck home, but it did not fall. It landed on the dais, the ancient white wood cracking and warping beneath the touch of its hooves. The beast loomed over him, reeking of blood and offal. He thrust his staff forwards, calling forth more lightning.

The bloodthirster shrieked and stomped up to him, hacking at him with its axe. The blow smashed into the dais, narrowly missing him. Teclis tumbled backwards. Before he could get to his feet, the axe was descending on him again. Hastily, he interposed his staff, knowing that it wouldn't protect him even as he did so.

The axe halted, bare inches from him. The bloodthirster gave a strangled cry as it staggered back. Teclis's eyes widened as he saw thick tendrils of plant life coil about the beast's wings, legs and arms. And beyond it, he saw Alarielle on one knee, her palm pressed to the dais. The wood buckled and ruptured as more roots thrust through it and snagged the struggling daemon. The creature bucked and thrashed, snarling, but for every tendril it ripped free, more tightened about it.

'This is my domain, beast,' Alarielle said, as she rose to her feet, 'and you are not welcome here.' She made a fist, and the bloodthirster screamed as the roots suddenly burrowed into its flesh. As its roars reached a crescendo, she opened her hand, splaying her fingers. A moment later, the bloodthirster convulsed and then was torn apart by the flailing roots. As chunks of daemon pattered down, Teclis climbed to his feet.

'Alarielle, I –' he began.

'Quiet,' she said. She turned and surveyed the ruin that had been made of the glade. Her features contorted into an expression of grief and anger. 'The forest is screaming. It is caught in a nightmare which does not end. It must awaken,' she snarled. 'Do you hear me? Awaken.' She raised her hands, and

swept them out as she spoke. *'Awaken and fight!'*

And before Teclis's disbelieving eyes, it did.

It happened swiftly. At first, there was only the sound. Deep and sonorous, it was akin to the rumble of a distant avalanche. Then, all around the glade, trees began to move, their roots tearing free of the clammy ground as their bark flexed and twisted into half-remembered shapes. In ones and twos the ancient guardians of Athel Loren were jarred awake by the cry of the Everqueen. The ground shook with a fury unseen since the days before the coming of the elves as the forest began to move.

Ponderous at first, and then faster and faster, the gnarled feet of the newly awakened treemen thudded home into the sod, propelling them into battle with the ravening daemons. They erupted from the forest on all sides, hurling themselves at the enemy with creaking roars. Bloodletters and flesh hounds alike were smashed aside or trampled underfoot and brass-fleshed juggernauts were crushed like tin as the ancient guardians of the forest roared into battle with the invaders. Daemons scattered like dead wood caught in a gale.

Teclis watched in awe as Athel Loren awoke for the first time in millennia. It was as beautiful as it was terrifying, for the forest unbound was as powerful in its own way as the Dark Gods, and equally as deadly.

Only where the treemen clashed with the bloodthirsters did their advance slow. The greater daemons were shards of Khorne's rage made manifest, even as the treemen were splinters of the great soul of Athel Loren. Not since the first incursion of Chaos had such a battle been waged. Lesser daemons were crushed as the titans battled, and even the Incarnates were not immune to the fury of the creatures. Teclis saw Arkhan nearly swatted from the air by the wing of a bloodthirster, and a moment later, his brother was almost crushed by a toppling treeman.

A roar sounded, echoing above the din of the colossal battle. Teclis looked up, and saw a black shape, vast and terrible, dropping towards he and Alarielle. One of the treemen climbed the dais and sought to ward off the new arrival, but the ancient was no match for the newcomer. A great hammer, covered in ruinous sigils, thudded down, and the treeman's arm evaporated into a cloud of charred splinters. As the guardian reeled, an axe hacked deep into the thick bark. The treeman fell with a groan. A moment later, its head vanished beneath the hoof of the bloodthirster as it climbed the dais to confront Teclis and Alarielle.

'Ka'Bandha of the Third Host, Huntsman of Khorne, bids you greeting,' the creature rumbled. 'The Lord of Skulls has laid claim to this forest and every scalp within it, and it is my pleasure to claim them on his behalf.' As it spoke, the creature drew closer, until it loomed over them. It raised its hammer.

'Prepare thyselfes, for thy doom is come...'



FOURTEEN

 *The King's Glade, Athel Loren*

Teclis stared up at the beast, and felt fingers of dread claw at his heart. He knew the name Ka'Bandha, for it was associated with many dread prophecies and dark futures. The Huntsman of Khorne stalked his prey across the vast sea of infinity, and had last trod the world during the previous great war against Chaos, when Teclis had helped the human leader, Magnus, escape the clutches of the Blood Hunt.

As he had done then, so many centuries ago, Teclis called up the lightning and cast it into the leering face of damnation. Jagged bolts of crackling energy struck Ka'Bandha; hissing magics crawled across the daemon's armour, and sparks played over the runic crown it wore. Ka'Bandha laughed gutturally, and bore down on them.

Two more treemen moved to cut the daemon off. They bounded up the dais with great, creaking leaps. Ka'Bandha cut down the first one without slowing, but the second caught the daemon a blow on the back with both of its fists, dropping the brute to one knee. Ka'Bandha roared and swung to face its attacker, ignoring the lightning that Teclis continued to hurl at it. The treeman caught the daemon's thick wrists in vine-laced fingers.

For a long moment the two creatures stood almost motionless, straining against one another. Teclis knew that the contest would not last forever. Strong as the guardian was, the daemon was stronger. He reached out, trying to grasp the faint strands of Ghur which permeated the glade. Though the Wind of Beasts was not strong here, it could still be manipulated, if he but had the strength. Catching it, he sent it flooding into the treeman, giving the guardian new strength. He staggered, and Alarielle caught him.

Ka'Bandha roared in baffled fury as it was slowly pushed back by its opponent. The bloodthirster opened its fanged maw and vomited a torrent of deep and ruddy flame into the treeman's face. The ancient guardian was consumed in moments, and Ka'Bandha ripped its arms free in an explosion of charred wood. The bloodthirster whirled on Teclis and Alarielle, burning spittle dripping from its jaws. 'I will have your skulls for such effrontery, little elves,' Ka'Bandha growled.

Teclis stared at the beast in growing horror. He had faced untold daemons over the course of his life, and he had bested them all. But this beast seemed resistant to everything he hurled at it. *Is this it, then?* he thought, as the creature's shadow fell over him. *Is this my debt come due at last?* It seemed fitting – an elf could only taunt the gods for so long before they turned their full attentions upon him.

Ka'Bandha's axe flashed down, and Teclis reacted on instinct, interposing his staff. The force of the blow drove him down, and pain thrummed through his arms and shoulders. His magics could protect him, but not for long. He glanced over his shoulder, intending to tell Alarielle to run.

The Everqueen ignored his panicked exclamation, and set her staff. The stuff of life itself writhed about her in a shimmering halo of all colours and none. Thorny vines burst from the cracked expanse of the dais and sought to snare Ka'Bandha, as they had the other bloodthirster. But unlike the earlier beast, Ka'Bandha easily tore itself free of the constricting plant life, heedless of the many wounds it caused itself.

The bloodthirster's hammer slammed down towards Alarielle. Teclis threw out a hand, and a shimmering shield of magical energy coalesced between the Everqueen and the daemon-weapon. Teclis bit back a groan as his body began to quake with the strain of his sorcery. Ka'Bandha lifted its hammer for a second blow.

'It speaks ill of the Lord of Skulls that his Huntsman is so easily distracted from his true prey,' a voice called out. Ka'Bandha stepped back, and turned. Teclis's eyes widened as Deathclaw landed heavily on the steps of the dais. The Emperor sat astride the griffon, and he gestured at Ka'Bandha with his runefang. 'It is known that you once came for Magnus the Pious, but failed to claim him. Did your god punish you for that, beast?'

Ka'Bandha snarled. 'Yes, I failed to claim the skull of one human emperor. But yours shall suffice as a replacement,' the bloodthirster hissed, gesturing at the Emperor with its axe. Before it could do more than gesture, however, Deathclaw was already hurtling forwards like a feathered cannonball at the Emperor's behest. The griffon crashed into the daemon and the animal's beak tore at Ka'Bandha's throat, even as its talons sank into the bloodthirster's arms.

Teclis pulled Alarielle aside as the two creatures careened down the dais, roaring and snarling. The Emperor clung grimly to his saddle and stabbed down at Ka'Bandha with his sword. 'Fool,' Teclis muttered. 'Without the power of Azyr, he's no match for that creature.'

'He is a fool, but a brave one. He is buying us time, and we must make use of it.' Alarielle raised her staff. 'I can feel Durthu – he is less than a league hence, and drawing near,' she said. Teclis felt a chill. If there was any creature in Athel Loren which could match Ka'Bandha for pure hate, it was the ancient treeman known as Durthu. Powerful beyond measure, despite the old scars which covered its frame – a legacy of a long ago confrontation with the dwarfs – Durthu was the rage of the forest given form.

Alarielle continued, 'Durthu will not be coming alone. We have three armies in this forest, and by now they will all know that something is occurring. We must simply hold out until they arrive.'

Teclis looked at her. 'And how do you propose we do that?'

Alarielle didn't answer. Instead, she lifted her staff over her head. Teclis flinched back as the Wind of Life churned about her, and he felt a hum deep in his bones as she once again called out to the forest. All across the glade, those treemen not currently engaged with the enemy began to move towards the centre of the clearing. Those already there sank their roots deep into the soil and locked their limbs, creating a living palisade.

Other treemen moved to join them, and along the way, they plucked up those Incarnates or their advisors who were not lucky enough to be riding a steed, or able to fly. Teclis saw a treeman scoop up the dwarf, Hammerson, and, ignoring the runesmith's virulent cursing, carry him to the dubious safety of the growing bastion. Teclis grabbed Alarielle's arm. 'Come, we must go,' he said urgently.

'What of the human?' she asked.

Teclis turned, seeking out the Emperor. He cursed as he saw that his worst fears were confirmed. Ka'Bandha had recovered from the griffon's attack and had wounded the animal, driving it back and nearly spilling the Emperor from his saddle. Before he could move to help, however, a roiling cloud of shadow enveloped the bloodthirster. Each mote of darkness pierced the daemon's flesh, eliciting a startled shriek of pain from Khorne's Huntsman. As the bloodthirster staggered, flailing blindly at the shadows, Teclis saw Tyron galloping towards the daemon, sword in hand. There was a flash of light, and the daemon screamed again as Tyron swept past, his blade trailing a line of ichor.

Teclis gestured to the Emperor as the man glanced his way. Karl Franz hesitated, as if reluctant to leave the fight, but then nodded. He hauled on the reins, and forced his snarling mount to swoop away from its opponent and towards them. Deathclaw spread its talons and scooped the two elves up as it sped over the dais.

As they flew towards the living palisade of treemen, a crash of timber heralded the arrival of the last of Ka'Bandha's forces. Teclis watched in horror as great engines of shimmering brass and impossible heat, all thumping pistons and fang-muzzled cannons, burst into the glade, belching fire and ruin. Treemen were torn apart by howling barrages, and the forest itself was set aflame. Alarielle writhed in Deathclaw's grip, wracked by agony as she experienced Athel Loren's pain as her own. The palisade shuddered around them as Deathclaw landed.

The Incarnates were still scattered, Teclis saw. A column of pulsing amethyst light marked where Nagash still fought alone, uncaring of the greater struggle. Vlad von Carstein struggled to free Hammerson from the twisted wreckage of the treeman which had been carrying the dwarf. The guardian had been struck from behind by a roaring bloodthirster, and the vampire fought desperately against the daemon. Lileath was nowhere to be seen.

With a shrill whinny, Gelt's pegasus crashed to the ground and rolled awkwardly, kicking futilely at the daemons which clung to it. The bloodletters shrieked and hissed as Gelt, pinned beneath his thrashing steed, incinerated them with a spray of molten metal. Teclis hurried to aid the wizard. Above them, Caradryan's firebird cut a sharp turn, as the Incarnate of Fire turned his attentions to the wave of daemons already clambering over the palisade of treemen. Teclis hauled Gelt to his feet with one hand as he sent a cerulean bolt of mystical energy smashing into a knot of bloodletters.

'We're out of time,' the Emperor said, shouting to be heard over the rumble of daemon-engines and the death-shrieks of trees. 'If we do not escape, then we have lost everything. Even if we survive the battle, the world will be doomed.'

'What would you have me do?' Teclis snarled.

'Use your magic! Get us to Middenheim, while some of us can still fight,' the Emperor said. He gestured with his sword. 'Even a few of us might be enough to prevent the Everchosen from ending everything.'

'I told you before, I lack the power to do that. And even if I could, such an expenditure of magic that close to Middenheim might cause the very catastrophe we seek to prevent,' Teclis said. 'It cannot be done!'

'Then what do you suggest we do?' the Emperor growled. 'The daemons will just keep coming until this forest is ash, and us with it. We have no more time, Teclis. It must be now, or never.'

'I – I...' Teclis hesitated. He shook his head. He was tired. So tired. The world pressed down on him from all sides, and his mind worked sluggishly. There were so many things he had not anticipated, so many missteps he had made. What if he made another? In trying to save the world, would he only hasten its demise? He looked at Alarielle, but she shook her head, her face pale and strained. There was no help there. He tried to catch sight of Tyrion – his brother would know what to do. Tyrion was always certain of the right path.

Only he's not, is he? He never was, a voice whispered in his head. It was always you, in the end. Your decisions, your morals, your certainties. But your cold, fathomless logic has failed you at last, just when you need it most.

The battle raged about him. He glimpsed scenes of heroism and despair as he turned, searching for some answer in the confusion. He saw Nagash stand alone and unbowed against hundreds of squalling daemons, like a pillar of black iron in a crimson sea. He saw Tyrion and Malekith, still locked in combat with Ka'Bandha. Through the thickening wall of the palisade, he saw Caradryan vault from his saddle and plummet onto the hull of one of the daemon-engines, his halberd sweeping down to pierce the brass and send a gout of cleansing flame into its interior. He saw newly arrived elves die, even as they rushed to the defence of the Eternity King. A treeman sank down, groaning, its ancient soul snuffed by the fiery barrage from a daemon-engine.

He felt a hand on his arm, and turned. Lileath, her face streaked with blood and soot, smiled gently at him. 'There is a way,' she said. 'My body is mortal, but the power of a god still flows in my veins, and in my spirit. With them, you could do what must be done.'

Teclis stared at her. From behind him, he heard the Emperor mutter, 'Innocent blood...'

Lileath laughed harshly. 'I have not been innocent for a long time, king of the Unberogens. Neither have you, or indeed any of us. We are here at this moment because we are the only ones strong enough to withstand the storm.' She reached up and gently stroked Teclis's cheek. 'I have lied, and committed treachery. I have condemned the innocent to death, and sent brave men to their doom, all to prevent the end now unfolding around us. I have done what is required, and if my heart's blood is the key to victory, then that shall be given as well.'

'You will die,' Teclis croaked. He grabbed her hand.

'We are all going to die, son of my son. It is the Rhana Dandra, the end of all stories and songs. And better I die for a purpose, than drown in horror.'

'You are Lileath of the Moon. Your voice has guided me since I was but a child. When I try to remember my mother, it is your face I see. Your voice I hear,' Teclis whispered. 'Do not ask this of me, my goddess. Are my hands not stained with enough blood?' He closed his eyes, and held tight to her hand. The sounds of battle grew dim, and seemed to fade.

'If you truly love me, my beautiful Teclis, you shall grant me this final boon,' she said. He saw that there were tears in her eyes. 'I cannot feel my daughter, or my love, Teclis. I have lost everything. I would know peace.'

'He will do it,' the Emperor said.

Teclis released Lileath and whirled, lightning crackling about his clenched fists. 'You do not speak for me, master of apes. If your folk had done as they were meant to do, none of this would be happening.'

'The same might be said of yours,' Lileath said. Teclis turned back to her, helpless. 'He is right. There is no time. You know, in your heart, that this must be your path.'

He wanted to argue. But his words were lost in the scream of one of the guardians which made up the palisade. It was uprooted and flung back by a gout of flame from a daemon-engine, to crash down nearby, twitching and smoking. The sound of battle rolled back in on him, and he could hear it all, in its terrible glory. It was the sound of a world ending. 'What must I do?' he asked.

Lileath pressed a dagger into his hands and sank to her knees. 'It cannot be swift,' she said. 'When my spirit flees, so too will my divinity, and any advantage you might gain with it. My death must be slow. It must be perfect.' She caught his hand, and guided the dagger point to a spot just to the left of her breastbone. 'There,' she said softly. She looked at him, and smiled sadly. 'Are you ready?'

'No,' Teclis rasped. Then he rammed the blade home with every ounce of strength he could muster. Lileath stiffened and moaned. He sank down to catch her as she toppled forwards. Blood stained his robes, and her breaths, shallow and rasping, were loud in his ears. The fading spark of her divinity danced across the dark of his mind as he reached out to catch it before it could flee. Several times it slipped his grasp, and he panicked. Then, he felt her hand reach up and rest on the back of his neck, and he grew calm. A moment later, a hand found his shoulder, and he heard a calm voice murmur encouragement. New strength filled him, and he hurled his mind and spirit at the slippery spark of power.

Bolstered, he seized the fading power and bound it to himself, drinking it in greedily. As it suffused him, driving aside all doubt and weakness, he felt her hand slide away, and her body shudder once, and grow cold. For a moment, his mind soared high above Athel Loren, and he could see the embattled mortals as flickering pinpricks of light, struggling against an all-encroaching ocean of darkness. The Incarnates showed more brightly still, the light of their power almost blinding. Nagash alone shone with a darkness almost as complete as that of the creatures he fought.

Teclis saw Gelt sheltering beneath a shield of gold as a bloodthirster hammered at it. He saw Nagash pluck another from the air, and crush its thick bones to powder in his unyielding grip. He saw Ka'Bandha tear his way free of the magics of Tyrion and Malekith, and Alarielle, and charge towards Vlad and Hammerson.

And he saw himself, kneeling, cradling Lileath's body. The Emperor stood behind him, one hand resting on his shoulder, and he knew the origin of that calming voice, and the sudden surge of strength. Something lurked within Karl Franz's frail envelope of flesh, something akin to both Lileath and the strange, fierce godspark in the man Volker, but more powerful than either. The Emperor looked up, and Teclis knew that the man could see him.

No, not the man. Karl Franz had not been a man for some time, Teclis knew. The Emperor nodded slowly, and Teclis turned his thoughts from mysteries to Middenheim. His mind and spirit stretched out, and pulled the disparate strands of the winds of magic to him. Without thinking, without even truly understanding, he began to weave them together, moving swiftly. The last spark of Lileath's power was already beginning to fade, and the magics he'd harnessed threatened to overwhelm him.

Pain shot through him, such as he had never felt before. He worked feverishly, fighting against the pain and the fatigue that came with it. The spell he was weaving was already beginning to unravel, even as he crafted it. Desperately he reached out with his magics, and carefully gathered up the motes of light which were the Incarnates and the others and enfolded them in the tapestry of the spell. One he had to reach further for, across vast distances into the east, and it struggled mightily in his grip, but it too joined the others.

They will not be enough, he thought.

They will have to be, the Emperor's voice replied.

Even as the man's voice echoed in his head, the spell, at last complete, tore loose from his weakening grasp and hurtled away from him, towards the distant darkling light of Middenheim. Then, overcome at last, Teclis slumped forwards, and collapsed into darkness.

 *Somewhere Else, Some Time Later*

'Wake up, elf.'

Teclis groaned. A sudden flare of pain ripped through him, and his eyes shot open. He lurched awake, a scream on his lips. He blinked back tears and looked up as a familiar figure carefully extracted his claws from Teclis's thigh.

'There we are. Back among the living, then?' Mannfred von Carstein said, smiling genially down at Teclis as he licked blood off his talons. 'I'd wager you thought you saw the last of me, eh?'

'Hoped, more like,' Teclis mumbled. He was not so much surprised to see the vampire as he was disgusted. After the creature's escape, he had feared that Mannfred would turn up again at an inconvenient time. And, true to form, it seemed he had.

Mannfred laughed and kicked him. Teclis grunted in pain. 'Where am I?' he wheezed, after a moment. He was lying face-down on cold stone. Manacles bit into his wrists, keeping him from standing. The only light came from guttering torches placed somewhere above his head, and the air stank of blood.

'Where do you think, elf?' Mannfred spread his hands. 'Can you not feel it? You are in the shadow of cataclysm itself.' The vampire grinned. 'Middenheim, mage. You are in Middenheim.'

'And why are you here?' Teclis asked. He knew the answer well enough. It was Mannfred who had started this chain of events, however unwittingly, and fate was not so kind as to deprive the beast of his final reckoning. *You are here because you have no choice. None of us do. We are all caught in the storm,* Teclis thought.

'How could I not be here? To witness the end of those who so cruelly betrayed me – me, who came in good faith, with heart open and hands empty.' Mannfred leered down at him. 'I knew there was only one place you would come, elf. I knew, as surely as I knew Be'lakor would allow his greed to overrule his judgement.' He sank to his haunches and caught Teclis's chin. 'But just how you got here, well, that was interesting... You crashed right through the roof of the Temple of Ulric, and smashed down before the throne of the Everchosen himself. I never suspected that you had that sort of power. Too bad it seems to have deserted you...'

'Silence, leech,' a voice rumbled. Its owner was hidden in the shadows which dominated the farthest reaches of the great chamber. Mannfred flinched and stepped aside. He bowed low, pulling his cloak tight about himself.

'Of course, my lord. Do forgive thy most unworthy of captains for his zealotry. Mine heart was overcome with adder's venom, and I sought to—'

'I said be silent,' the voice said. This time, Mannfred fell quiet. Teclis heard the rasp of armour on bone, and then, 'Well?'

'The elf is powerless, my lord,' a third voice said. Teclis looked up as a hooded figure stepped out of the shadows, the twisted metal of his mask gleaming in the torchlight. His tone was obsequious, his posture locked in a permanent half-bow, and he stank of dark magic. Teclis noted with some distaste that the sorcerer held his own purloined staff and sword. 'His magics have deserted him, as is the fate of all such false creatures.'

Despite what the creature said, Teclis was not wholly powerless, not that he planned to admit it. He could feel the presence of the Incarnates still, and felt a thrill of bitter satisfaction. He had transported some of them, at least, to Middenheim, along with many of their followers. Unfortunately, the spell had slipped from his control in the last few moments, and scattered them across the city.

Too, he could feel a new element. The Wind of Beasts was close at hand. He had feared at the time that he might have imagined its presence, but now he knew for certain that all eight Incarnates were accounted for. All eight Incarnates were in Middenheim.

'Not entirely, I think,' the first voice said. It sounded amused, and Teclis resisted the urge to shrink back from it. The sorcerer turned slightly to peer into the dark.

'I told you, fool,' Mannfred said, sneering at the sorcerer.

'Quiet, leech, or I shall stake your body out for the crows.' Through the shadows, past the pit of hissing, seething blood, on the throne of skulls which sat at the chamber's far end, a heavy figure reclined. As Teclis watched, the figure rose, and the eyes within its golden helm were unreadable. 'You have travelled a long way to die, elf,' Archaon said. 'But do not despair. The world shall not long outlast you.'



FIFTEEN



The Ulricsmund, Middenheim

An angry red dusk had fallen over the Fauschlag. Strange lightning carved the sky into facets, and the streets boiled with activity. War had again come to Middenheim; only now it was the servants of the Everchosen who found themselves under siege, and on multiple fronts.

The heart of the Ulricsmund, within sight of the Temple of Ulric, was one such front. Caradryan, Incarnate of Fire and Chosen of Asuryan, had not wasted time wondering how he had come from Athel Loren to the blasted streets of a human city, or what had happened to the other Incarnates. Indeed, there had been no time to even consider it.

Scarcely had the storm of magic about him and those elves who found themselves at his side ebbed when they found themselves under attack from the axe-wielding, black-armoured Kurgan they now faced. Wreathed in fire, the Phoenix Blade hissed as it smashed home into the chest of a howling northman and sliced him into two blackened halves. Before the edge of the blade could strike the blood-smeared cobbles, Caradryan had reversed the stroke, pivoted, and removed the head of a second northman.

Fire crawled along his lean limbs, and his hair crackled like a halo of flame as he fought. He'd lost his helmet during the battle in Athel Loren, but it was of no matter. He moved swiftly, the Phoenix Blade an extension of his arms. The haft slid through his grip as he raised the ancient halberd and spun, letting it sing out to its full length. Northmen fell back in a bloody tangle as he completed the turn. He retracted the weapon, pulling it in tight even as he came to a halt, before punching it forward to spit a slaving Chaos hound in mid-leap.

The captain of the Phoenix Guard tossed the dying beast aside and fell into a defensive stance as he retreated back towards the other elves. The sutras of Asuryan ran through his head as he gauged the strengths and weaknesses of the enemies who pressed close about him, pursuing him. *Chaff before the wind*, he thought. It was not arrogance which prompted that conclusion, though once it might have been. He had been arrogant in his time, possessed of a certainty in his own superiority. It had taken a god to humble him, to show him the truth of his place: to show him that just because he was alive, that didn't mean he truly lived, and that just because he could speak, that didn't mean he should.

You must crawl before you can walk, boy, Asuryan had said, his voice rising from the flames in the holy Chamber of Days. *I will teach you, though in time, you might wish I had not*. And he had. His lessons had begun that day, and a callow, spiteful brat had become, if not a better elf, at least a more tolerable one.

He signalled silently for the archers among his miniscule host to let loose a volley. Arrows hissed overhead, and the front ranks of the Kurgan fell. The rest retreated in disarray. Now that the initial impulse to violence had been curtailed, the northmen seemed to be coming to grips with the fact that an enemy force had materialised in their very midst. They wouldn't remain hesitant for long, he knew. Then they would come again, and he and his small band would be overwhelmed.

He looked west, towards the slag-heaps and spoil piles which had been at his back when he'd arrived. Immense clouds of smoke and soot rose into the air above the area, and he recalled Be'lakor's taunts about the artefact Archaon was looking for. He frowned, wishing that the voice of Asuryan still whispered to him. But he did not. Asuryan, like all of the gods, was dead. But his servants would do what they could, in his absence and in his name. Even if that meant nothing more than dying well.

Roars and shouts rippled from between the ruined buildings which loomed above and around them. The Kurgan were regrouping. Chieftains and champions would be restoring order, and in a few moments, the enemy would be upon them again.

Never before had his fate weighed so heavily on him. Even the power caged in his body was no guarantor of his survival; after all, that power, the raw fury of Aqshy, had consumed Ungrim Ironfist in the end. *Is that my end, then?* he thought. *To be consumed in flames, like Ashtari?*

He looked up, and saw the firebird swoop low over the elves. The great bird shrieked. His kind had long dwelt amongst the Flamespyres of Ulthuan, laying their eggs amongst the great alabaster pillars of rock, where magical flames flickered eternally. Now, with Ulthuan's destruction, there were no more Flamespyres, and there would be no more firebirds. A wave of sadness swept through him as Ashtari's shadow passed over him, and the cry of the bird reverberated through his bones. No, there would be no more firebirds.

But they could burn brightly one last time, before the end.

Yes. We can all burn. The thought passed across his consciousness as Asuryan's whispers had once done. For a moment, it was as if the god were still alive. *Fire does not diminish as it is divided*, he thought. *Instead, it only grows stronger*. He almost laughed for the simplicity of it. What good was caging the fire in one warrior, when it could lend its strength to many? He raised the Phoenix Blade, and felt Aqshy struggle within him, seeking its freedom. He reversed his halberd and drove it down, blade-first, into the ground. *Now you are unchained*, he thought, *go, spread and avail them of your strength*. The fire rose around him, licking out to engulf those elves closest to him, even as the Kurgan mounted their charge.

As the northmen thundered towards them, Aqshy blazed forth, the flames growing and dividing a thousandfold. It spread through the ranks of his tiny army, and flames flickered to life along the edges of blades and in the eyes of his warriors, whether they had been born in Ulthuan, Athel Loren or Naggaroth. Fatigued bodies straightened with new strength, and warriors shouted, their spirits renewed. Caradryan rose to his full height, the Phoenix Blade held out before him. He watched the enemy draw close, and the last captain of the Phoenix Guard smiled.

'In the name of Asuryan,' he said, pitching his voice to carry for the first time in centuries, 'and for the fate of our people... *charge!*



The Wynd, South-east of the Ulricsmund

So, you yet live, eh? Malekith thought, as he caught a glimpse of the fire suddenly rising above the rooftops of the Ulricsmund. In Malekith's opinion, of them all, Caradryan was the least suited to wield the powers he had come by. Better by far that it had been given to one more suited to such things.

Still, one must make do, he thought, as he guided Seraphon through the reeking air above the city, towards the distant smoke. He recognised the telltale sign of an excavation immediately, having overseen similar enterprises in his life. How many magical baubles had he dug out of the mountains and ice-floes, forced to grub about like a dwarf while seeking an easier path to the power so long denied him? 'Pity I never thought to simply rip it out of the Vortex, eh, Seraphon?' he said, and stroked the dragon's long neck. The black dragon screeched and unleashed another searing cloud of fire into the tangle of streets below.

Malekith leaned forwards in his saddle and peered down at the battle taking place below. His forces, such as they were, swept through the narrow streets and drove the skaven before them. The ratmen had been surprised to see the enemy on their doorstep and Malekith had seized the advantage, driving his cohort on, the Eternity Guard at the fore. In the tangled streets the skaven could not bring their numbers to bear, and his warriors harried them mercilessly.

The skaven were detestable creatures, barely worth unsheathing his sword for. He contented himself with sending his shadow-shapes to draw blood in his place, while he sat safely astride Seraphon. The dragon screeched again, and incinerated another squalid nest. Skaven ran shrieking into the open, their greasy fur alight. Malekith laughed.

His laughter faded as he looked up at the sky. Things pressed heavily against the clouds, half visible but wholly incomprehensible. He felt all mirth drain from him. It was as if the skin of the world were stretched too tight over some gangrenous wound. He could smell the foulness of it on the wind, and feel it in his blood.

Memories of another moment and another sky like that crashed down on him, and the Eternity King shuddered in his armour. He had stepped into the realms of Chaos once, in a desperate gamble, and fought his way free only by dint of luck and willpower. The sky in that dread country, where time and space had no meaning save that which was given them by the whims of deranged gods, had looked the same.

'The world is dying, Seraphon,' he murmured, stroking the dragon's scales. 'All of our striving has come to nothing, it seems. Even as my deceitful mother swore.' He smiled beneath his mask. 'So be it. I am king, and I will face the end as a king.' He leaned back in his saddle, his cloak of shadows rippling about him as he gazed up at the roiling sky. 'Heed me well, you puny gods. Malekith, son of Aenarion, last true lord of the elves, has come to meet you on the battlefield. And as my father before me, I shall carve my name into your mind, so that you might shudder at the mere thought of it for all eternity. I shall break your fragile schemes, throw down your blood-soaked champions, burn your halls of decadent indulgence and scour the plague-ridden earth with cleansing fire.'

He drew his sword. 'You will win in the end, because that is the way of it. But I shall poison your victory with my last breath. Do you hear me?' he roared, casting his words into the howling winds. 'I shall not go lightly into destruction. I shall burn like a black sun, and you shall know fear before my standard is cast down. I will break this world before I let you claim it. This I swear.' He swept his blade out as magical lightning slammed down around him, shattering buildings and casting the bodies of the dead high in the air. The sky twisted in on itself, and the red light grew darker.

Malekith paid it no mind. He bent over, urging Seraphon to greater speed. Let all the gods stand in his way, if they dared. He was the Eternity King, and this world was his. And he would not lose it now, not without a fight.



Arkhan the Black watched in satisfaction as Krell and the Doomed Legion brought the gift of death to the enemies of Nagash. It had been but the work of moments to lend his sorcerous might to the great spell Teclis had woven in Athel Loren. Another power, too, had been there, lending aid, and between them, they had bolstered the reach of the spell so that more than just those in Athel Loren were caught up in its folds.

Almost the entirety of Nagash's army had been plucked from the pine-craggs and transported to the streets of Middenheim to join their master for the final battle. And it was the final battle. Arkhan could feel it in his bones. It was like an ache, edging towards true pain, and he welcomed it. He reached up to touch the Everchild's mark on his chest. Would her curse reveal itself soon, he wondered? Would it even get the chance? The very bedrock of the world was shifting beneath his feet, and he felt that soon it might swallow them all. Even Nagash himself might not survive. He pushed the thought aside, even as it occurred to him.

Oblivion, he thought. *To sleep at last, no more to be awoken, no more to be set on the war-road.* He watched as the northmen, heavy with sleep and ale, died swiftly beneath the axe of Krell. *Do you welcome the end, as I do?* he wondered, watching the wight wade through the enemy with obvious glee. Krell was an enigma to the living, but to Arkhan he was a brute, barely chained by Nagash's sorcery, a creature not wholly one thing or another. Now he fought those he once might have led, and without hesitation. No, he decided. No, Krell would not welcome an end to his days of slaughter.

Nor would others, Arkhan suspected. Vlad was in this city somewhere – he could feel the vampire's black soul, pulsing like a ghost-light – and he had no intention of succumbing to oblivion. Vlad was as treacherous as Mannfred, and, worse yet, far wiser than his protégé. When the end came, when the Great Work at last came to its resolution, Vlad would pit himself against Nagash; else why would he seek to curry favour with humans and elves alike?

And he was not the only one. Neferata too would rally her followers, and set her standards in opposition to the Undying King. Arkhan felt some slight satisfaction at the thought... He had counselled Nagash to leave her as castellan of Sylvania for that very reason. Let Neferata cull the more treacherous elements of the dead for her own armies. Best to know who the enemy was, when the time came.

'*COME*,' Nagash said. Arkhan looked up at his master. Nagash surveyed the carnage as if it were of no more import than a squabble for table scraps between dogs. The Great Necromancer started forwards, almost floating as the spirits of the dead rose to join the throng which surrounded him. Arkhan followed in his wake, lending his spells to those of his master as they drew those slain by Krell and his wights back to their feet and added them to the already substantial horde. Nagash, it seemed, intended to drown the city in an ocean of corpses.

It was an effective tactic, if lacking in finesse. Arkhan glanced at his master. Then, the Undying King had never been one for finesse. But once, at least, he had understood subtlety. Now, even that seemed to have been discarded. In his own way, Nagash was just as much a brute as Krell – he was not human, not any more. Nor was he the liche who had resurrected Arkhan to serve him in Nagashizzar. He had become something else, something far closer to the gods of old Nehekhara. A vast, irresistible force aimed at a distant target.

Cries filled the air. Arkhan looked up. Few buildings still stood in this part of Middenheim, and those that were in evidence had been repurposed into slave pens. Arkhan saw that many, if not all, of the captives were clad in the ragged and faded uniforms of a number of provinces. As the northlanders flooded past the ramshackle gates of the pens, the slaves had begun to cheer, but those cheers became screams as they saw the dead shambling in their captors' wake.

'*Should we free them? Such chattel might be useful, in the coming fray*,' Arkhan said, looking up at Nagash. The other Incarnates, he knew, would look kindly on such an action. Such small mercies were the way to bind their unwilling allies to them all the more tightly.

'*YES. WE SHALL FREE THEM*,' Nagash intoned. He reached out a hand, and Arkhan felt the Winds of Death rise. Amethyst light played about Nagash's outstretched claw, and then a darkling fire washed across the stinking pens which covered Neumarkt, choking the life from all it touched. The screams rose to a fever pitch, and then, all at once, fell silent.

But they did not stay silent for long. Soon, every corpse in Neumarkt was rising to its feet, and making to join the still-shambling throng. They smashed from their pens, and rose from the streets, and fell in with the horde, which continued on through the city and into what had once been the Great Park. Arkhan said nothing as the dead swarmed. Nagash was his master, and Arkhan's will had never been his own. Better to argue with the storm, than with the Undying King.

There, amongst the burned-out trees and bald earth, the enemy had chosen to make their stand. The horde lurched to a stop at a simple gesture from Nagash. Arkhan took in the thick ranks of steel shields which lined the park's eastern overlook, and the warriors who crouched behind them. Behind this bulwark, sorcerers chanted loudly, tracing strange sigils in the air, and the air grew hot and foul as fell sorceries were worked.

Nagash laughed. The distant chants faltered and fell silent, as the sound of it crawled across the park and into the ears and hearts of the enemy. It was a terrible sound, like the crackle of ice-covered bones as they were trod underfoot.

Nagash looked down at Arkhan, his eyes glowing balefully. He swept out his staff to indicate the followers of Chaos. '*LOOK, MY SERVANT. MORE SLAVES TO BE FREED.*' Nagash set his staff and set the dead to moving again with but a thought.

'*LET US SHATTER THEIR CHAINS.*'



Vlad von Carstein caught the northman's chin and wrenched his head to the side. There was a sharp pop as the man's neck snapped, and the vampire sank his fangs into the dying man's throat. When he had finished, he shoved the body aside to join the others, and dragged the back of his hand across his mouth. The blood tasted foul, but it was nourishing enough.

The group of northmen, clad in reeking furs and black iron, had been as surprised as he when he'd appeared suddenly in their midst. He'd felt the magics that Teclis had invoked, but had not grasped their intent until he had been surrounded by startled warriors. He'd recovered his wits first, and then butchered the lot. He looked around. He recognised the Palast District easily enough, though it had been substantially redecorated since he'd last visited Middenheim.

'Ah, Jerek, my old friend, you would weep to see your city treated so,' he murmured as he took in the sheer, bewildering scope of the desecration which had occurred. Even Konrad, bloody butcher that he had been, would have been in awe. The gardens and palaces he had once known so well were now lost beneath a charnel shroud.

Lacerated offerings to the Blood God hung from gore-slicked trees, or lay chained in fountains given over to bubbling blood. Bodies hung from gibbets or crow-cages, or were impaled on fire-blackened stakes. Some of the victims of these tortures still lived, mewling pitifully, their eyes gouged out and their tongues cut loose from their moorings. Even Vlad, who thought he had seen the worst the world could offer up in his centuries of life, was disgusted by it all.

There was no artistry here, no purpose to the pain, and thus it was all a monumental waste. And if there was one thing Vlad could not abide, it was waste.

This was what awaited the world, if the Incarnates failed. He shook his head, more determined than ever to see this affair put to rest. He passed through the blood-sodden gardens like a ghost, delivering the mercy-stroke more than once on his way. Sounds of battle echoed through the district, and every figure he observed – be it armoured northerner or, more disturbingly, feral, pale-fleshed elf woman – was running south.

He followed them at a safe distance, killing only when necessary to hide his presence, and keeping to the walls and rooftops when he could. He was certain, given the sounds of battle wafting back towards him, that he would find allies at the end of his journey, though whether they would be in any state to aid him was another matter. He pursued the horde to the heart of the Middenplatz, where a scene of impressive carnage met his eyes.

Perched atop the northern gatehouse, he watched as treemen traded booming blows with bestial giants, and braying gor-bands hewed at shrieking drayds with crude axes. Whistling arrow volleys raced across the red skies, thudding into horned skulls and twisted bodies. The elves and their allies were surrounded on all sides by a seething ocean of madness. Beastmen, blood-cultists and daemons all were in evidence, and no matter how many fell, more took their place. As Vlad watched, one howling berserker cut through his own bestial allies to reach the elves, only to be smashed aside by a treeman a moment later.

He saw Alarielle at the battle's heart, jade life-magic flowing from her hands, healing wounds and restoring her fallen warriors to fight anew. Even so, it was plain enough to Vlad that Alarielle was growing weaker. She was pale and drawn, and her limbs trembled with fatigue... or perhaps pain. He suspected that she would have fallen long since, had the ancient creature fighting at her side not supported her. The vampire recognised Durthu easily enough – the treeman was hard to forget. The indomitable creature stood like a breakwater against the forces which lapped about them, and his mighty fists and gleaming sword brought death to any who sought to harm the Everqueen.

Vlad had commanded enough armies in his time to recognise when one was doomed. Alarielle's forces were being steadily ground down, and even his power was not so great as to turn the tide. An army was required, and he was but one man. He sank to his haunches and watched. He could not save them, and he had no intention of dying with them, but even so, he could not make himself depart. Alarielle fought on, despite her weakness, and Vlad could not help but be enthralled.

It might be possible, he thought, to save her. Her warriors were doomed, but if he were fast enough, he might be able to extricate her from the slaughter. She would not thank him for it, he suspected, but the other Incarnates certainly would. He readied himself to lunge into the fray, but before he could so much as twitch, the air was split by the roar of cannons and the entire eastern wall of the Middenplatz blew apart. Chunks of jagged stone flew across the square, pulverising beastmen and blood-cultists in their dozens.

Vlad was nearly knocked from his perch by the force of the explosion. As he regained his balance, he heard the crack of gunfire. Bullets punched through the spiralling dust and gromril armour gleamed in the smoke. Dour and dolorous voices erupted into song, and the sound of heavy boots on the march filled the air.

Alarielle and her forces had needed an army, and it seemed an army had come. Vlad smiled as he recognised Gelt, standing tall among the runic banners of the Zhufbarak. Hammerson was with him, looking none the worse for wear. That they both had survived was a surprise, but a pleasant one. Vlad drew his sword and readied himself to join the fray as, with a great shout, the armoured ranks of the dwarfs started forwards, and battle was joined.

The Sudgarten

Wendel Volker threw back his head and howled. His sword flashed, cutting down a skaven in mid-leap, and he led his followers forwards. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he caught glimpses of what had befallen Middenheim in his absence. The air stank of ash and ruin, and rage warred with sorrow in him as he led his motley band of priests, flagellants, foresters and knights into the heart of the skaven horde to avenge the city he had fought for and failed.

Teclis had brought them back, somehow. The last Volker recalled, he and his men had been hurrying towards the King's Glade, to lend aid to the embattled Incarnates. Now they fought through the tangled streets of the Sudgarten, against ratmen rather than daemons. He and his men loped in the wake of the Emperor and those knights who still had horses to call their own – banners bearing the emblems of the Reiksguard, the Knights Griffon and the Knights of the Twin-Tailed Comet rose above the wedge of armour and horseflesh that charged into the teeth of the jezzail-fire. Clouds of gun smoke rolled across the street, momentarily obscuring the enemy battle-line. A bullet plucked a howling flagellant off his feet and knocked him sprawling. Volker felt a shot whizz past his cheek, but didn't slow.

He longed to lose himself in battle, to join the ghosts he saw swirling about him everywhere he looked. Goetz, Dubnitz, Martak and others, including faces he had not seen since the fall of Heldenname, like the brutal Kross or old Father Odkrier. They watched him from the windows and doorways, from behind the enemy ranks and just out of the corner of his eye. They coalesced in the smoke, and their faces rose through the blood that trickled between the cobbles. They spoke to him, but he could not hear them. Ulric's snarls drowned them out.

The fury of the wolf-god burned in his breast, driving him on through the stinking powder smoke despite his fatigue. Gregor Martak's parting gift had been less a blessing than a curse. Volker had not slept since he'd escaped Middenheim the first time, leading those survivors he could to the dubious safety of Averheim, thanks to the godspark nestled within him. Most of those he'd saved were now dead, so perhaps it hadn't mattered either way.

He felt his bones shudder in their envelope of flesh, and knew Ulric was lending him strength. He pivoted as the god growled a warning, and caught the crashing blow of a rat ogre on his shield. The force of the impact drove him to one knee. A burst of light blinded him as he readied himself for a second blow. He heard the rat ogre shriek, and saw it turn and rear back, pawing at its eyes, as a golden, glowing shape rose up before it. A blade flashed, and the creature toppled like a felled tree.

The elf, Tyron, galloped past, shining like the sun, and behind him came the knights of the elves, moving more quietly, but no less swiftly, than their human allies. The elves had appeared near the western gatehouse of Middenheim alongside the Emperor and his followers. Now they fought side by side, as they had centuries past, against the forces of another Everchosen. Volker rose to his feet and turned, Ulric muttering in his head. *He cannot be trusted*, the wolf-god snarled. *He is the thief's brother!*

'Shut up,' Volker hissed. A crude spear dug for his vitals and he smashed it down with the bottom of his shield, before driving his sword into the throat of the skaven who held it. He drove forwards, forcing skaven aside with his shield, and cutting down those who would not be moved. Around him, men and elves moved up, whether on horseback or on foot, and the skaven steadily retreated, falling back through crossroads and squares.

You dare? I am Ulric!

'You're bloody annoying is what you are,' he muttered. The god had been in his head since Martak had given him up, and he hadn't shut up since. Sometimes, Ulric talked so much that Volker had trouble telling which thoughts were his, and which belonged to the wolf-god. Every day, there was a little less of the man he had been, and a little more of the thing Ulric was turning him into. The wolf-god had eaten him hollow.

He heard the scream of the Emperor's griffon and saw the beast swoop low over the melee, scooping up skaven in its talons as it went. It dashed the unlucky ratmen against the cobbles as it banked and turned. The Emperor clung to the beast's back and swung his runefang out, lopping off limbs and crushing skulls.

He is tiring, Ulric rumbled. *He is but a man, with a man's frailties*. Volker felt a moment of panic, and muttered, 'Is that what you were waiting on, then? To jump from me to him, the way you left Martak?' He knew, without knowing how, that if that occurred, he would die not long after. Part of him was even looking forward to it.

I did not leave Martak. I died with him. As I will die with you, Wendel Volker. I have split myself again and again, until I am but a sliver of the god-that-was, all to survive, to reach this moment, when I might sink my fangs into the flesh of the one who took my city – my people – from me. I am Ulric, the god of battle, wolves and winter, and I will have my vengeance!

'For all you know, Teclis is dead,' Volker growled. He hacked down on an armoured stormvermin, knocking the black-furred skaven off its feet. It lashed out at him with a heavy, serrated blade. He felt the tip scrape across his cuirass, and dodged back. Before the skaven could get to its feet, his sword hammered down to split its skull. 'And if he's not, we might need him,' he added, desperately.

I will have vengeance, Wendel Volker. Whether the world lives or dies, Middenheim will be avenged. You will be avenged, Ulric growled.

Then his head ached with the mournful cry of innumerable wolves, and he threw back his head and howled again and again, as he fought on. And as he fought, Wendel Volker's tears turned to ice on his cheeks.

The Merchant District

'Waaagh!'

Orcs spilled through the streets like a green tide of violence, and unprepared northmen and panicked skaven drowned beneath them. They hacked, thumped and head-butted their way through the ruins of Middenheim's merchant district and with every foe who was pulled down by the brawling horde, be they armoured Chaos warrior or skittering skaven jezzail team, the war cry only grew louder. It was a deep, feral rumble that rose and spread ahead of the onslaught, louder even than the sounds of battle.

'Waaagh!'

Crude blades smashed down through iron shields and crumpled steel helms as the orcs hacked at their foes with a wild abandon, inflamed by a force beyond their comprehension. They chopped at the enemy until their blades blunted and broke, and then continued to pummel their foes with bloody fists.

The greenskin warlord fought at the head of the horde, his axe spinning like a bloody whirlwind about him as he bellowed challenge after challenge. Massive, broken-toothed and clad in battered armour, where Grimgor Ironhide went, the enemy shield-walls split and Chaos champions died, the names of their gods still on their lips. Monstrous beasts, strong with the stuff of Chaos, fell dismembered, and their remains were trodden into pulp as the horde rampaged on through the streets, tireless and relentless.

Grimgor caught a northman by his bone-bedecked beard, and yanked the unlucky man forwards. Their skulls met with a resounding crack and the northman slumped back, his skull cracked open like an egg. Grimgor licked blood and brains from his lips as he shoved the body aside and drove his axe down on an upraised shield covered in writhing, shrieking colours. He split the shield, releasing a wailing prismatic spray, and reached through the ruins to grip the throat of its bearer. 'Get over 'ere,' he growled. He flung the brawny warrior into the air, and roared, 'Lads, catch!'

Behind him, his Immortulz cheered as they hacked at the fallen human, painting themselves with his blood and howling with laughter at his screams. Ahead of Grimgor, the humans were falling back, retreating through the close-set streets, keeping their shields between themselves and the orcs. He'd fought them long enough now that he knew what they were planning. The horse 'umies, on the plains, would scatter and reform – it was like trying to bash rain. But these were the iron 'umies... They'd fall back and form a shield-wall, and wait for their bosses to send for reinforcements. He knew from experience that iron 'umies could hold out for a long time. If they didn't want to move, they didn't.

For some reason, that wasn't as pleasant a thought as it might normally have been. He felt an itch, just to the left of his skull, and knew Gork wanted him to keep moving. *Go fasta*, the god growled, *fastafastaFASTA!*

Grimgor threw back his head and bellowed in frustration as Gork's words cascaded across his brain. Why couldn't the 'umies just take a kicking? They had to know that they couldn't get away from him, or resist him. They were worse than the bull-stunties, with their armour and fire and whips.

A grin split Grimgor's grotesque features as he recalled how the stunties had wailed as he'd torn down their city of pillars and pits, freed their slaves and toppled their statues. That'd teach them to break their staves on his hide. That'd teach them to try to make Grimgor a slave. The grin faded, and the old anger came back, hotter and fiercer than any stunty fire-pit. He lifted Gitsnik and pressed the flat of the great axe to his brow. His gnarled frame was a patchwork of scars, most earned properly, in the heat of battle. He'd fought stunties – both kinds – and rats and gits and big-bellies aplenty in the past few months, but it had always come back to the bull-stunties and their fire-pits. Their whips and chains and iron staves.

They had given him his first scars when he'd been no more than a runt. And he owed them for that.

Gork had shown him favour, filling him with strength enough to kick over the stunties' towers and turn their ziggurat of black obsidian into rubble. But first, he'd broken skulls and taken heads and put together the biggest Waaagh! around – orcs, goblins, even ogres. After Gork had blessed him with his strength, he had crushed Greasus Goldtooth's skull with the ogre's own mace. In the years that followed, he had broken the back of the Necksnapper and shattered the lodges of the Hobgobla Khan. He had cracked the Great Bastion, and burned the dragon-fleets of Nippon. The East was green, and it was his. But it hadn't been enough. Something was pulling him west. Gork, maybe, or Mork, drawing him towards a bigger fight. A better fight. He could feel it in his veins, thrumming along, like that time Gitsnik had got hit by a lightning bolt.

He'd thought, at the time, he'd found that fight in the city of the bull-stunties, but the gods hadn't even let him enjoy the krumpin' he'd given them before they'd scooped him up, and all his boys with him, and deposited him into the middle of a fight. A big fight, bigger than any he had ever seen. There were 'umies, rats, stunties, point-ears, and bone-men – every flavour of opponent. For a moment, Grimgor thought he'd died and gone to Gork's hall, but then he'd got an arrow in the head and realised that they were in a human city. He reached up to scratch the wound. The arrow had got dislodged somewhere along the way, and the wound had already scabbed over. Gork clamoured in his head and Grimgor shook his head in irritation.

He lowered his axe and eyeballed the northmen. He grunted and turned. Gork wanted him to get to the heart of the city, and fast, and Grimgor wasn't of a mind to argue with the gods... not yet anyway. This situation called for a bit of... Morkishness. 'Oi, Wurrzag!' he bellowed, punching his Immortulz aside to clear a path. 'Get up here, ya git.' He knew the crazed shaman would be close. Wurrzag was never very far away these days, not since Gork had reached down and given Grimgor a flick on the noggin.

Orcs and ogres made way for a capering, tattooed figure, wrapped in badly stitched hides and wearing a wooden mask decorated with feathers. Wurrzag wobbled to a halt before Grimgor, twitching in time to some internal rhythm. Grimgor grimaced. The air around the shaman sparked and crackled with energy that made an orc's blood fizz and his flesh itch. Wurrzag shook his staff under Grimgor's nose. 'All hail da once and future git,' the shaman warbled. The shaman hesitated in mid-hop. 'Werl, one o' dem, anyways.'

'Yeah, shut up wiv' that nonsense and go do that fing you do, right?' Grimgor snarled, gesturing towards the enemy with his axe. He wanted to plant Gitsnik right in the middle of the shaman's stupid mask on general principles, but Wurrzag was too valuable. 'They is in my way, and I want 'em gone. Gork wants me somewheres else, and I intend to go there. But that ain't here, so go blast 'em.'

'Yes, oh mighty git,' Wurrzag squawked, shaking his staff.

'And stop calling me a git,' Grimgor roared, as the shaman twitched past him. He turned and raised his axe. 'Golgfag, get over 'ere,' he snarled, as he caught the ogre's attention. Golgfag muscled aside a couple of orcs, and only had to thump one of them. They were scared of the ogre, and Grimgor didn't like that. The only thing his lads ought to be scared of was him. 'Get your lads up here,' he bellowed at the ogre. 'Me and you are breaking that shield-wall. You got a problem with that?' He glared at the ogre challengingly. Golgfag and his ogres had joined the Waaagh! as it crossed the Worlds Edge Mountains, and he'd come close to killing the mercenary more than once. Every time, Gork had whispered to him and quelled his anger.

The big ogre had proven more useful than most of his greedy kin – he was as smart as any runt, and dead sneaky when he needed to be. It had been Golgfag who had got the gates of Zharr Naggrund open, so Grimgor's lads could barrel in. The ogre had held the great iron gates open, despite having half a dozen stunty crossbow bolts in him. He and Grimgor had fought side by side and back to back up the steps of the black ziggurat, and had toppled the massive statue of the stunties' bull-god, alongside Borgut Facebeater and Wurrzag. That had been a good day, even if he'd had to kill ol' Borgut later, on account of him trying to make himself boss. He missed Borgut. Not at the moment, but in general.

'Got no problems, boss,' Golgfag rumbled. He wore a heavy horned helm that added to his already considerable height, and for an instant, Grimgor considered cutting him off at the knees. He didn't like standing in the ogre's shadow. 'Happy to bash whoever, wherever, whenever.'

'Good,' Grimgor grunted. He heard the air sizzle behind him, and felt his skin prickle. The light turned green, and cast weird shadows on the buildings around them. All around him, orcs, ogres and goblins set up a caterwauling and men screamed. He turned to see Wurrzag dancing a madcap jig as the shield-wall crumbled beneath a storm of crackling emerald lightning. Grimgor felt the strength of Gork rising in him, an elemental fury that outstripped even his own boiling anger. He grinned and Golgfag stepped back warily.

'Let's get to bashing then,' Grimgor snarled. He lifted his axe and waved his Immortulz forwards. Golgfag roared out for his followers, and the mingled wedge of black orcs and ogres took the fore as they thundered towards the enemy lines that Wurrzag had softened up. Grimgor sped up, wanting to get the first lick in. He caught Gitsnik in both hands and lifted it. 'I'm gonna stomp you ta dust, and break your bones,' he roared, hurling his words towards the faltering shield-wall. 'I'm gonna pile yer bodies in a big fire and cook 'em good! I'm gonna bash heads, break ya faces and jump up and down on the bits that are left!'

And when I get where Gork wants me ta go, I'm gonna get really mean, he thought in satisfaction. Then, he was upon the enemy, and there was no need to think at all.



SIXTEEN

The Temple of Ulric, the Ulricsmund

'How tedious. Surely we are all capable commanders. I do not need my hand held, even if I were intending to commit myself to an afternoon of carnage,' Sigvald the Magnificent groaned, one arm flung over his head as he reclined on the steps of the dais which led up to Archaon's throne. 'Dechala, my love, please inform the Everchosen that I am afflicted with ennui and will be unable to sully my fingers with the grime of battle today.' He flapped a hand at the serpentine shape of the daemon princess known as Dechala the Denied One.

Dechala possessed the upper body of the beautiful elfen princess she had once been, and the lower body of an immense serpent. She hissed at Sigvald. Whether it was a sign of annoyance, or some form of flirtation, Canto could not say. He watched as she slithered closer to the manacled form of the elf mage, Teclis, where he lay huddled next to the dais. His robes were filthy and blackened and his face was turned away from the gathering, but Canto knew he was still paying close attention, even so. He was a cool one, was the elf, and he stank of powerful magics. Even though he was a prisoner, Canto knew it was best not to get too close to him. Dechala, however, seemed unconcerned. She caressed him gently, as if trying to tease a lover awake, and leaned close, her tongue flickering.

She caught Canto watching her, and wrinkled her nose in a fashion that had him momentarily forgetting the six arms and the spiky bits. *Don't even think it, Canto*, he thought. Those who knew such things said that Dechala's embrace was a moment of pleasure, followed by an eternity of pain. She had been in Ind, he knew, alongside Arbaal, bringing the wrath of the gods down on that far land, until she and her rival had been scooped up by whatever dark forces were responsible for such things and brought to Middenheim.

He turned away as one of the others he'd brought to the temple at Archaon's behest made his feelings known. 'Cease your prattling, Geld-Prince,' Arbaal the Undefeated rumbled. 'The gods have called us here to do battle with their enemies. Would you deny their wishes?'

'And are you so arrogant as to know the wishes of a god not your own?' the horned, winged creature known as Azazel, the Prince of Damnation, purred as he sauntered out from behind Archaon's throne. The daemon prince's talons clicked across the haft of Ghal Maraz, where it was mounted above the throne.

Arbaal growled wordlessly and hefted his axe. A large, scaly paw pressed itself to his cuirass, stopping him from hurling himself at Azazel. 'None of us know the will of the gods,' Throgg, the self-proclaimed King of the Trolls, rasped. 'At least not until it is too late.' The troll was larger than any other of his kind that Canto had ever had the misfortune to run across. And his eerie self-control was equally as disturbing as Dechala's sinuous attempts at seduction. They said the troll had been plucked from Kislev by the whims of the gods, and that he bore the marks of battle on him. Canto wondered who would be insane enough to go toe-to-toe with Throgg. Then, he wondered whether they had survived.

'All I know is that I was enjoying the finest flesh Parravon had to offer, before I was whisked back to this inglorious termite mound,' Sigvald said. 'I am without even my sword-boy, or my mirror-eunuchs. How am I expected to perform without my mirror-eunuchs?'

'We all have our burdens to bear, Geld-Prince,' Mannfred von Carstein said. The vampire examined his talons, not looking at Sigvald, or, more pointedly, at the shrouded figure of Isabella von Carstein, who stood well away from the creature who shared her name. The two vampires had studiously ignored one another since Mannfred's arrival.

Canto watched Mannfred warily. He still didn't understand why Archaon had allowed the beast, or, for that matter, creatures like the renegade dark elf priestess Hellebron, into the city. They were treachery incarnate, and if they knew what the Everchosen was planning – indeed, if any of the gathered champions knew – they would turn on him in an instant. 'And in any event, eunuchs are easily replaced,' Mannfred continued.

'Are you volunteering, prince of leeches?' Sigvald purred. 'I believe I have just the paring knife for you...'

Mannfred laughed. 'Would that I could, barbarian.' The vampire turned his red gaze on Sigvald. 'Would that I could match my strength against yours, but... well. We have enemies enough, I think, and on our very doorstep.'

'Our doorstep, vampire?'

Canto stiffened as Archaon's hand fell on his shoulder. 'You have brought them all?' the Everchosen said, gazing at the assemblage.

'As many as weren't already engaged, my lord,' Canto said, as Archaon stepped past him. 'Hellebron has already brought the foe to battle in the Palast District, and only a few of the skaven are not currently hard-pressed,' he continued, gesturing to the tiny knot of skaven who stood near von Carstein. The ratmen looked nervous, as well they should have – they were not well liked by their allies. 'Harald Hammerstorm will do as he wills, as ever. And the other warlords send their regrets, I'm sure.' Not that there were many of the latter left. Most of the champions and warlords worth the name had already gone to join the gods, in one fashion or another. Those that hadn't died in the taking of the city, or during the assault on Averheim, had crossed Archaon and paid for that temerity with their lives.

'What of the Broken King?' Archaon asked, his amusement evident.

Mannfred and Isabella were not the only dead things in Archaon's service. The Broken King was another – a foreign potentate, ruler of a dead land, clad in shattered vestments and filthy wrappings. He was one of the skeletal princes of far Nehekara, though which one, he had never revealed, even as he prostrated himself before the Everchosen's throne in the months after the destruction of Averheim.

'He has already gone to confront the enemy,' Canto said. In truth, he did not know where the Broken King was, or what he was up to, and he did not feel like hunting the creature down to ask it. Let it live or die, as it wished.

Archaon said nothing for long moments. Then he shook himself slightly, and murmured, 'Monsters and fools. How fitting.' He looked around. 'We are besieged. You all know this, and you know too that this is the last roll of the dice for our enemies. This is the last gasp of the civilised lands, and when this battle is done... the gods will reward us.' Archaon made a fist. Canto felt a chill streak through him, and he glanced upwards, towards the red sky clearly visible through the shattered dome of the temple.

The gods are watching, he thought. But he didn't think they particularly cared who won. He looked at Archaon. *You don't either. Not really. Because you think you've already won. It's a foregone conclusion to you...* Because it wasn't about battles or enemies for Archaon. Not now. Now it was all about time and fire. While the rest fought, he contented himself with stoking the flames. Canto gripped the hilt of his sword and wondered how one might escape those flames when one was already in the pot.

Archaon was still talking. 'The enemy are scattered, for now. If we are quick, we might be able to destroy them piecemeal. If not, well...' He spread his hands. 'Such is the will of the gods.' He gestured to Arbaal. 'Most important are those closest to hand. A host of elves is on our doorstep, just east of here. Their skulls are yours, should you wish.'

Arbaal nodded silently. Archaon looked at Dechala. 'You will take the south – the Sudgarten. The enemy muster there as well.' As the elf-snake hissed her agreement, Archaon motioned to Isabella. 'And you, countess... you shall reinforce Hellebron in the Palast District. Catch the enemy between the

engines of blood and pox, and crush them.'

Isabella, face hidden behind her veil, gave no sign that she'd heard. Instead, she simply turned and strode away, accompanied by Arbaal and Dechala. Canto looked towards the dais and saw that Azazel was gone as well, though the daemon prince had been given no orders. Archaon didn't seem concerned for such trivialities. He turned to the skaven. 'Darkendwel,' he said, addressing the large shape which crouched above the knot of skaven warlords, perched high on a broken statue.

The shadowy shape of the skaven verminlord twitched as Archaon spoke its name. The squabbling warlords and seers gathered about it fell silent as the Everchosen turned to face Darkendwel. 'The orcs in the merchant district. Do they fight alongside the others?' Archaon asked. 'Have our enemies grown so desperate as to elicit the aid of mindless savages?'

'No, O most mighty King-With-Three-Eyes,' the verminlord chattered. It hesitated, and then added, 'Or such does not appear to be the case.'

'Then find out,' Archaon rumbled. 'Lead them towards... the Wynd, I think. Let us see if they prefer the elves as playmates.' Archaon cocked his head, as if in thought. Then, 'I was sorry to hear that your fellow verminlord, Visretch, fell to the blade of the elf-prince, Tyrior. I had much I wished to discuss with him, when the time came.' Canto smiled as Darkendwel tensed. One of the verminlords had been responsible for killing Valten, against Archaon's wishes. The Everchosen hadn't found out which one had struck the blow, but it wasn't for lack of trying.

'He died in your name, O most magnificent god-king,' the verminlord intoned.

'Then you can do no less,' Archaon said. He turned and pointed at Sigvald. 'The dead are yours. I want the skull of this so-called Undying King for a drinking cup, Geld-Prince.' Archaon glanced at Throgg. 'You will take your forces and join him. Sigvald will require assistance.'

'I require no such thing,' Sigvald said, pushing himself to his feet. 'And I will not share my glory with an ape in a crown.' He gestured dismissively towards Throgg. 'I can barely tolerate his smell... How do you expect me to fight alongside him?'

'I do not,' Archaon said simply. 'I expect you to die beside him. Perhaps I am mistaken. I am curious to see which it is.'

Sigvald gaped at him. The Geld-Prince's hand strayed towards the hilt of his sword, but Throgg reached him first. One scaly hand clamped down hard, trapping Sigvald's hand and wrist. The troll-king grinned unpleasantly. 'Come, beautiful one. We have carrion birds to feed, and dead men to set to rest,' Throgg rumbled. Sigvald jerked his hand free of the brute's grip and hurried away, Throgg trailing after.

'And what of me, O mighty Everchosen? What are your commands for me?' Mannfred said, bowing obsequiously, as they left. Archaon climbed the dais and took down Ghal Maraz before he glanced at him.

'Go where thou wilt, and die as you wish, leech. I have no commands for you, save that you remember whose side you have chosen, and that the gods have your scent, and they will harry you to destruction, should you forget.' Archaon gestured dismissively with the hammer.

Canto smiled slightly, pleased. Mannfred annoyed him. *Only room enough for two lickspittles in this court, I'm afraid*, he thought. As if the vampire had heard his thoughts, Mannfred turned a red-eyed glare on him. Canto's hand fell to the hilt of his sword, but Mannfred stormed past him, trailing shadow and the stink of old blood in his wake.

'I'm going to have to kill him, I think,' he said, without thinking.

'Possibly,' Archaon said. He still held Ghal Maraz in his hands. 'Then, possibly, it shall become unnecessary before long. It is all winding down, Canto. Can you not hear it? The wind which howls through the streets is the dying gasp of this sad world. The tremors which shake this mountain are but its death-shudders. Soon, it will all be done. All lies revealed, all gods thrown down, and the earth and sky made one.'

Canto shivered in his armour. His hand was still around the hilt of his sword. *One blow, that's all it would take... One swift blow, and then... Cathay*, he thought. Only there wasn't a Cathay any more, or an Araby, or anywhere that wasn't here. Still... just one blow...

'It would take more than one, Canto, and you know it,' Archaon said, softly. He did not turn around. Canto froze nonetheless. 'You had your chance once, to change the fate of all things, and you squandered it. You ran, rather than make a choice. In the end, it all comes down to choices, Canto. You chose to remain a man, in a world fit only for monsters. And now you face another choice.'

Archaon turned, Ghal Maraz swinging loosely in his grip. 'The gods are always of two minds, Canto. One mind says strike, and the other says hold. The gods see all possibilities and none, and they are blinded by this wealth of knowledge. So they plot within plot, and scheme against themselves, even in their moment of victory. For if I succeed, the game ends. The world ends and their playthings are but ashes on the cosmic wind.' He lifted the ancient hammer, turning it slightly in his grip, as if to admire the way the light glinted off the runes which marked its surface. 'Like this hammer, the Dark Gods are both creator and destroyer, and they cannot make up their minds as to which they are in any given moment.'

He swung the hammer experimentally. 'They are idiot gods, Canto – they are more powerful than you can conceive, but in truth, they are little better than giggling imbeciles, drawing shapes in the mud. They will crush this world into dust and blow it away, and then move on to some other world, some other place where the game begins again. That is the truth of it.' Archaon tossed the hammer aside carelessly, and it thumped down with a hollow clang. 'In a way, you were wise not to pledge your allegiance to any of them. That alone has given you the will to decide your own fate. The others will fight, because their gods demand blood. But you have a choice. Indeed, you have so many choices that I cannot help but envy you. I have no choices left to make, and am bound to my path.'

Canto shook his head. 'What... what choices?' he croaked.

'You could kill me,' Archaon said. He spread his arms. 'It might be enough to halt what has begun. With me dead, the gods would certainly turn away, though whether in satisfaction or anger, I cannot say. Or you could run. You could flee, and live for however long the world remains. I will not stop you.' Archaon crossed his arms. 'You could fight. You could be Unsworn no more, and perhaps even gain some measure of power in these final hours. Become a demigod like Azazel or Dechala, eternal and inhuman.'

Canto stared at him. After a moment, he said, 'None of those sound particularly enjoyable.' He looked down at his hand, clamped tight to the hilt of his sword, and, not for the first time, thought of Count Mordrek and the way he'd died. *An ending, that's all any of us are after*, he thought.

'Nonetheless, the choice is upon you at last. What do you wish to do, Unsworn?' Archaon asked. 'Which road will you take? Once, you showed some small touch of mercy, and spared the world its due punishment. Now, you have that chance again. Will you show it mercy a second time?' There was something in Archaon's voice which made Canto hesitate. A note of pleading perhaps, or resignation. It was the voice, not of a conqueror, or a great champion, but a man tired unto death, and wanting only oblivion.

Run and hide or stand and fight, Unsworn – your appointed hour has come round at last, he thought. He'd thought it had passed, but Middenheim, Averheim... it had all been a single moment, stretched over weeks and days. But now it was done, and he could no longer avoid it. He could only choose, as Archaon had said.

Canto's sword was in his hand, before he knew he had drawn it. There were no voices in his head, no whispers, only the sound of a tortoise of iron and crystal as it trudged on and on, into endless wastes, searching for something that could never be found. His sword slashed down towards Archaon's head, and then there was a flash of light, and pain and he was falling back – back onto the ground.

'I hoped you would run,' Archaon said solemnly. The Slayer of Kings hung loosely in his hand, its edge red with blood. It had cut through Canto's armour as if it were nothing. 'If you had run, I could have spared you this, for a few hours more. You have served me well, and without complaint, and I would have liked to have given you that much.'

Canto couldn't breathe. There was a fire in his belly, and it was consuming him from the inside out. Even so, he still managed to laugh. 'I... am running,' he wheezed. 'Death is the only escape from... from what's coming.' Pain swelled in him, choking off his laughter. Archaon knelt beside him.

'Do you fear the truth so much, then?' Archaon asked. He sounded regretful, and confused. *You aren't bound to your path, you just never bothered to look for another*, Canto thought, through a haze of agony. *Were you too scared? Is that it? Are you afraid, Everchosen? And here I thought I was the coward...*

'Whose truth?' Canto said, his voice barely a whisper. Archaon twitched, as if struck. The world was going red and black at the edges, and the pain had faded, leaving only a leaden weight on his limbs and heart. Canto closed his eyes. 'I'll not be forced to choose between dooms,' he slurred. 'Let the gods catch me if they can. I remain true to myself.'

Archaon said something, but Canto couldn't hear it. He could hear nothing now, save the distant laughter of thirsting gods, and the slow, soft wheeze of the tortoise as it walked on, towards the edge of the world.

Canto ran after it.



Teclis watched Archaon rise to his feet, sword still in his hand. He left the body of the Chaos warrior where it lay, and turned towards his captive. Teclis had not caught everything that had passed between them, but he thought he understood it regardless, and he cursed the warrior, whoever he had been, for not killing Archaon when he'd had the chance. The moment had passed now, and it would take more than a blade in the back to topple the Everchosen from

here on out.

'He was the world's last hope,' Archaon said, as he turned towards Teclis. 'I thought, for a moment, he might... but no matter. The way is clear and my path assured. Let the skies weep and the seas boil. Let us be free, at last, of the hideous weight of life.'

Teclis gathered his legs under him as Archaon strode towards him. 'Not all of us think it a burden,' he croaked. Archaon raised his sword and shattered the chains which connected the elf to the dais, as Teclis shied away instinctively. Archaon reached down and grabbed the chains, hauling Teclis upright.

'I do not care what you think, mage. I care only what you see. Come.' Archaon dragged Teclis up through the temple, onto the ancient battlements which surrounded the shattered dome. Teclis nearly stumbled and fell many times, but Archaon kept him moving with sharp tugs and cuffs about the head and shoulders. When they reached the open air, Teclis gulped it in, trying to clear his mouth and nose of the taste and smell of the foulness within the defiled temple.

Archaon paused at the top of the battlements. The Everchosen gazed out over the city, watching the play of light and shadow stretch across the ruins. Even from here, Teclis could hear the sounds of battle, and see the smoke. He could hear the boom of guns, and the raucous cries of the orcs. *And wasn't that a surprise*, he thought sardonically. It made a strange sort of sense. The Wind of Beasts had gone east and found a suitably bestial host. Appropriate, if unanticipated.

Archaon tugged on the chains. 'What do you see?' he rasped.

Teclis looked at him, and a dozen different answers sprang to mind. *What should I tell you? That the Incarnates are bound together by bonds of magic, and those same bonds are drawing them here? That it is fate, that it has come down to this, and that even the Ruinous Powers are but children in the hands of destiny?* But no. Archaon didn't want to hear any of that. The question had been rhetorical. The Everchosen was no longer a man, but merely a mechanism... a toy, wound up and set loose by irrational beings.

The elf sniffed. 'I see the end of all you have planned, and the fall of the Dark Gods.'

Archaon laughed. The sound set Teclis's gut to churning. 'Such defiance. Do you not fear me?' the Everchosen asked. There was no threat there. Only a question.

'What does it matter?' Teclis said. He examined the Everchosen, studying the stained armour, the ragged furs and the expressionless helmet. Once, he thought, the man before him could have been something else. There was a whiff of destiny deferred about him. It reminded him of Tyrior, in a way. Archaon could have, once upon a time, become the guiding flame for humanity, leading his folk out of the shadows and into glory.

Instead, he had become nothing more than a black fire, blazing at the heart of a world-consuming inferno. *You could have been a hero*, Teclis thought, and felt a wave of sadness sweep through him. *But you didn't even try, did you? Did you even have the chance?* He shook his head and looked out at the city. 'My life and death are irrelevant. I have played my part in this sorry affair.'

'Let me tell you what I see,' Archaon said, hauling Teclis close. 'I see a battle already won, and the dying spasms of a world already ended. Whether your allies win or lose, I win. Or were you hoping one of them might turn the tide? Your brother, perhaps?' Archaon shoved Teclis back.

Teclis fell to his knees on the hard stone. He ignored the pain, and glared up at the Everchosen. *So certain, are you? So assured of the outcome that it has blinded you to any other possibility. You made your choice, and you expect the world to fall into line with it.* He snorted. *You are more like my brother than I thought.* 'Armies are not the only expression of strength. And my brother is not who you should fear. It is the Emperor.'

'Karl Franz is a weakling. A mortal serving a false god in the name of a nonexistent empire,' Archaon said. 'I tore his magic from him, and sent him running.'

Teclis allowed himself a wintry smile. 'I did not say the Emperor is Karl Franz.' He looked away, out over the city. He could see the lights of the Incarnates, drawing close. And one in particular attracted his eye. He could feel Archaon's eyes boring into him. 'Karl Franz died in Altdorf, at the hands of your servants. He was a man, and he died a man's death. But an empire must have an emperor, and one came who answered the call.' He smiled. It had taken some time to puzzle it all out.

'What are you saying?' Archaon said.

'Did you really believe that the Heldenhammer would do nothing while you annihilated all that he built?' Teclis said. He turned and met Archaon's black gaze without flinching. 'Sigmar is coming, Everchosen. Even as he came for your predecessors. And with him, all of the fury and fire of this world which you so casually claim is dying.'

Archaon lashed out with a fist, and knocked Teclis sprawling. 'Sigmar is a lie,' he snarled. He grabbed Teclis's chains and jerked the elf to his feet. 'He is a lie!'

Teclis grinned through bloody lips. 'I hope I get to see you tell him that face to face.'



Mannfred cursed loudly and steadily as he stormed out of the Temple of Ulric and flung himself into Ashigaroth's saddle. The great beast groaned as it flung itself into the air at his barked command. Mannfred snarled uselessly as he flew over the rooftops of the Ulricsmund. It was all going wrong; he could feel it. The wind was shifting, but he couldn't tell in which direction. *This is not as I foresaw*, he thought. Victory had seemed so certain, then. Now, there was no certainty save that the end was fast approaching.

When he had arrived in Middenheim a few days earlier, Archaon had readily accepted his offer of fealty, even as he had that of the renegade elf priestess, Hellebron, and, even more surprisingly, Settra the Imperishable. The former king of Khemri was the last individual, living or dead, that Mannfred had expected to see here of all places. He'd thought the ancient liche reduced to dust and scattered across the sands of his beloved Nehekara, after his refusal to serve Nagash as a mortarch.

The Everchosen had seemed amused by these turncoats more than anything. And the Everchosen's other champions had wasted no opportunity to remind Mannfred of his new place in the scheme of things. He had been forced to defend himself, and his place in the pecking order, more than once. Such efforts had hardly been worth it, however.

He already regretted coming to Middenheim. This disrespect was the last straw. He would not fight for Archaon. Servitude to a jumped-up barbarian was no less galling than being Nagash's slave, and he had no taste for either. Let them fight one another. He would keep clear, and be ready to take advantage of what remained.

Ashigaroth hurtled on through the sky, as Mannfred turned his attentions to the battles taking place throughout the city. Somehow, Teclis had managed to drag the Incarnates and their followers to Middenheim, but he had not done so in any organised fashion. Nevertheless, they were moving steadily towards the Temple of Ulric, and Archaon. It would not take them long to smash aside the few obstacles Archaon had set in their path.

Mannfred glanced over his shoulder, back towards the temple. *What is your game, Everchosen? Why are you not making a more concentrated effort to stop them? What am I not seeing?* Since arriving in the city, he had attempted to uncover the reason for Archaon's seeming unwillingness to abandon the city. What was so important about Middenheim that Archaon would trap himself here?

Thus far, no answers were forthcoming. Archaon had shared his intent with few beyond his inner circle, most of whom were now dead by the hand of that fool, Canto. Archaon's executioner was nothing special – just another barbarian. But the others had deferred to him, as if he held some special place in Archaon's esteem. Mannfred's lip curled. As if a creature like that could be important.

Ashigaroth screamed and reared in mid-air. Mannfred fought to remain in the saddle as the beast bucked and shrieked. He twisted in the saddle, searching for what had disturbed his mount, and saw the sky over the Grafsmund split open, and spit out something like a falling star. He urged Ashigaroth closer, even as the falling thing slammed into the street and shook the city. Badly battered buildings collapsed all about the circumference of the newly made crater, filling the air with smoke and ruin. Northmen streamed through the streets below him, hurrying to confront the new arrival. Curiosity compelled him to follow suit.

The fallen rubble shifted and slumped as the monstrous form of a bloodthirster rose to its feet. The daemon was badly hurt, its unnatural flesh scorched by fire and marked by dozens of wounds, but it did not lack for strength as it tore its way free of the crater. The charging northmen had stumbled to a halt, and, as Mannfred watched, they sank down to their knees before the bloodthirster. As the smoke cleared, the vampire caught a good look at the beast, and he jerked on Ashigaroth's reins, pulling his mount up and away. Mannfred had studied the servants of the Dark Gods, and had familiarised himself with such entities as the Fateweaver and the Plaguefather. He knew Khome's Huntsman when he saw him, and he wanted to be nowhere near such a ravaging engine of destruction.

What the beast was doing here, he could only surmise. Archaon had sent Ka'Bandha to claim the skull of the Emperor – perhaps the daemon had simply followed his prey with the single-minded determination that so characterised the followers of the Blood God. The daemon unleashed a roar fraught with almost tangible frustration, and lashed out with the hammer it clutched in one claw, pulverising a number of the kneeling humans.

Ka'Bandha roared again. The surviving northmen, overcome by the daemon's bloodlust, threw back their heads as one and unleashed a warbling, communal howl. As the daemon strode away, the northmen followed, running on all fours as often as on two legs.

Mannfred shook himself. While he was immune to the daemon's presence, even he could feel the heat of the creature's rage. He urged Ashigaroth away, towards the Palast District. The more distance he put between himself and the daemon, the better. As he passed over the blood-soaked ruin Hellebron's cultists had made of the Middenplatz, a flash of movement below caught his attention. Something black, streaking across a rooftop.

Mannfred blinked. *Vlad*, he thought. *So, you've come as well. I thought you were smarter than that. Then, you could never resist a grand moment, could you?* He urged Ashigaroth in pursuit, and loosened his sword in its sheath. There was little chance, given the powers involved, that he could sway the battle one way or another. The thought galled him, but he was pragmatic enough to admit when he was outmatched. But he could accomplish at least one thing in the meantime.

Nagash should never have brought you back, old man, he thought. *And I'll see you sent back into the dark before this world ends.* Mannfred smiled cruelly as he hurtled in pursuit of the other vampire. Whatever else happened, whatever fate awaited Mannfred or the world he'd sought to claim, Vlad von Carstein would die.



SEVENTEEN

♣ The Wynd

Malekith cursed as the eastern flank of his forces began to buckle beneath the weight of the orc assault. The ruins shook with savage cries as the greenskins barrelled through the thinning ranks of the fleeing skaven and crashed into the elves. The elves fought with all of the discipline and fury of their race, but they could not match the pure, bestial ferocity of the newcomers. He tugged on Seraphon's reins, drawing the dragon through the air towards the collapsing lines. Below him, elves on horseback galloped to bolster the flagging flank.

He couldn't say where the greenskins had come from, nor did he particularly care. That they were here now and attacking his forces was all that was important. It had all been going so well. The skaven had been driven before them, fleeing like the rodents they were. But even as the elves had pressed forwards, the orcs had been lured onto a collision course with Malekith's forces. He could see the cunning pattern now – the ratkin had ever been willing to sacrifice thousands of their own kind in order to secure a minor victory. He cursed himself for not being more wary. Now he had a more persistent foe to contend with, and he knew, though he could not see them through the fog of war, that the skaven were likely regrouping. They would not have led both armies here, if they did not have some—

The thud of jezzail shots and the crackle of warp-lightning cannons interrupted his thoughts, and confirmed his suspicions. Seraphon caught an updraught and reared to hover in the air as, below, jezzail-shot thudded into the melee, gouging bloody trails of dead and wounded through the press of battle. Poisoned wind mortar shells burst open along his lines, claiming the lives of many elves, including the fierce corsairs of the Krakensides.

Of course, he thought. Why draw one foe into a trap, when you can draw two? Cunning vermin. Malekith snarled in frustration and jabbed his spurs into Seraphon's scales, urging the dragon on.

With a shriek, the great beast undulated through the air, eastwards, in search of the hidden skaven positions. Malekith hunkered low in his saddle as green lightning arced from a crumbled second-storey archway, and at his command, Seraphon tucked its wings and plummeted towards the ruins like a diving falcon. The black dragon smashed into the ruins hard enough to shower the streets below with debris, and its head snaked forwards, jaws agape. Thick, black smoke spewed from its maw, and filled the ruin. Dying skaven staggered into view, collapsing even as they tried vainly to escape the noxious poison.

Malekith summoned flames of shadow and sent them roaring into the depths of the ruin, searing those skaven whom Seraphon's breath had not reached. He laughed as the vermin burned, and longed to do the same to the whole city. Let it all burn, and be lost to darkness, so that the enemy might know the futility of standing against the Eternity King.

He heard a squeal from above him, and twisted in his saddle. Shapes dropped towards him from the upper reaches of the ruin, wielding curved blades that glistened with poison. Even as he raised his blade, he knew that he would not be able to stop every blow.

Something flashed in the dark, and spun past him. Several of the assassins went limp, like puppets with their strings cut, and smashed into the ground below. The remaining skaven landed on Seraphon's back and leapt towards him, only to die with his sword in its skull. As he swept the twitching carcass away from him, he turned to see a dwarf axe embedded in the stonework nearby. Whoever had thrown it had done so with consummate skill, killing two assassins in mid-air with a single throw.

'You never were any good at watching your back, were you?' a rough voice rumbled, from somewhere nearby. Malekith froze. He recognised the voice, though he had not heard it in millennia. Not since those dim, distant days before elf and dwarf had discarded all oaths of friendship, and gone to war. 'Just as well I was passing through.' He caught a glimpse of gleaming armour and a flash of white beard, and felt his heart lurch in memory of a pain he'd thought long forgotten.

'Snorri,' Malekith whispered. 'My friend – I...'

But the speaker, whoever they had been, was gone. He turned and saw that the axe was gone as well, as if it had never been. Malekith shook his head. He knew the legends, and had heard the stories from the lips of slaves and captives, but he had never believed... not until now. He smiled. *Go in peace, my friend, and meet your doom as is fitting.*

Even as the eastern knot of skaven guns fell silent, so too did those situated to the south. Malekith pushed aside old memories and regrets as he peered into the darkness and glimpsed the glint of golden murder-masks there – the Chainedancers had found new prey. Malekith's smile turned cruel as he heard the screams of the ratkin, and silently wished the sisters of slaughter luck in their hunt. 'Such hubris these vermin display, to believe that we are prey, eh, Seraphon?' he murmured, as he gave the dragon's reins a tug. The beast flung itself back into the air, wings pumping.

As he passed over the heaving sprawl of battle, a dull ache began to grow in his skull. It was a familiar sensation – the tug of strong magics, of the great winds of the Vortex striving against one another. He felt it most strongly when another Incarnate was close by. He peered down, and saw a war-hydra fall, its coils split by the bite of a crude axe. A burly figure bounded through the writhing death-spasms of the beast, and crashed into the close-packed ranks of the Phoenix Guard. Amber energy sparked and snarled around the orc, as if the creature were the eye of a storm.

'The eighth wind,' Malekith hissed. And bound to the body of a brute at that. Suddenly, the presence of the orcs made sense – this was Teclis's fault.

Much like everything else, he thought sourly. And like everything else, it is up to me to see to the rectification of this colossal blunder. The orcs were uncontrollable, and filled with the power of Ghur. They would ruin whatever slight chance of victory the Incarnates possessed.

'No, best to let the Wind of Beasts seek out a more fitting host,' he said, as he urged Seraphon into another dive. 'Once we have freed it from its current shoddy shell, of course.' The dragon roared, as if in reply, and dived down towards the orc warlord.

Improbably, the brute ducked beneath Seraphon's grasping talons. Malekith cursed as the dragon turned, jaws wide. The orc whirled and charged towards them, axe raised. The dragon spewed poison smoke, but the orc plunged through it heedlessly. Malekith blinked in shock, as the orc suddenly bounded from the cloud of poison and crashed down onto Seraphon's spined skull. Before the dragon could do more than issue a startled snarl, the orc was scrambling up Seraphon's ridged neck, towards the Eternity King.

The orc was even more monstrous up close, Malekith thought, even as he drew his blade to block a blow from that lethal axe. One eye blazed fiercely from a green, scowling face pitted with scars. The black armour was tarnished and piecemeal, but sturdy, and the orc's arms bulged with thick knots of muscle. There was a flare of light as their blades met, and Malekith grunted in pain as the force of the blow jarred his arm. The orc was strong; far stronger than he'd assumed. 'Grimgor is gonna gut ya,' the orc snarled, spraying spittle all over Malekith. 'Gonna rip out yer spine and beat ya to death wit' it. Gonna squish yer heart like it were a squig, and suck it dry!'

'You'll do nothing except scream, brute,' the Eternity King hissed. Malekith's hand snapped out, the clawed tips of his gauntlet sinking into the orc's arm, eliciting a bellow of pain. The orc rocked and his broad skull slammed into the faceplate of Malekith's helm, almost buckling it. Nearly jarred from his saddle, and dazed by the blow, Malekith slumped back, releasing his hold on the orc. The creature grinned and hefted his axe for a killing blow, but a sudden undulation from Seraphon as the dragon launched itself back into the air sent the brute tumbling away, back to the street below.

Before Malekith could attempt to spot where his foe had landed, a great chattering shriek rose from the north, and he turned to see a host of armoured skaven ploughing through the ruins of a burnt-out guildhouse, straight towards his already embattled forces. 'No,' he spat. 'No more of this foolishness.' Even as he spoke, however, the sound of more orcs arriving reached him. Hundreds of orcs were spilling through the rubble of storehouses and shops, an unyielding wave of green violence, seeking to sweep his embattled forces from the field. Giants and ogres lumbered amongst them, and squealing, snorting boar riders careened through the streets ahead of the rest.

His host was caught in the jaws of a trap, and there would be no escape. Not through force at any rate. His elves were too few, and even his own power, great as it was, could not prevail over so many enemies. *Is this it, then? Is this my fate – our fate? To be drowned in violence by uncomprehending savages or cowardly vermin? Am I to preside over ignominious defeat? Is that to be my legacy?* he wondered, as his heart sank and his warriors died.

No. No, this was not his fate. He had struggled too hard, fought too long to give it all up now due to the error of another. He was Malekith. He was supreme. He had survived the Flame of Asuryan not once but twice, and forged two nations in his lifetime. He had beaten daemons, and matched his will to that of the Dark Gods themselves and emerged whole and triumphant.

But there had ever been one common element to his victories. One foe that had to be defeated first, in every case. *Pride, damnable pride.* It was pride that drove him; he knew it and accepted it. It was pride that lent him strength, and pride too which had endangered his every plan and scheme. Pride told him that he needed no aid; pride murmured that he could find a more fitting host for the Winds of Death and Beasts; pride demanded that he fight to the last, against those he deemed inferior.

And it was with a single twist of his limbs that Malekith dashed pride to the ground, and dropped from Seraphon's saddle. He landed lightly, despite the weight of his armour, borne to the street by coiling shadows. The orc still lived, and was hacking his way through the Phoenix Guard with a single-minded determination that put Malekith in mind of Tyrion. *Brutes of a feather,* he thought, as he strode towards his opponent.

The orc roared as he caught sight of Malekith. Several of his followers made as if to charge the Eternity King, but the orc cut them down without hesitation. Malekith smiled. The beast would allow no other to claim his victory. *Pride is not the sole province of Asuryan's children,* he thought as he drew close to the rampaging orc. Amber light sparked and snarled about the orc warlord, illuminating him with a pale glow.

Well, now to see whether I am right... or dead, Malekith mused, as he swiftly sank down to one knee, bowed his head, and extended his sword hilt-first towards his opponent. 'I yield,' he said, loudly.

The orc, axe raised over his blunt skull, blinked. Malekith said, 'I yield, in my name, and in that of the elven race. We are your servants.'

The orc hesitated for a moment. Then a slow, cruel snarl of triumph spread across his features. The orc raised his axe and turned towards his brawling followers. '*Grimgor is da best!*' he bellowed. He pounded his chest with a closed fist, and his followers added their voices to his victorious roar.

'No,' Malekith said.

The orc whirled about. 'What?' the brute growled.

Malekith matched the beast's gimlet stare with one of his own. 'I – we came to this city to defeat one who claims that title for himself.' He flung a hand out to indicate the skaven. 'They serve him, as do the northmen. They say he is the best, the strongest warrior in the world. So strong that he intends to crack it, and drown what's left in fire.' Malekith inclined his head. 'How can Grimgor be the best, if Archaon kills the world?'

'Archaon,' Grimgor rumbled, drawing the Everchosen's name out like a curse. Amber sparks danced in the brute's good eye. The beast turned north, towards the Temple of Ulric. 'Archaon... thinks he's better than me?'

'I doubt that he thinks of you at all,' Malekith said.

'Take me to him,' Grimgor snarled, shoving the flat of his axe beneath Malekith's chin. 'I'm gonna bash 'im, and then I'm gonna stomp 'im, and then we'll see who's best.'

'It would be my pleasure,' Malekith murmured, rising to his feet. Grimgor snorted and turned. At a single bellow, his orcs began to flow around the elves, and towards the skaven. Malekith could almost admire the iron control the beast had over his simple-minded followers. But he still intended to plant his sword between the brute's shoulder blades once the day was won. He'd sacrificed his pride on the altar of necessity, but that didn't mean that matters between them were resolved.

I hope you survive what's coming, beast. If only so you can witness my supremacy first-hand, when your services are no longer required...



The Great Park

Arkhan the Black pinned the northman to the ground with a sweep of his staff, and watched disinterestedly as the savage convulsed and withered to a lifeless husk. It joined the others that surrounded him in an ever expanding ring of death, and he paid the body no more notice. It wasn't even worth raising to fight anew.

From around him rose the clangour of battle, as barrow-blade crashed against ensorcelled steel in a monotonous rhythm. Nearby, the wights of the Doomed Legion fought against the black-armoured reavers of the Wastes, both sides trampling the bodies of Kurgan and northmen beneath their heavy treads. With a gesture, Arkhan re-knit broken bones and rebound wicked spirits to their mouldering bodies, dragging those wights who had fallen back to their feet to rejoin the fight.

The sky had gone from red to black, and squirmed like a carcass full of maggots. The few remaining trees in the Great Park had been set alight by witch-fires as the battle surged back and forth. The living had been joined by a cavalcade of daemons – graceful, dancing shapes which moved with impossible quickness across the field. One such bounded towards Arkhan, her lilting song playing across the grave-whisper of his thoughts. Faces flashed in his mind's eye – Morgiana, Neferata, others, women he had loved and lost in his sorry life – but he ignored them easily enough. His will was not his own, and could not be broken so lightly. The vast, black bulwark of Nagash's thoughts steadied his own, and he interposed his staff as the daemonette's claws snapped shut inches from his skull.

The daemon hissed at him and he twisted to the side, throwing the androgynous creature to the ground. Before it could rise, he had drawn his barrow-blade and severed its head from its neck. He turned, blade still in hand, and scanned the park. Wailing spirits hurtled through the ashen air to the south, ripping the life from Kurgan warriors, even as the latter fought on beneath their skull-topped banners against a lurching, fire-blistered horde of zombies. He heard a rasping roar, and turned to see Krell's axe crash down on the mirrored shield of a creature he recognised as Sigvald the Magnificent. Arkhan had only crossed paths with the Geld-Prince once before, in Araby, but he knew that the Chaos champion was a deadly opponent, despite being a preening brat.

Arkhan extended his staff, unleashing a crackling amethyst hurricane of death-magics at the daemonettes who capered past Sigvald and Krell, unbinding them and reducing them to motes of glittering dust. Through the cloud, he saw Sigvald driven back by Krell's whirling blows, each of which bled seamlessly into the next.

Again and again, Sigvald lunged at Krell, his flickering blade skittering across Krell's ancient armour, but the wight gave no ground, and continued to drive his opponent before him. Krell launched a wide blow, meant to decapitate Sigvald, but the Geld-Prince ducked beneath it. The blow shattered the scorched husk of a tree, showering both warriors with cinders and ash. Sigvald lunged, and his sword punched through Krell's breastplate with a screech of metal and a puff of dust.

Krell staggered back, a dry, death-rattle laugh echoing from his fleshless jaws. He pivoted, wrenching the sword from Sigvald's grip, and backhanded him, sending the Chaos champion flying backwards. Arkhan nodded in satisfaction. All was as it should be.

Suddenly, a throaty roar split the cacophony of battle. Arkhan looked towards the overlook of the park and saw a vast, lumpen silhouette clamber over the hill. A tattered red cloak flapped about the beast's shoulders, and a tarnished crown pulsed strangely on its brow. Arkhan raised his staff warily. This creature too he recognised, though he had never before laid eyes on it. Arkhan had heard the stories from his agents in the north, of Throgg and his ice-palace in the ruins of Praag. Of the capture of sorcerers and mages of all races and descriptions; of Throgg's obsessions, and his fall at the hands of a one-eyed dwarf. *It seems that fall was not so long as one might hope,* Arkhan thought.

For now, it seemed as if the Wintertooth, the so-called King of the Trolls, had come to Middenheim, and he had not come alone. Trolls, giants and mutants of the northlands flooded down the overlook, smashing into both the dead and the living without regard to whether they were friend or foe. Feral minotaurs slaughtered Kurgan warriors as the gorgons of the Drakwald tore through the massed ranks of zombies.

Arkhan wove spells of strength and recovery with all the speed his dead limbs could muster, trying to hold the army of corpses together. He could feel Nagash's displeasure ripple through him, and with a twitch of his staff he summoned the surviving morphasts from the angry skies. The osseous constructs hurtled down like birds of prey, their spirit-bound blades chopping into bestial flesh. But for every dozen brutes and beasts that fell, a morphast was pulled down from the sky, to be hacked apart or torn limb from limb.

Though it took almost every iota of concentration he could muster to reform the destroyed constructs and fling them into battle once more, Arkhan kept

one eye on the duel between Krell and Sigvald. If the wight could manage to dispatch the champion, it might tear all heart from the surviving Kurgan and put them to flight. With them out of the way, the beasts would be easy prey. Or so he hoped.

That hope, however, proved to be in vain. Arkhan watched, disconcerted, as Sigvald lunged to retrieve his sword, still stuck in Krell's chest, and Krell's axe whistled down to shatter the mirror-shield the man held. Sigvald staggered back, sword in hand, face bloody. The axe had bifurcated the shield and gashed the Geld-Prince's handsome features, reducing one side of his face to a ruin. Sigvald clapped a hand to his mangled flesh and wailed like a dying cat. The champion lunged, still shrieking, and launched blow after blow at Krell.

Krell staggered back beneath the rain of wild blows. His axe lashed out in reply, scarring Sigvald's gleaming cuirass or scoring his flesh, but the Geld-Prince was too far gone to feel the blows, Arkhan realised. The two warriors whirled and clashed through the melee, smashing down any creature, living, dead or otherwise, unlucky enough to get between them. Arkhan considered lending Krell aid, but dismissed the idea even as it occurred to him. He had his own battle to fight – a roaring giant stretched a wide hand towards him, as if to scoop him up. Arkhan ducked under the grasping fingers and lashed out with his sword, slicing through the creature's wrist. The giant howled and retracted its limb, as Arkhan thrust his staff out and spat a killing word. The great beast staggered as its mighty frame began to shrivel and sag. It turned to dust even as it fell.

Arkhan heard a crash and spun. Sigvald, broken sword in hand, had borne Krell to the ground. One of the wight's arms was missing, and as Arkhan watched, Sigvald braced his knee against the other, pinning Krell. The champion was howling unintelligibly as he battered at the wight with his broken sword and bleeding fists. Krell's armour crumpled beneath the maddened Geld-Prince's blows, and Arkhan could feel the wight's spirit slipping loose from its husk. He took a step towards them, but found his path blocked by a massive shape.

Throgg roared and smashed his club down, narrowly missing Arkhan. The troll-king wrenched his weapon up, scattering cobblestones, and swung it again. Arkhan twisted aside and hacked a bloody trench in the troll's side. Throgg staggered, clapping a hand to the steaming wound. His club found Arkhan's hip, pulverising the bone. Arkhan stumbled, and it was only thanks to his staff that he stayed upright. He dragged himself out of reach as his bones re-knit, but Throgg didn't follow. Instead, the troll seemed captivated by Sigvald and Krell's confrontation.

Arkhan shuddered as he heard the fading scream of Krell's ancient, black soul, and he glanced over his shoulder. Sigvald sat back on his heels, panting and bloody-faced, staring blindly down at the shattered remains of Krell. The Geld-Prince threw back his head and screamed, though whether in triumph or in mourning for his ruined features, Arkhan couldn't say. Regardless, the scream was cut short a moment later by Throgg, who split Sigvald's head open with his club, dashing his brains across Krell's carcass.

Throgg turned, a smile on his grotesque features. 'He was a fool, and a wastrel,' the troll rumbled. Arkhan was startled by the troll's voice. It was not that of a beast, but of a man. A man in agony. For a brief moment, Arkhan felt a strange kinship with the creature – they were both but pawns in the designs of others, their own hopes and dreams but sparks lost in the grand conflagrations of those they served.

'And you are neither, I suppose,' Arkhan rasped.

'No. The gods sent me here to die on your sword, so that my body might tangle your feet and delay you,' Throgg said. He looked around. More bellowing creatures – monsters of all shapes and sizes – spilled down from the overlook with every passing moment. What was left of the Doomed Legion was already being swept away, and only the southern stretch of the Great Park was still firmly in the hands of the dead. The battle was going badly, Arkhan knew. He could feel Nagash's growing frustration, and the heavy tread of his approach.

'A TASK FOR WHICH YOU AND YOUR HORDE ARE SINGULARLY WELL SUITED, APE,' Nagash said, as he stepped over the burning carcass of a chimera. Blood stained his robes and armour, but the nine books still thrashed and snapped at the ends of their chains, and his captive spirits still wailed. *'BUT I HAVE NO TIME FOR SUCH DISTRACTIONS. I HAVE GODS TO SLAY.'*

Throgg hefted his club. 'Make time, carrion-bird,' he roared. 'I have been denied an empire, but I will not be denied victory.' The troll surged forwards, brushing Arkhan aside as if the liche were no more substantial than a spider-web. 'I will wear your skull as an amulet, and the gods will grant me all that I wish!'

Nagash's great blade looped around, and chopped through the club. Throgg lurched to the side, off balance, and Nagash's free hand snapped forwards, talons digging into the troll's throat. Nagash dragged the troll close. *'THE GODS GRANT NOTHING YOU DID NOT ALREADY POSSESS, FOOL. THEY ARE LIARS AND THIEVES. I WILL DRAG THEM SCREAMING FROM THEIR NIGHTMARE WOMB AND FLAY THEIR SECRETS FROM THEM. SERVE ME, AND I WILL GIVE YOU ALL THAT YOU MIGHT DESIRE.'*

Throgg pounded uselessly on Nagash's arm, trying to break his grip. The troll glared at Nagash. 'Better death,' he snarled, in his almost-human voice. 'Better death than service to such as you. The gods might raise us up, or dash us down, but there is a chance there, at least. There is no hope, not in you.'

'AS YOU WISH,' Nagash intoned. His great blade, death-energy writhing along its length, plunged down, through the troll's thick shoulder and into his torso. Throgg screamed and sank down, clawing at Nagash's robes. The Undying King held the sword in place, and the magics in that fell blade did their work, chewing through the troll's mutated body like acid. Throgg collapsed slowly, falling in on himself, until there remained only a pile of char and ash, and a tarnished crown, which rolled slowly away across the cobbles to fall flat at Arkhan's feet.

'And thus do the unworthy fall,' a voice as dry as the desert sands rasped. Arkhan looked up from the crown, and turned. A familiar form, ancient bones shrouded in tattered ceremonial wrappings and broken armour, stepped towards them, khopesh in hand. *'Will you join him in oblivion, Usurper?'*

'SETTRA,' Nagash said.

'I have walked across half of this world to find you, Usurper. You broke me and scattered me, but Settra is deathless. Settra is eternal. And so Settra returned, and now he stands here, sword in hand, and he denies you, Usurper. He stands between you and triumph,' Settra croaked. He lifted his khopesh and pointed it at Nagash, who regarded him as if he were less a threat than a curiosity.

'I DID NOT BRING YOU BACK, LITTLE KING,' Nagash said.

'No,' Settra said. *'You did not.'* The khopesh dipped. *'They did. The jackals of the smokeless fire, the howlers in the Wastes. They dared to offer Settra aid.'*

'HOW FOOLISH OF THEM,' Nagash said.

'They offered Settra victories, and empires and life unending.'

'AND WHAT DID THEY ASK IN RETURN, LITTLE KING?'

'That I serve them and kill you.' Settra looked down at the remains of Throgg, and then, quicker than Arkhan could follow, lunged. Nagash lurched aside, but Arkhan realised that Settra had not been aiming for the Incarnate of Death. Instead, the ancient king's blade chopped into the scaly torso of the dragon ogre which had been preparing to smash its enormous axe down on the back of Nagash's skull. The beast roared in agony, but Settra did not give it time to recover. He tore his blade free and slashed upwards, separating the monster's head from its shoulders. It toppled over like a felled tree, and Settra turned.

He extended his khopesh towards Nagash. *'Settra does not serve. Settra rules.'* He strode past them, towards the horde of monsters. *'Go, prince of Khemri. Settra will forgive your trespasses if you but make the jackals howl. Teach them that the kings of the Great Land cannot be bought and sold like slaves. And then, when it is done, Settra shall take your head, and take back his people.'*

As the last words left his mouth, Settra the Imperishable broke into a run, slashing out at a snarling giant even as the great beast reached down for him. His khopesh removed its fingers, and then its lower jaw in rapid succession. A moment later, he was lost to Arkhan's sight as he plunged into the heart of the battle.

Arkhan looked up at Nagash. The Undying King gazed in the direction Settra had vanished for a moment longer, as if bemused. Then he turned to look down at Arkhan. *'MY SERVANT,'* he said.

'What would you have me do, master?'

'I MUST REACH THE ARTEFACT, OR ALL IS FOR NAUGHT. TAKE TWO HOSTS OF THE MORGHASTS AND HOLD HERE, UNTIL YOUR LAST STRENGTH IS GONE. DO NOT FAIL ME.'

Arkhan didn't flinch. He had fallen before, as had Krell. It was never the end. No matter how often he wished it were so. Settra's reappearance was proof enough of that. And Nagash was right. They could not break away from the enemy here. Even though Throgg was dead, and Sigvald too, their foes were too numerous and too far gone in their bloodlust to be so easily shifted, even by one as mighty as Settra. For Nagash to make his escape, someone would have to stay behind and keep the remaining Kurgan and the monstrous horde occupied. And since Krell was no more, that left him. *'Yes, master. Do you have any further commands?'*

Nagash hesitated. And for the first time, Arkhan the Black felt a flicker of hope. He had never known the Great Necromancer to hesitate, even in the face of defeat. It was as if, for the first time in centuries, the Undying King was uncertain of the ultimate outcome. Nagash looked down at him and said, finally, *'DIE WELL, MY SERVANT.'*

Then Nagash stalked south, leaving Arkhan to face the enemy alone. Arkhan turned away, and set his staff. The remnants of Throgg's army that weren't currently being occupied by Settra rampaged towards him, shaking the ground beneath his feet. Arkhan tightened his grip on his sword, and thought of a long-forgotten alleyway, where he'd first set his feet on the path to eternal servitude. A path that had, at long last, reached its end.

He thought of the feeling of sand across his cheeks, and the smell of Cathayan spices on a sea breeze. He could taste blood, and the black leaf, and the kisses of a queen. He looked down at his fleshless hand, clasped about the hilt of his sword, and then up, at the crawling sky. If Arkhan the Black had been capable of smiling, he would have.

The Palast District

'Fire!' Gotri Hammerson roared, chopping the air with his axe. The ensuing volley punched through the ranks of the beastmen, dropping many. The rest came on, braying coarse-tongued battle cries as they charged heedlessly into the dwarf shield-wall. 'Ironbreakers – to the fore!' Hammerson bellowed, as he signalled for the Thunderers to retreat.

The Ironbreakers, clad in gromril and bearing runic shields, stumped forward, accompanied by Balthasar Gelt, as the dwarf line fell back around them. The Incarnate of Metal planted his staff, and the runes inscribed on the ancient armour of the dwarfs glowed with power. A moment later, the beastmen crashed into them, hacking at flesh and armour with frenzied abandon. The dwarfs held firm, and soon the last of the creatures was slumping into the dust or scattering in flight. Hammerson caught Gelt's eye, and nodded sharply.

They had come to the aid of the elves, but almost too late. Alarielle's forces were outnumbered and surrounded by an ever-expanding ring of foes. And unlike the beastmen, these didn't look as if the thought of dwarf bullets filled them with much dread. Witch elves, howling blood cultists, and daemons swirled about Alarielle's elves and tree-spirits, and only where Durthu and the remaining treemen fought was the battle not going badly.

Hammerson knew that wasn't going to last. He could see a massive cauldron-shrine grinding slowly across the plaza towards Alarielle, and perched atop it, the fugitive Blood Queen, Hellebron. The wiry witch elf spat and railed, issuing orders and threats in a voice twisted by madness. She clashed her blades and gesticulated wildly, as if overcome by the same frenzy which possessed her followers. He'd heard that she had fled Athel Loren before the arrival of the refugees from Averheim, and had learned enough about her proclivities to know that she meant Alarielle ill.

'We must rescue her,' Gelt said, as he hurried towards Hammerson. His golden mask was dented and tarnished, but his eyes glowed with power. 'If Alarielle falls, so too will the world,' he continued. He gestured with his staff towards the cauldron-shrine, as its heavy wheels ground over the broken dead and laughing witch elves came leaping in its wake.

'Aye,' Hammerson grunted. 'I have eyes, lad. I know.' He raised his axe. 'Zhufbarak – shield-march,' he shouted. 'Let's go give the tree-huggers a hand, lads.' The Ironbreakers locked shields and started forwards, as the clansmen and Thunderers followed suit. A dwarf throng on the march was akin to one of the Empire's steam tanks, capable of rolling over almost any enemy. Clansmen on the flanks used their shields to provide cover for the Thunderers, who unleashed volley after volley, reloading as they moved. The Ironbreakers formed the wedge, smashing aside any enemy who sought to stand in the throng's path. And there were plenty of those. Hammerson and Gelt took the point of the wedge for themselves, unleashing their respective magics on the foe.

Hang on woman, we're coming, he thought, as he summoned runes of fire and swept aside a shrieking witch elf. *Not that I have any clue how to help you, when we get there. Or if you'll even live that long, with the way you're looking...*

From his few glimpses of her, as she fought in the shadow of Durthu, the Everqueen looked less radiant than cadaverous. It was as if she had aged centuries in moments, and her movements were faltering. Nonetheless, she fought on, her magics reaching out to snare and break the enemy at every turn. Hammerson had no real fondness for the elves, but he knew bravery when he saw it. And he was determined not to let it be in vain.

The Zhufbarak throng advanced at a glacier's pace, with all the relentless inexorability that implied. Salvoes thundered forth, flinging bodies into the air and throwing the already anarchic ranks of the enemy into complete disarray. The great, coiling war-horns of Zhufbar groaned so loudly as to shake the rubble, and where bullets and steam did not reach, axes and hammers served to split Hellebron's host in two.

At a gesture from Gelt, golden light danced across the weapons of the dwarfs, awakening the full power of the ancestral runes. Gromril armour flared and shone like the stars that had once shone in the skies above as it was struck by enemy blows. Hammerson raised his axe and gestured east. With his other hand, he motioned west. The dwarf shield-wall split with perfect synchronicity, and two lines of clan warriors turned outwards around a hinge composed of a doughy core of Ironbreakers, one to the east, the other to the west. Hammerson gestured to Gelt. 'Take the west, lad. I'll see to the east,' he growled. 'Let the enemy break themselves on good dwarf steel. Give the elgi a chance to catch their breath. We'll collapse the wall when we've earned some space, and squeeze the enemy between us, like grist beneath a millstone.'

Hammerson watched Gelt go, and then turned to study the turmoil they had wrought in their wake. He grunted in satisfaction as he saw that their intervention had destroyed any momentum the enemy possessed. They'd cut Hellebron's forces in two, with the Blood Queen herself caught on the wrong side of the shield-wall and trapped between dwarfs and elves. Then, that didn't seem to bother her all that much. She was exhorting her followers to greater efforts, ranting and shrieking loudly enough to wake the dead. The elves would have to hold out until the dwarfs could fall back to their position.

Hammerson glanced back at Alarielle. *I hope you can handle her, woman, because we've got our hands full,* he thought. A thunderclap shook the Palast and rattled his teeth in his jaw, and he turned to see the followers of the Blood God slam into the western shield-wall. Axe-blades chopped over shield rims or hooked dwarf legs, and the wall wavered, but only for an instant. Rune-axes carved red, efficient arcs through the packed ranks of the enemy, as the Zhufbarak gave their foes their fill and more of skulls and blood.

'Hold them, lad,' Hammerson growled. He looked around at his warriors, as they strained against the enemy. 'And you, you great wattocks... that goes for you as well!' he roared, clashing his weapons together. 'Hold!'



The ancient treeman gave a cry, like the splintering of a great oak, and collapsed. Alarielle whipped around, the pain of the world's dying a drumbeat in her temples, and stared in shock as Skarana, eldest of the oldest, toppled down into death. The bloodthirster roared in triumph and ripped its axe free of the treeman's body, scattering charred splinters across the heads of the wailing dryads which flung themselves on the daemon's followers. The daemon charged towards her and Durthu, wings flared, arms wide, as if inviting them to meet it in battle. She could feel her protector stiffen in anticipation, and then relax.

Durthu would not leave her side willingly. Not while only a thin wall of spears separated her from Hellebron's maddened servants. The treeman did not trust the dwarfs to reach her in time. But he was the only one among them strong enough to dispatch the daemon even now charging towards them. She placed a hand on the rough bark of his wrist. Durthu was the greatest of Athel Loren's children. In his mighty frame was the strength of the forest itself, and the blade he carried had been forged by the gods.

'Go,' Alarielle said. Durthu looked down at her, silently. Alarielle frowned. 'Go, Durthu. Go begrudgingly, or willingly, but go. Do as I command. I will be here when you return.' Durthu reached out, and brushed a lock of hair from her face. Then, with a sound like an avalanche, the treeman turned and strode to meet the daemon.

Durthu picked up speed as he moved past the spear-wall of the defenders, and his great root-feet trampled the enemy as he charged towards the approaching daemon, his massive blade held out behind him. He reached out with his free hand, and roared with all the fury of Athel Loren as he smashed into the bloodthirster, sending the daemon staggering sideways into the Middenplatz wall. There was a crackle of snapping bone as the force of the impact shattered the daemon's wings, and the beast howled in agony.

Durthu didn't slacken his assault. Even as the bloodthirster tried to rise, the treeman swung his Daith-forged blade up and drove it down through his opponent's breastplate and into the unnatural flesh beneath. The bloodthirster shrieked and grasped the blade. It hauled itself up and smashed at Durthu with its axe, hacking deep grooves into the treeman's bark. Durthu ignored the frenzied assault and twisted around, wrenching his blade free of the bloodthirster's chest. Without pausing, he whirled about, bringing the sword about to chop clean through the daemon's thick neck.

The treeman stepped aside as the daemon collapsed, but Alarielle did not see what happened next. Her attentions were dragged back to her own predicament, as one of her warriors gave a shout. Alarielle grimaced as the corpse impaled on the woman's spear abruptly flopped into motion and pulled itself off the point of the weapon. Others began to rise as well, slipping and sliding in their own blood as they struggled upright. Alarielle hissed in pain as the Winds of Life recoiled from the abomination taking place before her. She raised her hand, ready to sweep the risen dead aside with her magics before they could attack, when a sudden shout stayed her hand. A familiar form had dropped from the Middenplatz wall and into the battle, laying about him with a deadly blade.

'Take heart, dear lady,' Vlad von Carstein called out as he sprinted past her warriors, accompanied by the staggering forms of the newly slain, who stumbled in his wake. 'Your champions are legion, be they man, dwarf or heroic tree-stump. Your burying place is not here, and not today. So swears Vlad

von Carstein, Elector of Sylvania,' he shouted, flinging himself into battle like a dark thunderbolt. Where he moved, the enemy fell, only to rise again at his command. With every corpse that rose, a jagged thorn of pain cut into her heart. But those pains were but pinpricks compared to the agony she felt with every breath. The world itself was coming undone, collapsing in on itself like a rotten tree, and she could feel the sharp ache of the artefact Archaon was employing to accomplish the unmaking.

The vampire slithered into the heart of the ranks of the bloodthirster's followers, his sword flickering like lightning. He employed finesse and brutality in equal measure, and moved with such grace that Alarielle thought even Tyrion might have looked upon him with envy. He employed the risen dead like ambulatory shields, using them to create opportunities for his kills. She shook her head, grateful and disturbed in equal measure, and turned her attentions to her own battle.

Despite the aid of the dead and the dwarfs, Hellebron's forces had reached the ring of dryads who protected Alarielle, sacrificing their lives to keep her safe. She felt every death, every mangling blow that afflicted the tree-spirits, and it was all she could do to stay on her feet. She watched in dull-eyed horror as dryads flung themselves up the iron stairs of the cauldron-shrine that steadily bore down on her. The spirits attacked Hellebron, who hacked them down with shrieks of laughter. Alarielle closed her eyes. She felt every blow, and her body shuddered as each spirit fell. Hellebron bounded off the cauldron, her lithe shape covered in blood and sap. 'I see you, queen of weeds and maggots,' she screeched, gesturing with one of her cruelly curved blades. 'I see you, and I will wear your pretty skin as a cloak.' She darted forwards, and two of Alarielle's guards moved to intercept her. Without slowing, Hellebron swept her blades out and removed their heads.

Alarielle stepped up. Her asrai fell back at her command, clearing a path. She wanted no more of them to die in a futile attempt to stop the Blood Queen. Hellebron danced towards her, grinning madly, and Alarielle wondered how it had come to this. What had set the Blood Queen on this course? She had come to Athel Loren with Malekith and the others, but her loyalty to her people had faded like a morning mist, leaving only this... thing which now capered and shrieked at her in challenge. A challenge that she would meet, though she was no warrior. Though she had learned blade-craft from the finest warriors in Ulthuan, the Everqueen was a creature of peace, rather than war, and even with the power of Life Incarnate, she was little match for the former ruler of Har Ganeth.

'We looked for you,' Alarielle said, 'after Be'lakor's attack on the Oak of Ages. We thought you had been slain.' She waited for Hellebron, trying to conserve her strength.

'That would have pleased you to no end, I'm certain,' Hellebron cackled. She pulled the edges of her blades across each other, filling the air with their shriek.

'If you think that, then you are truly demented,' Alarielle said. 'You were welcomed into Athel Loren, sorceress. You and your followers both, despite your foul ways. You are of the asur, despite your predilections, and I would not see you dead.'

Hellebron grimaced. 'You lie,' she spat. Her grimace twisted into a manic grin. 'And now, you die!' She lunged, and Alarielle interposed her staff. The cobblestoned street ruptured as a writhing thicket of thorn-vines burst upwards to ensnare the leaping form of Hellebron. The Blood Queen shrieked in pain, but did not stop. Her blades flashed out, chopping through the vines, and a moment later, she was free. She snarled and drove one of her blades into Alarielle's belly.

Alarielle screamed as Hellebron jerked the blade free, and clapped a hand to the wound in her stomach. She slumped to her knees, the pain overwhelming her. Her staff rolled away, forgotten. The world seemed to shudder around her, as if in sympathy, and she bowed her head, trying to concentrate through her own internal din. She could feel the essence of Ghyran trying to mend her torn flesh, but she was too weak. The world's pain, added to her own, was too much to bear. Nonetheless, she could not give in. Too much counted on her. She tried to focus her own magics through those of Ghyran, to bolster her flagging body.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hellebron's second blade descending towards her neck, as if in slow motion. The Blood Queen's features were distorted by rage, triumph, and something else. *Fear*, Alarielle realised. Hellebron was afraid. Of what, she couldn't say, but that fear was driving the Blood Queen to attack like a wild animal. The Wind of Life whispered in Alarielle's mind, and in that instant, the Incarnate of Life knew what was required of her.

Alarielle forced herself to her feet and caught Hellebron's wrist as she rose, halting the blade a hair's breadth from her neck. She forced her opponent back and tore her hand from her wound. The green energy of life crackled between her bloody fingers as she pressed her hand gently to the side of Hellebron's contorted face. The magics flowed into the dark elf, and centuries of madness and frenzy were washed away by the healing tide of Ghyran. The fractured psyche of the Blood Queen became whole, for the first time in a thousand or more years, and with lucidity came understanding. For a moment, a different woman entirely looked out through Hellebron's bulging eyes, saw what she had made of herself, and the witch elf moaned in horror.

Alarielle met Hellebron's horrified gaze and said, 'I'm sorry.' Then, grabbing hold of her opponent's wrist with both hands, she forced Hellebron's own blade up into its owner's chest. The deadly blade passed through Hellebron's ribs and its curved tip found her heart, and the horror in her eyes faded as her contorted features slackened into something resembling peace. She slumped against Alarielle, and the Everqueen sank back down, blood pouring from the wound in her belly. She slipped down beside her fallen opponent.

She felt cold, and the dark crept in at the edges of her vision. She heard the screams of Hellebron's remaining followers and the agonised shouts of her people, and wanted to weep for the uselessness of it all, but lacked the strength to do anything but lie still. *Is this death, then?* she thought. She did not fear it. Aliathra's face swam before her eyes, and she reached up, hoping to touch her daughter's cheek once more, to say at last all the things she should have said. *I will tell you of your father, and how he tore me from my silk pavilions and slew any who stood in his way, the day that Malekith came for me. I will tell you how we hid in the forests of Avelorn, and what occurred there. I will tell you everything, at last... You are so like him, my daughter. Brave and foolish and proud... I—*

A shadow fell over her. Heavy, rough hands picked her up, and a voice like the curling of roots through the hard-packed earth spoke gently to her. Durthu. The treeman cradled her close, and the last thing she heard before oblivion swept her under was his roar, as it shook the Middenplatz down to its foundations.



Vlad watched in consternation as the treeman, still cradling the broken form of the Everqueen, wrenched the cauldron-shrine from its frame and, swinging it by its broken chains, hurled it at the remaining blood-worshippers. Then, with another bone-rattling roar, the ancient spirit uprooted its sword and stalked into battle, killing any who dared stand against it, be they elf, human, beast or daemon.

Too little, too late, brute, Vlad thought, as he caught a blow from his current opponent, a hammer-wielding berserker who'd announced himself as Harald Hammerstorm, as if Vlad either knew or cared as to his identity. If the Incarnate of Life was dead, that boded ill for their chances to see off whatever apocalypse Archaon was brewing in the bowels of Middenheim. He snarled in frustration. To have come so close, only to fail now, was unacceptable. He had lost Isabella, Sylvania, even Mannfred... He would not lose the world as well.

'Die, beast,' Hammerstorm roared. He struck out with a looping blow, which Vlad easily avoided. His riposte glanced from the Chaos warrior's shield, and they circled one another, each searching for an opening in the other's defences. Why the warrior had singled him out, Vlad couldn't say, but he was getting bored. Hammerstorm was tenacious, and annoyingly difficult to hurt. Vlad grinned as the warrior surged towards him, shield tilted, hammer swung back. It was the first mistake his opponent had made, and Vlad intended to make it his last. He slid forward to meet the Chaos warrior, rather than retreating, and let his blade glide across the face of Hammerstorm's shield. The point of his sword pierced Hammerstorm's visor, even as the warrior's hammer caught him in the ribs and knocked him sprawling.

Vlad rolled to his feet with a hiss of pain, one arm pressed tight to his side, as Hammerstorm took a faltering step towards him, hammer raised for another blow. Blood was pouring down the Chaos warrior's visor. He took another step, a third, and then toppled forwards. He crashed down, and his hammer clattered from his grip. Vlad rose to his feet with a wince, and saluted his fallen enemy.

The wind shifted, and a familiar, if foul, stench invaded his nostrils. He whirled and cursed as he caught sight of the diseased host that crashed against the dwarf line, even as the last of the blood-mad berserkers died. Plaguebearers wielded rusty, pus-encrusted blades against the ragtag shield-wall of the Zhufbarak, and where they struck, metal rusted, leather rotted and flesh turned black and swollen. The golden light of Gelt's magics warred with the malignant wind of putrefaction as the weary dwarfs met their foes with stolid determination. Even as Vlad hurried towards them, he saw his zombies begin to rot and collapse, even as they had in Sylvania so many weeks ago, and he knew, even though he could not yet see her, that Isabella was near.

'Hello, wife,' he murmured. A plaguebearer lurched towards him. Vlad blocked a blow from its mottled blade and snatched a flapping length of intestine from its bloated belly. With a jerk, he tore its guts from its thin body, and decapitated it as it fell to its knees, off balance. 'Do not hide your pretty face from me, my love... Where are you?'

'Behind you, my love, my darling light,' a voice breathed in his ear. The words faded into the buzzing of flies and he twisted about as a blade tore

through his cloak, scraping sparks from his cuirass to mark its path. The swarm of biting, stinging flies enveloped him and he staggered as the insects covered his eyes and nose and mouth, as if seeking to burrow into the meat of him. 'Come, give me a kiss, Vlad. Open your mouth and let me in,' Isabella purred, her voice coming from every direction and none.

Vlad slashed out blindly, and the swarm scattered. His zombies were all fallen back into the arms of death, and he stood exposed and alone, caught between the dwarfs and the daemons. He cursed and sprang out of the path of battle, bounding from fallen statues to the tops of fire-blackened stakes and finally to the crumbling ramparts of the Middenplatz wall. Isabella would follow him, he was certain. If she did, their confrontation might give Gelt and Hammerson a chance to defeat the daemons. Without Isabella to guide the beasts, they would be easy enough to banish back to the realm of Chaos.

As he cleared the ramparts, however, a shadow fell over him, and he looked up to see an abyssal steed swoop low over the wall before alighting on a crumbled tower, just out of reach. He glared up at the creature and its rider in annoyance. 'Hello, boy. Come to help, or to hinder?' Vlad asked.

Mannfred sneered. 'Neither, if it's all the same to you. I merely wanted to come say goodbye before your inevitable messy end, old man.' The other vampire leaned back in his saddle and clapped his hands together. 'It's a better one than you deserve, I'll say that for you.'

'What you know about what anyone deserves could fill a very small jar,' Vlad said, suddenly weary. 'I see you've chosen a new side to fight for. How egalitarian of you.'

'Any port in a storm,' Mannfred said. He frowned. 'And the only side I'm interested in fighting for is mine, Vlad. I fight for myself, and no other.'

Vlad smiled, and looked up at the dark sky. 'I was right. You are like Nagash. More like him than the rest of us, even old Arkhan.'

'I am nothing like him,' Mannfred snarled, hammering a fist into his mount's neck, eliciting a snarling squeal from the beast. 'Nothing!'

'No, you're right. Nagash at least has a will to match his monstrousness. He is true to himself, whatever else. But you are a tyrant, just as he is.' Vlad shook his head, and looked down at the battle below. 'A true ruler believes in something greater than himself, boy. A nation, an empire, an ideal. Something...'

'Oh, spare me,' Mannfred growled. He flung out a hand. 'Do you think I'm a fool? You have never done anything out of largesse, old man.' He smacked his fist against his breastplate. 'Even me – you only took me under your wing because you needed me.'

Vlad grunted. 'Not so.' He smiled thinly. 'I took you in because I pitied you.' He cocked his head. 'In truth, I always preferred Konrad. Dumb as a stone, but honest.'

Mannfred drew himself up, his eyes blazing with hate. Vlad tensed, readying himself for his former protégé's attack. But Mannfred did not attack. Instead, he shook himself and looked away. Vlad frowned. 'If you're not here to plant a sword in my back, boy, why are you wasting my time?'

'Maybe I simply wanted to indulge in the conviviality of a family gathering once more, before I go to forge my own destiny,' Mannfred said. Vlad blinked, and then turned towards the gatehouse tower behind him, where he could hear the humming of flies. Isabella, ragged skirts flowing, stepped onto the ramparts.

'Greetings, husband,' she said. Her musical tones were overlaid with the guttural growl of the daemon that possessed her. 'Will you not embrace me?' she continued. She extended her hand, like a proper noblewoman looking to dance.

'Yes, Vlad, by all means... embrace her,' Mannfred said.

Vlad glanced back at him. 'Leave, boy.'

'And if I choose to stay?'

'Then I will kill you after I kill him,' Isabella said, softly. She drew her sword and extended it. 'This is not for you, Mannfred. You do not belong here, and you will not sully this moment with your rancour and spite. Run away, little prince. I will find you before the end, have no fear.'

Vlad smiled and shrugged. 'You heard her, boy. This is a game for adults, not conceited brats. Go bother the elves, eh? I understand Tyrion would like a word or three with you.' He flapped his hand loosely. Mannfred snarled in frustration and jerked on his steed's reins. The creature took to the air with a shriek, and Vlad watched it depart. He turned back to Isabella. 'I won't let you kill him, my love. Foul as he is, the little prince is still bound to me, and I owe him my protection.'

'And what do you owe me, my love?' Isabella said, stepping gracefully towards him.

'More than that,' Vlad said softly. 'I owe you life, and happiness, and eternity. That is what I promised you, once upon a time.'

'You lied,' Isabella said, drawing closer.

'No. Not to you. Never to you,' Vlad said, readying himself.

'Lies,' Isabella hissed. She came for him in a rush, faster than even he could process, and it was only through luck that he parried her blow. They fought back and forth along the rampart, trading blows that would have killed any normal human, or even many vampires. It was all Vlad could do to keep up with her – the daemon in her soul gave her unnatural strength, as well as twisting her mind. Isabella had always been mad but the daemon made it worse, and he cursed it and the gods it served as he fought.

In his mind's eye, he could still see her as she was on that first night, leaning over her father's deathbed as he gasped his last. 'Do you remember the night we met, my love?' he said, as they crossed blades. 'The night your father died, and your deceitful uncle attempted to usurp your claim? Do you recall how the stars looked that night?'

'There was a storm, and no stars,' Isabella snarled. 'And you murdered my uncle!'

'Only with your permission,' Vlad said, as they broke apart. She screeched and came at him, forcing him to back-pedal. 'I loved you then, and I love you now...'

'Lies,' she hissed, and her sword slashed down, nearly severing his hand at the wrist. His blade fell from nerveless fingers and he staggered back against the ramparts, clutching his wounded wrist. Isabella smiled cruelly, and for a moment, he saw the gloating face of a daemon superimposed over her own. Beneath his grip, he could already feel the ring he wore employing its magics to knit his torn flesh and muscle.

She stretched out her hand, and took a step towards him. 'I will enjoy seeing your flesh putrefy and slough from your cankerous bones, husband. It is all that you deserve.'

'Maybe,' Vlad said. 'I left you, my poor Isabella. I swore that I would stay by your side forever, and I... lied. I died. And then you...'

She paused, mouth working. He saw the daemon again, snarling silently. Isabella shook her head, and he knew that she was still in there, somewhere. 'I... died too,' she said, not looking at him. 'I died.' She looked at him. 'I *died*.'

'But you live now, and I live, and I will not let you die again, even if it means that I must,' Vlad said hoarsely. He thought of his dreams, and hopes, of the Empire he'd hoped to rule and serve, and of old friends he'd hoped to see again before the end. And he thought of a young woman named Isabella von Drak, and the way she'd smiled at him in the moonlight, and touched his face without fear, when the beast in him was awakened. And just like that, Vlad von Carstein knew what to do.

He flung himself forwards as she hesitated, and smashed the blade from her hand. As she lunged for him, he grabbed her arms and twisted them up behind her back. Where her hands touched his, his flesh began to moulder and rot, and he snarled in agony, even as he slid the von Carstein ring from his finger and onto hers. Then, grabbing hold of her, he shoved them both towards the edge of the ramparts with the last of his fading strength.

As they fell towards the fire-seared stakes below, Vlad laughed. *This feels unpleasantly familiar*, he thought, in the moment before they struck one of the stakes at the foot of the wall. The point of the stake punched through Vlad's heart an instant after Isabella's. He felt her go limp beneath him. He felt no pain, or regret, and as his body came apart, he caught her head and pressed his lips to hers. Then she was gone, and what was left of Vlad von Carstein slumped into oblivion on its stake.



Balthasar Gelt shouted an incantation, and felt the Wind of Metal surge through him. The air coalesced about the plaguebearer that had been about to strike down one of his bodyguards, and the daemon was suddenly encased in silver. Steam spewed from the tiny gaps in the sheath of blessed metal as the daemon was sent howling back into the void. The dwarf reached out with his hammer and nudged the statue over. He caught Gelt's eye and grunted wordlessly, as he hefted his battered shield and moved back into the fray.

'It was my pleasure,' Gelt said. He wasn't entirely sure which of the two Anvil Guard it was – whether it was Stromni he'd saved, or Gorgi. It didn't matter, in any event. They weren't the most talkative duo, and didn't seem to know his name either, calling him variously 'manling', 'wizard' or the more ubiquitous 'human'.

He swung his staff about, unleashing a crackling surge of magic. More daemons were erased from existence, ripped apart by golden bolts or shredded by tendrils of thrashing iron. But for every chortling plaguebearer that fell, two more took its place. The daemons were without number, and without fear. They crashed again and again into the ragged and ever-shrinking shield-wall of the Zhufbarak like a limitless tide of filth. The air was thick with flies and

screams. Not even his magic could hold them back indefinitely.

The knowledge didn't weigh as heavily on him as it once might have. As far as he was concerned, he was living on borrowed time. He had cast his soul into the blackest depths, and it was only by chance that he had been saved from damnation. *If this be doomsday, I will not flinch from it*, he thought, and then smiled at his own pomposity. *It's not like I'll have the time, at any rate. The world is coming apart and it will take greater powers than mine to hold it together.* He tossed his staff from one hand to the other and drew his sword, parrying a blow from a pox-riddled blade. As their weapons scraped apart, Gelt rammed his staff into the plaguebearer's belly and sent a pulse of magic thrumming through it. The plaguebearer twitched in consternation, and then exploded as a thousand thin spikes of gold tore it apart from the inside.

Gelt swung his staff about like a morning star, and sent the ever-expanding sphere of spikes hurtling into the packed ranks of the enemy. The sphere exploded into a thicket of thrashing tendrils, and at his shouted command, the dwarfs took the opportunity to fall back while their foes were otherwise occupied. As dwarfs streamed past him, Gelt set his staff and roused the hidden deposits of ore in the bedrock of the Fauschlag, summoning them to the surface. Great barricades of molten metal flowered into being between the Zhufbarak and the plague-host.

'That won't hold them long.'

Gelt turned to see Hammerson stumping towards him. The runesmith had lost his helm, and his face and beard were streaked with blood and soot. Nonetheless, he was smiling grimly. 'Good plan, though. Give us a minute to have a wee drink, at any rate.'

'I think we're out of Bugman's,' Gelt said. 'You'll have to settle for water.'

'I'll die thirsty then,' Hammerson said. 'Out of Bugman's... it really is the end of the world.' He tossed his head, indicating the remaining elves. 'The elgi woman, Alarielle... she's dying, lad.'

Gelt turned and looked towards the ragged ring of elven shields that sheltered the fallen Everqueen. Her remaining warriors surrounded her, fighting alongside the dwarfs. The treeman, Durthu, loomed over the Everqueen, killing any daemon which drew too close. As Gelt watched, the ancient spirit spread its arms and roared so loudly that a semi-ruined wall nearby collapsed, filling the air with dust.

'What is he doing?' Gelt muttered, as Durthu hurled its sword into the leering, bloated face of a great unclean one, spitting the greater daemon like a hog over a fire-pit. The treeman shoved Alarielle's defenders aside and sank down beside her limp, pale form. Gelt started forwards, but Hammerson grabbed him.

'Don't even think about it, lad. Whatever he's doing, it's only bound to help, and you'll only rile him up if you interfere,' the dwarf said. Gelt subsided, but continued to watch, unable to look away. As he watched in awe, the treeman's bark-flesh withered and cracked, and leaves fell like dust from his shoulders and head. Gelt could feel the power flowing between Durthu and Alarielle, and knew, without knowing how, that the treeman was giving of his own life to restore the Everqueen.

The calcified and crumbling husk of Durthu collapsed in on itself as Alarielle's form swelled with light and life. She rose, her flesh unmarked, her eyes clear. She gently touched the crumbling remains of Durthu and then turned. The light of Ghyran crackled in her eyes, and she spread her arms and threw back her head to sing a single perfect note.

Gelt and Hammerson threw up their hands to protect their eyes as white fire, crested with green, filled the Middenplatz and roared hungrily through the Palast District. It passed over the heads of the remaining elves and dwarfs harmlessly, but where it struck the hordes of daemons, it wreaked a terrible destruction. Hundreds of daemons were reduced to ash in a matter of moments, but thousands more pressed forwards, through the sooty remains of their fellows. To Gelt, it was as if the Dark Gods were determined to prevent them from reaching the centre of the city at any cost.

And why wouldn't they be? That is where Archaon is, and his devilish artefact, and that is where the true battle is. Not here, Gelt thought, looking around. They were cut off. Surrounded on all sides... save one. The northern gatehouse had been cleared by Alarielle's fire. As she moved to join he and Hammerson, he looked at her. 'We must get to the Temple of Ulric,' he said. She frowned, one hand pressed to her head.

'Yes... I can feel it. That is where the artefact is,' she said, wincing as if the thought pained her. 'But we have no time. Our forces cannot...'

'No,' Hammerson grunted. 'We cannot. But we can hold the way clear, and buy you time.' The runesmith gestured and Gelt saw one of Hammerson's Anvil Guard lead his pegasus, Quicksilver, towards them. His heart leapt at the sight of the proud animal. It had been hurt during the battle in the King's Glade, one wing badly scorched. But though the animal couldn't fly, Quicksilver was still the fastest stallion this side of the famed stables of Tiranoc. Or would have been, had either the stables or Tiranoc still existed.

'I do not wish to ask this of you,' Gelt began, as he looked at Hammerson. He reached out, without thinking, and placed his hand on the dwarf's shoulder. Hammerson twitched, as if to knock the hand aside, but in the end, he merely shook his head.

'Then don't. No time for long goodbyes, lad,' Hammerson rumbled, placing his heavy hand over Gelt's. 'We made an oath, and we'll not break it now.'

Gelt hesitated, trying to summon the words. Hammerson nudged him impatiently, poking him in the belly with the flat of his hammer. 'Go on, lad. Get moving, the both of you. There's work to be done, and it's best done well. Don't let the elgi and that tottering tower of bones mess it up.' The runesmith grinned. 'We'll see to things here, one way or another.'

Gelt nodded and turned away. He caught hold of Quicksilver's bridle and hauled himself into the pegasus's saddle. The animal whinnied and reared, as Gelt extended his hand to Alarielle. She climbed into the saddle behind him, without hesitation. 'We must ride swiftly, wizard,' she murmured as she wrapped an arm around his midsection. 'They will pursue us.'

'Let them try. Quicksilver has outpaced daemons before. Aye, and worse things besides,' Gelt said confidently. At a tap of his heels, the pegasus began to gallop towards the northern gatehouse. He did not look back as he felt the twinge of Hammerson's magics on the wind, and heard the crack of gunfire. Alarielle pressed her face to his back as her people moved around them, elves and dryads fighting and dying to clear them a path.

Daemons bounded forwards to block their route, but Gelt thrust his staff out, over Quicksilver's head, and swept the creatures aside with a gout of shimmering energy. Then they were past the northern gatehouse and galloping through the streets beyond, in the direction of the Ulricsmund and the Temple of Ulric.

As they rode, Gelt whispered a silent prayer to whatever gods might still be listening that the other Incarnates would be there to meet them.



Hammerson watched Gelt ride away, and smiled sadly. 'A good lad, that one, for all that he's had a rough path to walk.'

'Aye,' Grombrindal rumbled. Hammerson could not say where the white-bearded dwarf had come from, or when he had arrived, but he was here now, and that was all that mattered. If this was to be the last war of the dwarfs, it was only fitting that the White Dwarf himself be there to fight alongside them. Grombrindal hefted his axe, and ran his thumb along the edge. 'But he and the elgi woman are best out of it, eh? This is dwarf work.'

'Aye, that it is,' Hammerson said. He no longer felt tired. Though Gelt's enchantments were fading, his warriors looked as fresh as the day they'd set out for Averheim, so long ago. It was as if the presence of the revered ancestor had renewed their strength.

He looked past the shield-wall and saw that the Chaos hordes, daemons and mortals alike, were readying themselves to charge once more. If they were allowed to get past the Zhufbarak, the Incarnates would pay the price. Hammerson raised his axe. 'Plant the standards, lads,' he bellowed. 'I want to fight in the shade.'

With a loud rattle, the clan standards were stabbed into the ground, creating a makeshift forest of gold and steel. Hammerson looked up at them, and knew that he was seeing them for the last time. 'I forged some of those myself,' he said.

'Good runework,' Grombrindal said.

'Not worth doing, otherwise,' Hammerson said.

Flesh hounds howled, and bloodthirsters roared. Bloodletters shrieked and mortal warriors added their chants and screams to the daemoniac clamour. The dwarfs ignored the noise. Hammerson nodded in satisfaction. 'I wish Ungrim were here. He'd love this.'

'He is here, lad,' Grombrindal rumbled. 'They're all here, standing with us, in this moment. All the kings and their clans, be they thane, clansman or Slayer, they are with us now. Can't you feel them? They are crying out for vengeance. Today is a day for the settling of all grudges, great or small.'

As the White Dwarf spoke, Hammerson thought he could see them. The ghosts of his ancestors moved through the ranks of the living to fill the gaps in the shield-wall. And not just the dead of storied centuries, but those more recent. He saw Thorek Ironbrow, and Ungrim Ironfist. He saw Thorgrim, the Grudgebearer himself, and others besides. Faces and names from history and recent days. It was as if the entirety of their people had come to witness this final act of defiance.

He saw Grombrindal standing upon a broad shield, supported on the shoulders of a one-eyed Slayer and a tankard-carrying ranger. The good eye of the Slayer met his own, and Hammerson felt his growing sadness washed away in a moment of anger. Anger that it had come to this, that all the great works of his people were now as nothing. The fate of the world would be decided elsewhere, by the hands of humans and elves.

For the dwarfs, there was only this. The whole of their history, brought to this point. Hammerson met Grombrindal's gaze, and the White Dwarf nodded slowly. *If it must be done, let it be done well*, Hammerson thought. Whether they were dead or alive, that was the only way dwarfs knew how to do anything.

On the other side of the shield-wall, the Chaos horde had jolted into motion at last. Hammerson lifted his weapons. 'We make our stand here,' he said, trusting in his voice to carry to every ear. 'No more running. We stand here, for the Black Water, for every hold, and the world entire. Do you hear me, sons of Zhufbar? Like the stones of the mountains... *we will hold*.'



EIGHTEEN

 *The Ulricsmund, Middenheim*

Caradryan spun his Phoenix Blade, blocking the deadly bite of the axe as it flashed towards him. The Chaos champion known as Arbaal the Undefeated roared in fury and hacked at the Incarnate of Fire again. Nearby, Ashtari shrieked in fury as he tore at the scaly body of Arbaal's flesh hound. The daemon-dog wailed in frustrated rage as the firebird drove its beak into the beast's flesh again and again.

'I have slaughtered armies of elves,' Arbaal roared. His axe reeked of hot blood, and it left trails of crimson smoke in its wake as he brought it slashing down towards Caradryan's head. 'I have broken the backs of dragons, and eaten the hearts of sea-leviathans.'

'Your culinary practices are no concern of mine,' Caradryan snarled, parrying the blow. His arms ached, but he whirled the halberd about as if it were as light as a feather. He twisted and spun, driving the Chaos champion back. 'It does not matter to me how many you have murdered, monster. It ends here.'

Quicker than thought, Caradryan lunged, slashed and jabbed, striking Arbaal again and again. He knew that were he not host to Aqshy, he would have no hope of standing up to such a foe, let alone defeating him. But with the fire raging in him, he felt as if there were no battle he could not survive. It was a dangerous feeling. He had spent centuries honing his mind and body, and learning to control the rage that was the curse of every elf. But the fire called to that primal part of him, and lent it strength. He wondered if this was akin to what Tyrion had felt, when the fury of Khaine had driven him into madness and despair. There was a freedom in it that called to him, and that he longed to embrace. Instead, he whispered the mantras of Asuryan, trying to maintain focus.

Arbaal swatted the Phoenix Blade aside, ripping it out of Caradryan's hands. The elf cursed himself for his momentary lack of focus and threw himself over Arbaal's next blow, his hands reaching for the halberd's haft. He caught the weapon and rolled to his feet, turning just in time to block a blow that would have split him in half. Shattered cobbles shifted beneath his feet as Arbaal put all of his weight behind his axe, and forced the elf back.

Caradryan wrenched his halberd to the side, trying to twist the axe out of his opponent's grip, but Arbaal was ready for such a tactic, and he drove a fist into the elf's belly. Caradryan staggered back, and lurched aside as Arbaal tried to smash him from his feet.

The axe gashed his arm, and Caradryan bit back a scream. His blood hissed and bubbled as it splattered Arbaal's cuirass, and the Chaos champion hesitated, giving Caradryan a chance to put distance between them. As he retreated, Caradryan cursed himself for a fool. If he hadn't moved when he had, Arbaal's blow would have taken his arm off. He could feel the fire within him, demanding to be let out. But to do so would be to doom his warriors to certain death. Arbaal charged towards him, axe ready. The weapon howled as it came around. *Only one chance*, he thought.

Caradryan spun about and leapt backwards over the sweeping blow. He tumbled through the air and dropped down behind Arbaal. Even as the champion whirled to face Caradryan, the Phoenix Blade slashed out. Ancient armour, crafted in Khorne's own forges, ruptured as the fiery blade tore upwards through it. Arbaal sagged backwards, clutching at the wound. He raised his axe, but Caradryan hacked his arm off at the elbow. Arbaal screamed in fury and lurched towards the elf, groping for him with his remaining hand.

Caradryan stepped back, out of reach, and pivoted, hammering the edge of his halberd into the space between Arbaal's collar and the bottom of his helmet. The white-hot blade tore through the champion's neck, and his head tumbled free to roll away across the cobbles. Caradryan sank back against a wall, panting. He placed a hand to the wound in his arm, and winced as his touch cauterised the bloody slash.

He looked up. Proud princes of drowned Caledor swooped fearlessly through the increasingly agitated skies on their dragons, braving the lightning and sorcerous fire that rained from the bloated clouds in order to drive back the enemy. As he watched, a dragon was struck by a Chaos-birthed bolt of emerald lightning and its smoking corpse plunged from the sky to demolish a row of ramshackle houses.

Below them, plunging recklessly through the plazas and streets of the Sudgarten and the Ulricsmund, came the remaining knights of Ulthuan, the Empire and even chill Naggaroth – Reiksguard galloped alongside Silver Helms and the shrieking, scaly shapes of Cold Ones. The wave of armour and horseflesh swept over and smashed down the enemy wherever they struck. And at their head rode the shining figure of the Dragon of Cothique, his blade searing the darkness and all those things which sought to hide in it. It was the greatest cavalry charge in the history of the world, led by the greatest hero the elven people had ever produced. And he was not alone – the Emperor was there as well, on the back of his griffon, Deathclaw. Where the great beast pounced, blood and horror ensued for the followers of Chaos.

Around Caradryan, his host battled on against the enemy as well. His warriors were cloaked and shielded by fire, and it spilled from their weapons to consume northman and daemon alike. And there were plenty of both to feed the growing conflagration. Even with the forces of Tyrion and the Emperor, they were hard-pressed. The closer they drew to the Temple of Ulric and the great excavation which marked it, the harder the servants of the Ruinous Powers fought. *But they fight in vain*, he thought.

Already, the less fanatical of the enemy were beginning to fall back. Especially those who had witnessed the defeat of Arbaal. The champion had slaughtered a score of Ulthuan's finest before Caradryan had reached him, and like as not, he could have carried the day by himself. With his fall, his warriors were starting to retreat, and the daemons who had accompanied him were wavering into instability, their always-tenuous hold on the world slipping. Too, he could feel the presence of the other Incarnates, not just Tyrion and Karl Franz, but Nagash and the others as well, all drawing closer. They would be here soon, and if Teclis was to be believed, no power in the world could stand against them. Victory seemed not only possible, but imminent.

A bellow, deeper and more powerful than the loudest roll of thunder, pierced Caradryan's burgeoning hopes and swept them aside. It echoed down from the sky and rose from the ground; it shivered through the bricks and tore through alleyways and escaped from cul-de-sacs. The sound reverberated through every cobblestone and he clutched his head in agony, even as he turned, seeking out the author of that cry.

A moment later, the sky erupted in fire. Blazing meteors pierced the clouds and smashed home amidst the battle, killing warriors from both sides indiscriminately. The cry continued, growing impossibly loud as more and more meteors hammered down, levelling buildings and pummelling streets into ruin. Caradryan swept his halberd out, summoning a shield of flame to protect those few of his warriors that he could reach. But it was to no avail. His flames were snuffed, and elves died. Caradryan snarled in fury and whistled for Ashtari. The phoenix rose from the corpse of Arbaal's flesh hound with a single beat of its crimson wings and swooped towards him, dodging through the rain of burning debris. He caught hold of the bird's harness and hauled himself up onto its back as it streaked past.

His warriors followed him as he flew on, each one knowing, even as Caradryan did, that to stand still, or to seek shelter, was to die. So they followed him, plunging through the fleeing ranks of the enemy and carving themselves a path towards their goal. The Temple of Ulric was within sight, and nothing – not the enemy, or the wrath of the Dark Gods themselves – would deter the sons and daughters of Ulthuan from reaching it.



Tyrion swept Sunfang out in a shimmering arc. The daemoness the Loremasters knew as Dechala, the Denied One, parried the blow, shrieking and cursing him in the ancient tongue of his people as her coils tightened about he and Malhandir. The battle swirled on around them, as the finest warriors of

three kingdoms fought and died against the forces of the Dark Gods, and the sky wept fire. Nearby, what had once been a tavern exploded, filling the air with burning chunks of wood and stone.

Dechala's many arms flailed at him as she rained blow after brutal blow down, but he blocked each of them with a speed which shocked even him. He could feel the power of Hysh flowing through him, lending him speed of body and mind. *Whatever you have done to me, brother, wherever you are, thank you*, he thought. The daemoness had come at him suddenly, out of the press of battle, striking like an adder. It was as if she had been hunting for him alone, but he suspected any Incarnate would have done. He caught sight of Deathclaw, swooping low over the battle, and saw the Emperor's runefang flash and remove a bloodletter's head as he passed it. Despite the situation, he was glad the daemoness had found him, rather than the human. Whoever or whatever he was, he was still no match for a creature like Dechala.

Dechala chose that moment to lunge for him, swift as the serpent she resembled, her beautiful features contorted with hate. Her jaws spread wide, and he was forced to catch hold of her chin with his free hand. The poison dripping from her fangs hissed and sputtered where it dripped onto his gauntlet. Tyrion shoved her head back, and her flesh began to smoulder where he touched it as his aura of light started to burn away her cloak of darkness. She shrieked and squirmed, tail lashing. Malhandir whinnied in pain as her coils tightened convulsively.

Tyrion parried a blow meant to gut him, and his riposte was swifter than even the daemoness could follow. Sunfang was a blur of light, and it pierced Dechala's chest before she even had a chance to scream. The Denied One slumped, smoke rising from her, and her coils loosened and flopped quivering to the ground, to be trodden into ruin by Malhandir's hooves. Tyrion urged his horse on, and the animal reared and lunged away from the dissolving ruin of the daemon princess even as a fiery meteor obliterated the spot where she had fallen.

He heard a familiar shriek from above, and saw Caradryan hurtle towards the Temple of Ulric in the distance, his host following in his shadow. Flaming blades and spears cut the host a path through the disorganised rabble of the Chaos forces. Tyrion grinned. *Leave it to the silent one to lead the way*, he thought. He hauled on Malhandir's reins, and the stallion pawed the air with a whinny.

'Ride,' Tyrion roared with all the strength he could muster, to those of his warriors still fighting around him, whether they were human or elf. 'Ride and fear no darkness. Ride, for the world, and the breaking of the gods!' Even as his steed's hooves struck the ground, the animal was in motion, charging in Caradryan's wake. Those who could fell in behind him, as fiery ruin continued to hammer the cursed city from above. Knights of Stirland, Altdorf and Ostland, of Cothique and Caledor, of Ghgrond and Hag Graef, galloped in his wake. The proud survivors of three kingdoms, who looked to him for orders and inspiration.

Tyrion felt the weight of that responsibility keenly, even as he found joy in the sound of thundering hooves and the rattle of lances. He knew, in his heart, that this was the last charge of the world's defenders. Even if they won, even if the Dark Gods were cast back, the flower of elven *ithiltaen* and of human chivalry would fall here, never to ride again. Win or lose, the pillars of his world had been broken. *And we must see that it was not in vain*, he thought. He leaned forwards, over Malhandir's neck, and hacked down a northman standard bearer as he swept past.

The Temple of Ulric rose into sight as Tyrion galloped through the cramped streets of the Ulricsmund. The building was a shell of its former glory. It had been defiled and shattered by the servants of the Ruinous Powers. Tyrion recalled how Teclis had spoken of the city, when he had made common cause with the human Magnus against the forces of Chaos. Tyrion himself had been occupied fighting the druchii, after the battle of Finuval Plain. Teclis had said that Magnus had been a small man, and unimpressive at first glance, but filled with an inner fire that had been matched only by the Flame of Ulric itself. The same Flame that now coursed through Tyrion's blood, and lent its strength to his own.

He heard a snarl, and looked over his shoulder to see the Emperor's bodyguard, Wendel Volker, riding hard at his elbow. The Reiksguard looked almost as monstrous in that moment as their enemies, his eyes as yellow as a beast's and his lips peeled back from teeth which were too long. Then the moment passed and he was but a man again. Tyrion turned away. He did not know for certain what force lurked in the human, but whatever it was, it made him as savage as any of the great lions of Chrace.

Malhandir whinnied, and Tyrion snapped out of his reverie with a curse. They were within sight of the great excavation which marred the side of the Temple and marked where the artefact Be'lakor had spoken of was housed, but even as they drew close, a blaze of crackling warpflame suddenly roared to life, blocking off their advance. Tyrion hauled back on Malhandir's reins, bringing the horse to a sudden stop.

'Can you do anything?' a voice called down from above. Tyrion looked up as the Emperor's griffon landed nearby. The human looked as exhausted as Tyrion felt, but he still gripped his sword firmly. 'We are running short on time.'

'I... don't know,' Tyrion said. He urged Malhandir forwards, aware that as he did so, he could hear a growing war-chant echoing from the north. The enemy had found their courage, now that the rain of fire had slackened, and were regrouping. Tyrion felt Hysh rise within him as he extended Sunfang towards the crackling flames. Through the multicoloured haze, he could see the robed shapes of Chaos sorcerers and capering daemons.

Light flared, rising from his every pore, driving back the dark all around him. The flames quavered as the light struck them, and recoiled for a moment before reforming, even stronger than before. Tyrion climbed down from Malhandir's saddle and strode forwards, blade still extended. The flames gave way before him, but then roared up, as if to envelop him.

A gleaming halberd slid into place alongside Sunfang. Tyrion glanced aside, and saw Caradryan take up a position beside him. The Incarnate of Fire smiled thinly. 'Let us face the fire together, heir of Aenarion,' Caradryan rasped. Tyrion nodded tersely, and then turned back to the flames. Together, the two Incarnates drove their power against the warfire barrier, trying to snuff it. Beads of sweat rolled down Tyrion's face as he summoned the light and sent it frenzying forth to sear the unnatural flames. Beside him, Caradryan's own flames burned hotter and brighter than the colourful daemon-inferno. But still, the warfire barrier held.

Behind him, Tyrion could hear the Emperor shouting orders, reforming the ranks of the combined armies to face the attack that was imminent. The human was a commander without equal. But he also knew that this was no longer a battle for mortals... It was the Rhana Dandra and only gods could hope to keep their footing in the torrent of blood to come. He almost turned back, to lend his aid, when Caradryan grabbed his shoulder. He glanced at the former captain of the Phoenix Guard, and nodded. *You are right, my friend... If these flames are not snuffed, we will all perish this day.*

The howling grew louder and louder, until it beat at his ears. Tyrion risked a glance, and saw a nightmare horde burst through the streets and dash pell-mell towards the combined armies of men and elves. Northland hounds, lean and athirst, loped ahead of savage brutes which had once been men, before some fell power had driven all reason and humanity from them, reducing them to feral monstrosities. The berserker wave slammed into the allied lines, and died in droves. But not all of them, and some managed to drag a knight from his horse, or pounce on a spearman and bear him to the ground, their teeth in his throat.

Tyrion instinctively turned, his blade sweeping out. Light speared forth, and a group of howling barbarians were immolated in an instant. Before he could turn his attentions back to the barrier of flame, however, Caradryan shoved him aside. Tyrion hit the ground and rolled to his feet as a monstrous shape slammed down onto the street where he'd been standing. Tyrion raised his sword as the bloodthirster rose to its full height and turned towards him. The beast gestured with its hammer. 'Ka'Bandha has come, elf,' it roared. 'You thought to escape me, mortals, but the Huntsman of Khorne will not be denied!'

'Running wasn't my idea, I assure you,' Tyrion snarled. He darted in, and threw himself beneath the daemon's first blow. As its hammer smashed down on the street, he was already on his feet. Sunfang whipped out, carving a trail of fire across the bloodthirster's back. Ka'Bandha reared back and roared. It whipped around, and Tyrion was forced to leap back as the axe it clutched in its other hand crashed down, carving a gouge in the street. Before he could launch another attack, the daemon wrenched its weapon free of the street and reared back, slamming one massive hoof into his chest. Tyrion skidded backwards, his chest aching and no air in his lungs.

Before Ka'Bandha could take advantage of his predicament, however, the Emperor was there, his runefang singing as it carved through one of the bloodthirster's wings, eliciting a shriek of fury. That shriek rapidly became a snarl of triumph, as Ka'Bandha whirled and smashed Deathclaw from the air with the flat of its axe. 'You... Your skull is mine, human,' Ka'Bandha roared, as it closed in on the fallen animal and its rider.

'And yours is mine, hound of carnage,' Caradryan grated, as Ashtari swooped around the bloodthirster's head. The Phoenix Blade flashed and Ka'Bandha staggered as flames roared about it, singeing its unnatural flesh and scorching its brass armour. But the beast did not fall, no matter how many wounds Caradryan opened in its hide.

Ka'Bandha bellowed and swung its hammer out, catching the phoenix as it dived past. The great bird fell with a scream and the bloodthirster was on it in an instant, with fatal results. The daemon's hammer rose and fell with deadly precision, and the last phoenix of the Flamespyres died. Caradryan, who had fallen from his saddle, hacked at the daemon in a fury, and his halberd, wreathed in white-hot flames, crashed down on Ka'Bandha's skull hard enough to shatter the brass crown the daemon wore, and to open its scalp to the bone.

Ka'Bandha, blinded by its own ichor, lashed out wildly, trying to drive the Incarnate back. As Tyrion dragged himself to his feet, he saw one wild swing of the hammer catch Caradryan in the legs, and he heard the snap as the elf's bones were shattered by the impact. Caradryan fell heavily, striking the hard rock of the Ulricsmund with crushing force, and his halberd was jarred from his hand as the bloodthirster bore down on him.

Tyrion, one arm wrapped around his side, staggered towards them, but was too slow. Ka'Bandha lifted one hoof high, over Caradryan, who strained to reach the haft of his weapon, which lay just out of reach. The daemon stamped down onto the Incarnate's chest, and, with a thunderous crunch, Caradryan,

captain of the Phoenix Guard, servant of Asuryan, died. Tyrion watched in horror as sparks of flame burst from the shattered corpse and took root in the bloodthirster's flesh, running hungrily across its limbs, until no part of the daemon was not aflame. Ka'Bandha wailed and thrashed in obvious agony as it felt the wrath of Aqshy. Even so, the beast did not fall.

Tyrion saw Deathclaw hurtle towards the daemon once more, the Emperor clinging to his saddle, his blade sweeping out. But before his blow could land, Ka'Bandha lashed out, even as it had before, and struck the griffon from the air with its hammer, driving the beast into the rubble of the temple nearby. The Emperor was flung from his saddle by the impact, and thrown high through the remnants of a stained glass window and into the temple beyond. Tyrion's heart sank as the bloodthirster turned towards him, grinning through the flames that ate at its bestial features. Though the fires burned it, its lust for battle had not dimmed.

'Flee, blood-speck, and I shall save your skull for another day,' Ka'Bandha gurgled, as it glared down at him. 'Flee, little elf, and do not seek to come between the Huntsman and his prey this night.'

Tyrion straightened, and felt the fire sing in his veins. The light around him began to glow, and the daemon winced. It raised a hand, as if to shield its eyes. Tyrion raised Sunfang. 'I do not bargain with daemons,' he said. 'I kill them.'

Then, with a yell, he launched himself towards Caradryan's slayer.

The Temple of Ulric

The Emperor awoke in darkness, his face sticky with blood and his body a mass of aches and pains. *Forgot what that was like*, he thought sourly, as he pushed himself to his feet. The air was heavy, and a slaughterhouse stink was thick in his nostrils.

He looked around warily, hands flexing. He'd lost his runefang somewhere between here and Ka'Bandha's hammer, and he scanned his surroundings for something to take its place. He peered into the darkness, marking the body of a Chaos warrior nearby. The man's sword was to hand. Though he was loath to touch it, beggars couldn't be choosers. As he started forward, he took note of the corpses hanging from the ceiling on heavy chains and hooks.

With a start, he realised he was under the great dome of the temple. For a brief heartbeat, rage pulsed through him to see this most holy of shrines defiled so, but he regained control of himself quickly. 'Work first, mourn later,' he muttered.

'Same old Sigmar.'

The voice slithered out of the dark. The Emperor froze, and then turned, following the echoes of laughter. He saw a throne of skulls and flayed skin rising above a dais of bones, and at its base, a familiar gleam of bronze. 'Ha,' he murmured. No cleansing flame, no sunlit morning, had ever seemed as beautiful as the sight of his hammer, gleaming in the dark. He stepped towards it, hand reaching out, but stopped as the laughter echoed again.

'Yesssss, it *is* you. I knew it from the first. I smelt your stink on the wind the moment that fool elf freed you from the Vortex, Unberogen. For two thousand years, this world was free of you, but here you are, hiding in a dead man's skin.'

Sigmar looked up as the alabaster-skinned figure climbed atop the back of the throne and spread great black wings. Eyes like polished opals shone as the horned head twisted about. 'It has been a long time, my old friend,' the daemon prince murmured. 'Centuries since last we spoke, eh, Sigmar?'

'Gerreon,' Sigmar said. He felt the old hate welling up again, like a wound that had never properly healed. A woman's face passed before his eyes, and receded into memory. This thing before him had been his friend, once upon a time. Now, it was a plaything of Chaos.

'Azazel,' the daemon prince corrected, gently. 'Alas, no time to catch up, I'm afraid. No time to speak of better days, of loves lost and won. Time is speeding up, and the world judders to pieces in haste. I thought... well. One last moment, before the end.' Azazel pointed at the fallen shape of Ghal Maraz, where it lay amidst the refuse of barbarity. 'You want that filthy thing, cousin? Then come and take it, if you dare.'

Sigmar lunged for the hammer. Azazel gave a wild shriek of laughter and flung himself towards his prey, drawing a blade covered in ruinous sigils as he did so. The blade slammed down, inches from Sigmar's head. The Emperor rolled aside. Azazel rose, wings stretching out. He stood between Sigmar and his weapon, and spread his arms as if in invitation. 'A good effort, but not good enough. Not for this,' Azazel said. He took a step towards Sigmar. 'I wish that we had more time, my friend. I have been waiting so long to see you again.'

'Can't say the same, I'm afraid,' Sigmar said.

Azazel laughed. 'Oh, how I have missed you,' he said. Then with a single snap of his wings, he hurtled forwards. His blade hissed as it whipped towards Sigmar's neck. Sigmar twisted aside and flung himself towards his hammer. Even as he caught the haft, he heard the boom of Azazel's wings. He rolled onto his back, and just managed to block the daemon prince's blade with the haft of Ghal Maraz. For a moment, Azazel crouched above him. The blade writhed like a thing alive in his clawed grip. 'Do you ever think of her, brother of my heart?' Azazel purred, as he forced the blade down. 'Do you recall her scent in lonely moments, or the way the light caught her hair? Do the memories press down on your heart, when you recall Ravenna? Do you spare even a thought for dear Pendrag?' Azazel chuckled. 'I know I don't.'

'I think about them always, Gerreon. As I have thought about this moment,' Sigmar said, from between gritted teeth. He felt stronger than before, as if some part of him which had been missing up until now had returned. It wasn't simply the presence of Ghal Maraz, but something else – as if a weight had been lifted from him. He heard the clash of steel in his head, and the song of distant stars. He pushed back against Azazel. The daemon prince's eyes widened.

'What are you—?' Azazel began. Sigmar shoved the haft of the hammer up, and Azazel screeched as the edge of his own blade gashed his chest and throat. He tumbled backwards, wings flailing. His blood hissed as it burned the flagstones. Sigmar swept his hammer out, and inhuman bone splintered as the force of the blow tore the daemon prince's sword from his grip. The sword wailed like a wounded cat as it was sent skidding across the floor.

Sigmar kicked him in the head as he tried to rise. The daemon prince yowled as the Emperor trod on his wings, pinning him in place. Sigmar raised Ghal Maraz over his head. 'You said it yourself, Gerreon. There is no time. And so I send you back to the forge of souls more quickly than you deserve.'

'No!' Azazel shrieked. His eyes bulged in fear as he tried to tear himself free, to no avail. The hammer came down with thunderous finality. The great wings twitched once, and then fell still. Sigmar Unberogen looked down at the rapidly dissolving ruin of a man he'd once called friend, shook himself, and strode away, towards the sound of fighting.

There was a war to be won. And a world to be saved.



NINETEEN

✧ The Ulricsmund, Middenheim

Wendel Volker grunted as his sword became lodged in the skull of a snarling northman, and he released it as the body slumped. He reached down and snatched up the axe of a fallen White Lion and spun it experimentally. Somehow, the axe, despite not being made for human hands, felt more natural in his hand than any sword ever had.

An axe is a warrior's weapon, Ulric growled softly. Volker ignored the god and turned to chop a leaping Chaos hound out of the air, sending the dying beast crashing down nearby. He whirled back, and smashed aside a brass-faced shield before cleaving through the breastbone of its owner. He tore the axe free and spun, seeking more foes. He'd lost his horse in the first charge, but he'd never been comfortable with the animals. As far as Volker was concerned, being on a horse made you a target. Ulric seemed to feel the same way.

Anarchy reigned wherever Volker cast his gaze. Bellowed war cries and the clash of steel echoed across the city. All around him, men and elves were hard-pressed by the savage northmen. The latter seemed tireless, driven beyond all reason and discipline and into a red rage that ended only in death. They came again and again, hurling themselves at the dwindling ranks of the Empire and the elves, dying in droves but pulling down warriors in their death-throes. Even worse, the northmen were not alone in their assault. The clamour of battle was drawing enemies from all over the city, including beastmen and skaven.

A flare of light startled him, and he turned to see Tyrion still locked in combat with the bloodthirster. The elf was holding his own, but only just. The bloodthirster had already killed one Incarnate, and though it was wreathed in flames and bleeding from dozens of wounds, it didn't seem to be slowing down. And Tyrion was beginning to tire.

A knight, bearing the bull emblem of Ostland on one pauldron, staggered into him. Volker grabbed his arm, and the knight tried to pull free. His armour was scorched and dented, and he'd lost his helmet. 'Let go of me, damn you,' he cried.

'Get back in line,' Volker snarled. The man paled and stumbled back.

'The Emperor is dead,' he shouted. 'We cannot win!'

Volker tensed, and Ulric snarled within him. Before he could stop himself, he swung his axe and decapitated the knight. *Cowardice is like a disease*, Ulric growled, *and it spreads as swiftly as any pox*. Volker saw other men, knights and halberdiers, woodsmen and handgunners, staring at him in shock and fear. His fellow Reiksguard, whom he'd been fighting among, edged away from him. His gut churned, but he lifted the bloody axe high and bared his teeth. 'Fight or die, men of the Empire,' he snarled. He could feel the god adding his strength to Volker's voice, making sure he was heard by every human ear on the field of battle. 'I do not care which, but do it bravely, and do it well. Fight, in the name of Sigmar, who forged our Empire. Fight, in the name of Ulric, who forged our people! Fight and rend the enemy like the wolves who birthed you!'

A northman charged through the press towards him, bellowing incoherently. Volker spun the axe in his hands and brought it down in a two-handed grip, cleaving the barbarian from pate to jawl. He tore the axe free and gestured towards the enemy. 'Fight, you Unberogens! Fight, you Teutogens, Jeutones and Brigundians, fight, sons of Ulric all! Fight until the Fauschlag quakes and the Dark Gods hide in fear,' he roared. And they roared with him. He could feel the panic and dismay giving way to anger and determination as he charged towards the foe, his people at his back, and felt Ulric's contented growl roll through him. Whatever else happened here today, the men of the Empire would not falter.

A new sound pierced the clangour of combat then, even as Volker led his people into battle. It rose from the south, spiralling up into the smoky air, and set the hair on the back of his neck to dancing. Through the madness of battle, he caught sight of green shapes flooding into the plaza. 'Orcs,' he muttered, as he slammed his shoulder into a bloodletter's gut and flipped the daemon over his back. 'As if things aren't mad enough.'

Not just orcs, Ulric roared, *elves as well. The Incarnates approach. Allies, Wendel Volker. Or if not allies, then those who come to make war on our enemies*. He shuddered as the godspark howled within him, joyously this time. *War, man, war so as to shake the pillars of heaven itself! See them, Wendel Volker, see how they come, scenting the blood of our prey!*

Volker shook his head, trying to ignore Ulric's howls and concentrate on the fight at hand. He heard someone shout his name, and jerked back as the Chaos warrior charged towards him was suddenly transmuted to gold. He turned and saw Balthasar Gelt riding towards him, the Everqueen sitting behind him on the pegasus's back. 'Volker, where is the Emperor?' the wizard shouted. Volker signalled for his fellow Reiksguard to fall in around Gelt and Alarielle, and the remaining knights did so swiftly.

'That... thing struck him down. I don't know where he is, and there's no chance of finding out, not with the enemy hemming us in,' Volker said, gesturing towards the spot where Ka'Bandha and Tyrion still fought as Gelt helped Alarielle down from the pegasus. 'If you've got any magic that can find him, now's the time to use it,' he continued.

Before Gelt could answer, an ear-splitting screech sounded over the din of the battle. The two Incarnates and Volker turned to see the bloodthirster reel back, away from Tyrion, its axe a twisted ruin. It tossed the smoking weapon aside and reached for Tyrion. It smashed his sword down, and knocked him from his feet. The daemon loomed over the elf, its hammer raised for a killing blow.

'No,' Alarielle hissed. She started forwards, but Volker stopped her, even as Ulric howled a warning in his mind.

'Wait – look!' he said. A sudden gale sprang up, sweeping across the Ulricsmund. And with it came a charnel stink that hung heavy on the air. A moment later, a swirling black cloud, roiling and pulsing with dark energy, burst out from between two buildings. The street shook beneath the tread of something monstrous as the cloud rolled forwards. Where it passed, combatants fell dead, their skin desiccated and cracked, their weapons and armour crumbling to dust. The cloud of death made no distinction between orcs and elves, skaven and northmen. It claimed them all.

The cloud drew close to Ka'Bandha, who stared at it in bewildered rage. As it got within arm's reach, it split open to reveal an immense, skeletal figure standing amidst the thinning vapour. Nagash had come, at last. And death came with him.

Volker cringed back as Nagash drew his great, serrated blade and hewed at the bloodthirster. The daemon interposed its hammer at the last moment, and the two baneful weapons connected in a shower of sparks. Nagash gave a death-rattle of frustration and launched another blow. Ka'Bandha swatted it aside with a roar. The two beings slammed together and broke apart, their duel scattering the combatants around them as it shook the street. The remaining windows in the temple shattered as sword and hammer met again, and even the warpflames shied away from the duel.

Through the smoke and dust thrown up by the confrontation, Volker saw a horse galloping towards them, the slumped form of Tyrion on its back.

Alongside Alarielle, he caught the elf as he toppled from the saddle. 'Does he live?' she asked.

'I live,' Tyrion coughed, reaching up to stroke her face. She caught his hand and held it. Volker turned away, uncomfortable. *Battle is no place for such things*, Ulric growled petulantly.

'Quiet,' Volker murmured. He could hear something. Like a rattle of spears and a rumbling of drums, or the snap of distant flames. He turned, to ask Gelt if

he'd heard it, and saw that the three Incarnates were staring up at the sky. Gelt was shaking in his saddle, and the elves looked bewildered.

Lightning slammed down, not the blood-red lightning of the Chaos-cursed skies, but something brighter and purer. It struck the dome of the temple, and shook the Fauschlag down to its core. Ka'Bandha and Nagash both shrank back from the light, their fight forgotten in the face of such overwhelming elemental fury.

Tyrion laughed.

'Welcome back, my friend,' he said.

Sigmar strode through the dust and the smoke, lightning crawling across his form, Ghal Maraz in his hand. He had cast off the remains of his cloak, and his helmet. For the first time in a long time, he felt whole. Complete.

He had been reborn in the broken body of Karl Franz as the Glottkin had ravaged Altdorf, called to a man of his blood by the winds of magic and fate, and perhaps even necessity. An empire, even a dying one, needed an emperor. *I was the first, and so I will be the last*, he thought sadly. Then he looked out at the massed ranks of friend and foe, and smiled. *Or perhaps I will be the first again, come what may.*

But he had not been reborn whole. His power had been split, even as Ulric's was, between himself and the man called Valten. But what had been in Valten had coiled waiting in the hammer he now held after the youth's death, waiting for the hand of its true owner. Now, reunited, the power of the heavens was his once more, and Sigmar Unberogen was whole.

He raised his hammer, and it began to glow with a cerulean light. As he passed Deathclaw's broken form, the griffon stirred and clambered to its feet with a groggy scream. 'Up, you lazy beast,' Sigmar murmured, stretching out his hand to stroke its feathered neck. 'Up. We have a war to win,' he said. The beast made to follow him, but he waved it back. He strode towards Nagash and Ka'Bandha. The liche met his gaze and, after a moment's hesitation, inclined his head.

'UNBEROGEN,' Nagash said.

'Monster,' Sigmar said conversationally. He swept Ghal Maraz out, and Nagash flinched back. 'Step back, Nagash of Khemri. This one is mine.' Sigmar stared at Ka'Bandha. The bloodthirster was still warily watching Nagash, even as the liche slunk back. 'Turn, hellhound.'

Ka'Bandha turned, a smile creeping across its distorted features. The daemon's nose wrinkled. 'Ahhhh. I smell the stink of a broken soul. You have defeated the Prince of Damnation.' The bloodthirster's smile widened, in its mask of flames. 'Good. That saves me the trouble.'

'I didn't do it for you,' Sigmar said, stepping through the rubble. 'He was an obstacle. A stumbling block, set on the path of fate by your masters. They fear me.' He lifted Ghal Maraz. 'They fear this.'

'I do not fear you,' Ka'Bandha growled.

'No. But then, you aren't important. Just another obstacle.' Sigmar leaned his hammer across his shoulder. 'You've done your part, beast. And now the story goes on, without you.'

'I will have your skull,' Ka'Bandha snarled, raising its hammer.

'No. But I will have yours,' Sigmar said.

Ka'Bandha roared and swung its hammer down. Sigmar ducked under the blow as it sizzled through the spot his head had occupied, and leapt onto the fallen statue of a forgotten hero. As Ka'Bandha turned, roaring, Sigmar was already in the air, his hammer clasped in both hands. The weapon seemed to glow for just a moment as it descended, and then with a thunderous crash, it slammed home. Ka'Bandha's roar was cut short as the rune weapon crumpled Chaos-spawned bone and tore steaming flesh. Sigmar landed in a crouch, and Ka'Bandha crashed down beside him, its body already unravelling as the dark spirit of Khome's Huntsman fled back to the abattoir of souls from which it had been plucked.

Sigmar rose slowly to his feet. As if that had been a signal, a great cry rose from the ranks of the Chaos horde, and, almost as one, they at last faltered. Some howled and fled, others dropped to the ground and cowered. Some fought on, but they were quickly overwhelmed by the brawling mass of orcs. Even as Sigmar joined the other Incarnates, the remainder of the Chaos horde broke and fled into the city, pursued by the greenskins and ogres. All save for a burly one-eyed orc, and his bodyguard.

Sigmar eyed the beast as it stumped towards them, its broad form suffused with what he knew to be the Wind of Beasts. *Well, that explains that*, Sigmar thought. He hid a smile as the brute gestured curtly for Malekith to step forward. The Eternity King looked as battle-worn as any of them, and his eyes were hard behind his mask. 'Grimgor, Boss of the East, demands that he be allowed to challenge the Everchosen,' he said, his tone making it clear that he would brook no humour at his expense. 'If you have a problem with it, he wishes it known that he will – ah – crump you.' Grimgor nodded and glared about challengingly.

'*IF THE BEAST WISHES TO TRY ITS LUCK, LET IT*,' Nagash said. The uproar of battle had faded, and now the only sound was the eerie crackle of the warfflame barrier. Sigmar looked at it, stroking Deathclaw's neck.

'He will not try it alone,' Tyrion said, sheathing his sword. 'It will take all of us to win this battle.' He frowned as he said it, and glanced sidelong at Nagash. 'Even those we would rather not fight beside.'

'*YOUR PREFERENCES ARE OF LITTLE CONCERN TO ME, ELF-PRINCE. I WOULD HAVE THIS AFFAIR DONE WITH*,' Nagash said. The liche stalked towards the barrier, amethyst magics crawling along his limbs as he focused his powers on the wall of daemoniac flames.

'We must aid him,' Sigmar said. 'All of you – turn your power upon the barrier. We must act as one, if we are to accomplish what we must.' As he spoke, he thrust out a hand, and a bolt of lightning streaked from his palm to strike the barrier. One by one, the other Incarnates followed suit, and soon, the warfflames were assailed by the dichotomic onslaught of light and shadow, of life and death, lightning and shards of gold. The flames died back and surged forth, redoubling in strength even as the Incarnates smote them.

Grimgor alone did not unleash the power that had made him its host. Instead, the orc hefted his axe and bellowed a wordless challenge at the pulsating barrier, before rushing in to strike the flames with a wild blow. Sigmar smiled as the barrier collapsed at last, and the orc staggered through. Grimgor spun wildly and decapitated one of the sorcerers responsible for the flame-barrier, even as the backwash of the broken spell consumed the others and reduced them to ash.

Beyond the flames, Sigmar could see the great excavation and the smoke rising from its depths. He could feel the pull of those depths, and his hand tightened on Ghal Maraz's haft. The Fauschlag gave a shudder, and he stumbled, feeling a hollow sensation in the pit of his gut. He looked around. 'We must hurry. The artefact has awakened.'

'How can you tell?' Tyrion said.

'How can you not?' Alarielle said, striding past him. Her face was pinched and tight with pain. 'It is like a wound which will not heal – the world is screaming in agony.' She stumbled, and Malekith solicitously caught her arm.

'*THE WORLD IS DYING*,' Nagash said.

'And that is why we must hurry,' Sigmar said. He looked around. 'The fate of the world is in our hands, my friends,' he said softly. 'And we cannot afford to fail.'



TWENTY

The Depths of the Fauschlag

Teclis opened his eyes as the cavern shook. Great fangs of rock fell down from the roof of the chamber to smash across the ground, and dust choked the air. Whatever was going on above, its echoes were reverberating through the mountain Middenheim was built on. Or perhaps it was not the battle above but the abomination below that was causing the Fauschlag to shudder so.

The warp-artefact shone ominously at the centre of the rough-hewn chamber, its surface rippling with hateful colours. He squinted against its cold light, trying to make out the shapes that dived and swam within it, but gave up after a moment. Sorcerers clustered about it, uttering harsh chants to coax the thing to life.

Learned as he was, he only recognised a few of the incantations being shouted. Even those he knew were archaic, older even than the elves themselves, and had likely not been spoken aloud since the time of the Old Ones. As he watched, a sorcerer toppled over, smoke rising from her mouth and eyes. Her body joined those of the others who had been overcome by the power they were seeking to manipulate.

Teclis tested the bonds that held him moored to the cavern wall. Despite the wide cracks that now ran the width and breadth of the walls and floor, his chains remained taut. His wrists were raw from previous attempts, and blood dripped down his fingers. He did not stop trying, despite the pain. There was nothing else to do but try. Anything else was surrender, and now that he was here, now that it had come to this point, Teclis had discovered wellsprings of what some might have called courage, but which he suspected to be spite.

The spite of a child always in the shadow of his stronger sibling. The spite of a man who had never been trusted by those he called friends and allies, because of his gifts. The spite of one who had been forced to sacrifice everything for a chance at victory, only to find himself falling short yet again, despite his best efforts. And it was the spite of a gamesman without any moves left, as much as anything else, of one who had been outmanoeuvred and outplayed. So Teclis hauled on his chains, strengthened by bile, and anger, and frustration; there was hatred in his heart, and he would not, could not yield. He did not know what he would do if he got loose, but he would do something. Anything.

That he could feel the wellspring of magic which filled the cavern only added to his frustration. It had been drawn from the rock and the air by the thousands of blood sacrifices Archaon had ordered conducted. The bodies of those unfortunates lay strewn about the chamber like a carpet of abused flesh, and the smell of their dying hung thick on the air. The magics roared about like a wind, caught in the pull of the warp-artefact, but Teclis could not manipulate even the slenderest thread, thanks to baleful runes etched into his manacles.

Where are you, brother? he thought. Do you still live? Do the others? Or was it all for nothing? He threaded his thin fingers through the links and turned, trying again, as he had so many times before, to pull the chains free of the rock. As he did so, he looked around, taking in the silent ranks of the Swords of Chaos, and their master on his hell-steed. Archaon stared up at the oily surface of the artefact as if captivated. He had not looked away from it since they'd arrived, save to occasionally check that Teclis was still safely bound.

You should have killed me, Teclis thought, bracing his foot against the wall. Pain screamed through his shoulders and arms, but he ignored it. *But you need an audience, don't you? Like a petulant child, waiting to throw his tantrum until his parents are close by. You need me to see what you have done.* His muscles throbbed with weariness and a bone-deep ache, but he strained backwards regardless. Blood welled around the edges of his manacles, and he could not restrain a grunt of pain.

Another quake shook the cavern. Stalactites speared down, shattering on the ground, filling the air with debris. Gold gleamed in the cracks above his head, and not for the first time, he wondered about the true nature of the Fauschlag. *Not that it matters,* he thought. Yet, the part of him that was still a loremaster remained curious. More stalactites rained down, and several of the chanting sorcerers were crushed into messy pulp. Those closest to them made as if to flee, but returned to their labours at a simple gesture from Archaon. They feared the Everchosen more than a death by falling rock, and Teclis couldn't blame them.

A faint sound tugged at his ears. Faint, but growing louder. He recognised it instantly, and smiled suddenly, fiercely. *Brother. I knew you would not let me down. I knew it!*

Teclis licked his cracked and bleeding lips, and cleared his throat. 'Do you hear that, Everchosen?' he called out, letting his chains fall.

Archaon did not turn.

Teclis smiled. 'Do you hear the sound of the drums, Archaon? The crash of steel, the tread of feet? Those are the sounds of battle, Three-Eyed King. You asked me earlier what I saw, Archaon. Well, I saw the future – your future – and it is not pretty.' He hurled the words at Archaon, taunting him. Words were all he had left, and he intended to expend his quiver.

'Silence,' Archaon said. He turned in his saddle, his eyes glowing eerily within his helm.

'Do you remember what I said, on the ramparts?' Teclis continued. 'Sigmar is coming, Archaon. No... he is here. Do you hear him? Do you feel him?'

'Sigmar is a fairy tale. A myth for children, the mad and the blind,' Archaon rumbled. 'Which are you, elf?'

'I don't know. Which are you, human?' Teclis spat. *Child,* he thought, *I am a child. Or mad, but I have seen too much to be blind.*

Archaon wheeled his horse about, and his hand hovered over the hilt of his sword. For a moment, Teclis wondered if the Everchosen would strike him down. The chamber shuddered again, and Archaon laughed softly. He glanced over his shoulder, up at the flickering warp-artefact. As Teclis watched in horror, the artefact's gleaming surface abruptly swelled, doubling in size. Those sorcerers closest to it were sucked into its depths, their screams echoing through the cavern. Vast, pain-wracked faces bulged from within it, pressing against the oily skin of the artefact, and whorls of colour contracted and broke apart in dizzying fashion. Terrible lights gleamed up through the cracks in the cavern floor, and a strange, sickly sweet smell filled Teclis's nostrils as the air wavered, suddenly full of shapes which were not quite in synch with the world. They moved too swiftly, or too slowly, about him, and he shied away from leering faces and insubstantial gripping talons.

Daemonic whispers filled his mind, clawing at the walls of his soul. The sphere increased in size again, and the whispers grew louder. He thrashed in his chains as the daemons tore at his will and sanity. The end was mere minutes away, he knew. The sphere was growing exponentially, but it could only grow so big before it at last imploded. And when it collapsed, the Fauschlag, and all within it, would be wrenched into the Realm of Chaos, as the rest of the world was slowly, but surely torn apart.

'It is beautiful, is it not?' Archaon said, as the wraith-like shapes of daemons swirled about him as if he were the eye of a storm. 'Here is the doom of all mankind, come round at last.' He raised a hand, and daemonic shapes coiled about his arm and fingers like serpents. 'These are the last moments. Glory in them, Teclis of Cothique, for after this, only horror awaits you.' Archaon spread his arms.

'A great and beautiful horror awaits us all.'



Wendel Volker watched in awe as the Emperor, Tyrion and the orc, Grimgor, carved a savage path through the horde of squealing skaven. Though the fighting was not confined to them, they bore the brunt of the red work being done in those tunnels. The skaven died in their hundreds, and their bodies carpeted the cold bedrock of the calcified catacombs where they'd chosen to make their stand, but there were always more of them.

Volker, axe in hand, hauled a wounded elf archer to her feet and shoved her back towards her fellows as armoured stormvermin burst out of a side tunnel and charged towards the small force of men and elves. Before he could shout for his fellow Reiksguard, Gelt stepped forwards and gestured sharply, sending a hail of golden shards hammering into the ratkin. He watched in disgust as the newly dead skaven twitched upright a moment later, dragged back to their feet by the will of Nagash. He cut his gaze towards the swirling black cloud which surrounded the Undying King, and felt Ulric snarl within him.

He knew how the god felt. It was one thing to ally with elves, or even orcs, but the liche was something else entirely. He was as wrong as Chaos, in his way, and he cared nothing for the lives of his allies. Nagash ranged ahead of them all, moving swiftly, killing himself a path through the enemy with magic, sword or choking cloud. No skaven monster or war machine could stand against him, and they had faced plenty of both after descending into the Fauschlag. The deeper they went, the more fierce the resistance became.

The Incarnates had been forced to combine their efforts, fighting together for the first time since they had all gathered in Athel Loren. Malekith's shadow-constructs harried the enemy, driving them squealing into the path of Gelt's shards or Alarielle's thorns. Tyrion and the Emperor guarded Grimgor's flanks as the orc and his Immortulz bulled ahead, taking on the worst the skaven could send against them with enthusiasm rather than strategy.

From behind him, Volker heard the rasping intake of breath that heralded Malekith's dragon preparing to breathe its reeking smoke into another set of tunnels. The great beast, and Deathclaw, had had a tough time of it at first, for neither beast would be parted from their respective masters and they'd had to squirm and scrape through the upper tunnels. But once those manmade tunnels had given way to the cavernous natural corridors, the dragon had flared its wings and lent its might to the advance.

Tough beast, Ulric murmured, admiringly.

'Glad it's on our side,' Volker said. He spun his axe, and chopped through a spear as it sought his belly. He slashed out, killing the skaven who'd wielded it, and then those behind it. Ulric had some strength yet, and the god lent it freely. Volker was not equal to the Incarnates, but he was more than the man he had been.

The Fauschlag continued to shake and shudder about them, and more than once, Volker heard the scream of a man or elf as they vanished into some crevasse, or were crushed by rocks tumbling from above. The moans of the wounded pursued them all down through the tunnels. Those who were trapped, or could not walk, were left behind to survive as best they could. That which was still the man he had been cringed in horror at the thought, but the wolf in him, the part that was ice, knew that it was necessary. Time was of the essence, and there was none to spare for those who could not march.

A strange light played across the blade of his axe as he swung it and swept the head from a skaven's shoulders. As the body fell, he saw that the ratmen were fleeing, scuttling for their holes. *Do you smell it, Wendel Volker? We are here, Ulric thundered in his head. The wolf-god gave a joyous howl. We are here and our prey is at last within reach! Blood is on the air, and the sounds of battle fill our ears. Rend and slay, tear and smash! Vengeance!*

Volker shuddered as the godspark twisted and writhed in agitation within him. Blood poured down his skin as white hairs grew from his pores, and his bones cracked and shifted. He closed his eyes, trying to fight past the pain. Suddenly a cool hand pressed itself against the back of his grimy neck, and he felt a cleansing wind blow through the cold runnels of his soul. He turned and saw Alarielle. The Everqueen smiled sadly, and stepped back as he flinched away from her. 'I—thank you,' Volker said. He could taste blood in his mouth. He didn't know what she had done, but the pain had lessened.

'Do not thank me,' the Everqueen said. 'Fight, son of the Empire. Fight hard, and die well, if it comes to that.'

'Which it almost certainly will,' Malekith said. The Eternity King glared at Volker. 'Whatever lurks within you, man, see that it does not seek to hinder us. We have arrived at the precipice and I would not be sent over the edge by mistake.' Malekith gestured with his sword, and Volker turned back towards the strange light. He smelt an acrid stink, and Ulric growled, *Daemon-spoor*. They had come to a wide, high cavern, which rang with the shrieks of daemons and the grinding of shifting rock. And the light as well, which burned and chilled at the same time, the way the sun was said to do in the far north.

Before them was arrayed the full might of the Lord of the End Times. Daemons of every size and description blocked their path to the artefact, and they surrounded a core of black iron—Archaon, Volker knew, and his Swords of Chaos. 'There are thousands of them,' someone muttered. Similar mutters ran through the ranks, and hands tightened on weapons as men and elves faced the army of the End Times.

'More than that,' Volker said. *If I were still a gambling man, I wouldn't bet a farthing on our chances*, he thought. He felt strangely calm, and wondered whether that was Ulric's doing, or Alarielle's.

'No wonder the vermin ran,' Gelt said hollowly. 'I wouldn't want to get caught in the middle of this either.' The Incarnate of Metal sounded tired, and Volker knew how he felt. Wherever he looked, there were bloody bandages, bound limbs and exhausted faces.

Volker looked to the Emperor, and saw him sitting rigid in Deathclaw's saddle, his hammer across his lap. He stared across the cavern, and his face was placid, as if he were deep in thought. *That was always his problem*, Ulric growled. *Too much thinking. What is there to think about? The enemy is here, we are here, there is only one choice. There is no more time for cleverness. There is only time now for blood, steel and will!*

As if in reply to the wolf-god's muttering, Grimgor threw back his head and gave a wild bellow, which drowned out even the raucous howling of the gathered daemonic hosts. The orc spread his arms, and his Immortulz gave voice to their own cries. Then, with a rattle of iron, the greenskins charged. 'Well, that's torn it,' Volker said.

The daemons reacted instantly, surging forwards like a sea of infernal fury to meet the Incarnate of Beasts and his warriors. Bloodletters bounded up, hissing Khorne's praises; horrors of all hues and shades laughed uproariously and hurled torrents of writhing magic without regard for friend or foe; plaguebearers shambled into battle, pox-blades ready; and the handmaidens of Slaanesh danced in, claws snapping. And behind them all came the greater daemons, driving their lesser manifestations on with lash and bellowed order.

The Emperor lifted Ghal Maraz, and, as one, the Incarnates and their remaining forces started to advance. There was no grand strategy or battle-order. There was only the raw press of the melee, strength against strength, and human muscle and will against daemonic caprice. Volker began to run as, around him, knights galloped into battle. Silver Helms and Dragon Princes joined the charge, shouting out the battle cries of fallen Ulthuan and Caledor. Arrows arced overhead, and Malekith's dragon uttered a scream of rage and anticipation as it launched itself into the air. The dead bodies of skaven, elves and men lurched past Volker as he ran, stumbling into battle with broken blades and empty fists.

Volker ducked under the slash of a bloodletter's black blade, and hammered his axe into the daemon's gut. The creature folded over him, its fiery ichor scorching his armour. He tore the axe loose and turned. *There, Ulric snarled. There he is—the thief!*

He saw the ragged shape of Teclis chained to a wall across the cavern, and he snarled deep in his throat. Volker hefted his axe and began to lope towards the prisoner. Icy strength flooded his limbs, propelling him faster and faster. Daemons lunged at him out of the press of battle, and he hacked them down. He leapt over the body of a burning elf as a salvo of coruscating sorcery enveloped a number of Malekith's warriors, and chopped through the gangly arm of a pink horror as it sought to snare him.

As he ran, he saw the orcs crash into the wild, pirouetting daemonettes. The shrieking laughter of the latter rapidly turned to screams as the black orcs proved uninterested in anything save slaughter. Volker was forced to leap aside as the pearlescent hoof of a keeper of secrets slammed down nearby. The daemon strutted into battle against Grimgor. The orc launched himself at the creature with a roar, and his axe smashed down into the distorted, bovine skull, filling the air with ichor. The orc's roar of triumph followed Volker as he continued on, arrowing towards his prey.

A plaguebearer rose up before him, and he smashed his axe into its bulging side, tearing it out the other in a welter of foulness. The daemon sagged, its blade falling from its rubbery fingers as Volker stepped over it. The air was cold around him. He looked down at Teclis, and said, 'Hello, thief.' But it wasn't his voice. It was the deep, rough growl of the godspark within him. 'Your debt has come due.'

'Well, wolf-god, if that is who and what you are,' Teclis murmured, through bloody lips, 'I am helpless at last. Your prey hangs before you, throat bared. What will you do?'

Volker glared at him. Everything around him, the noise of the battle behind him, the constant keening wail of the shimmering black sphere at the centre of the cavern, all of it fell away, lost in the howling of wolves. He was cold inside and out, and despite the heat of the cavern, his breath frosted on the air. He raised his axe. Teclis closed his eyes.

Volker hesitated. Teclis cracked one eye. The elf smiled. 'Then, perhaps I am not your prey after all, despite your howling.' He grimaced, as a spasm of pain rippled through him. 'Am I your enemy, Wendel Volker? Or are we at last allies in this last hunt?'

Volker shook his head. He lowered his weapon. The Fauschlag shook, and Volker closed his eyes for a moment as the howling grew too much to bear. In his head, he heard the voice of Gregor Martak. *You will not die, Wendel Volker. Not until you have done as I command.* 'No,' he said, softly, as he looked at Teclis. 'You are not my quarry.' He turned. He spotted Archaon, galloping through the press of battle, and Ulric howled within him. *Yes, yes!*

And then, axe in hand, the last servant of the wolf-god went on the hunt.



Sigmar Unberogen saw the battle as if through a prism – scenes and vignettes of heroism and struggle flashed across his eyes. He saw Malekith, once more astride his dragon, shadows flaring about him like a dark cloak, hurtle into battle against two malevolent lords of change. He saw Alarielle, pale and weak, the world's pain battering at her body and mind, snare a gambolling beast of Nurgle in a web of thorns and tear it to slimy shreds. He saw Gelt unbind the enchantments that bound together daemoniac weapons, and loose swarms of flesh-rending shards to tear scores of daemons apart. He saw Nagash, lurid amethyst fires boiling in his eye sockets, stalk forwards, his spells and legion of corpses driving the enemy before him.

Strange times, he thought, as he watched the liche do battle with the world's foes. There was a strange sort of nobility there, buried beneath the murk and madness. A will that rivalled his own, a drive for victory that was second to none. Nagash would fight to the end, for he could not countenance defeat. As he watched, the liche swung his blade and opened a bloodthirster's belly, scattering burning ichor through the air.

Deathclaw's screech brought him back to himself and Ghal Maraz lashed out, smashing the malformed skull of a plaguebearer. Around him, the remaining members of the Reiksguard fought from horseback, or on foot, as they slowly pushed their way towards the warp-artefact. Sigmar watched as the men – his men – fought on, and thought, *once, I would have known your names. I would have known who you were, and we would have shared wine and blood. I do not know you now, and I am sorry.*

He jabbed his hammer out, and sent a bolt of cerulean lightning smashing into a pack of flesh hounds as they loped towards Grimgor. The orc was oblivious to his peril, being too occupied with trying to shove his axe down the throat of a great unclean one. The beasts were hurled back, or up into the air, their scaly bodies blackened and broken. *Saving an orc*, Sigmar thought. *What would Alaric say?* He smiled. *He'd probably be annoyed all of his runefangs have gone missing.*

The air throbbed as the artefact at the chamber's heart pulsed, and as Sigmar turned towards it, he saw it expand to almost four times its previous size. Jagged lesions appeared on its outer skin, spreading like stress fractures in a pane of glass. A brilliant white light shone from the growing wounds, dazzling and painful in its intensity. The Fauschlag gave a sudden, jarring lurch, and Sigmar knew that they were out of time.

Great slabs of rock crashed down from above, pulverising zombies, daemons and even a few luckless elves. Sigmar jerked Deathclaw into motion as he saw Tyron's horse go down amidst the rain of debris, its leg broken. The griffon barrelled in with a shriek and snatched both horse and rider out of the path of a stalactite. The elf looked up at Sigmar and nodded his thanks as he and his wounded steed were deposited nearby. Sigmar didn't waste words on inquiring after the elf's health. Hurt or not, Tyron would fight on. He urged Deathclaw back towards the centre of the cavern, hoping he might reach the artefact. *Though what I'm going to do when I get there is another matter entirely*, he thought, as his hammer crashed down on a bloodletter's flat skull.

He spotted Malekith as he hurtled through the rain of falling stones, and gestured towards Teclis's bound form, hoping the Eternity King would understand. There was no way his voice would carry through the cacophony of the collapsing cavern. Fortunately, the Incarnate of Shadow seemed to have grasped his meaning, and he nodded tersely as his dragon wheeled about in the air to swoop towards Teclis, ignoring the rocks which bounced off its scaly hide. Sigmar looked around, trying to spot the other Incarnates.

He saw the great unclean one Grimgor had been attempting to throttle struck by an immense chunk of rock, and it burst under the impact, foetid liquid spurting free from the torn prison of unnatural flesh to spatter all who fought around it. The orc dodged aside at the last moment and now stood alone almost in the centre of the cavern, his Immortulz spread out around him, locked in combat with the fallen daemon's servitors.

As Grimgor turned towards the light of the sphere, Sigmar saw Archaon, still sitting astride his horse before the artefact, raise a fist. The Swords of Chaos lowered their lances as one, and started forwards. The Chaos knights picked up speed, and soon they were galloping towards the orcs, Archaon at their head.

'Faster, old friend,' Sigmar shouted, as Deathclaw lunged. But even as the griffon careened towards the centre of the cavern, Sigmar knew he would be too late. Grimgor caught sight of Archaon and roared in delight. The orc charged to meet the oncoming knights, his bodyguard loping alongside him. The greenskins crashed into Archaon's warriors and carnage ensued. Grimgor beheaded a horse with a wild blow, and dragged a knight from his saddle as the man sought to ride past.

The Incarnate of Beasts swung the hapless Chaos knight like a bludgeon, battering at the latter's comrades with more enthusiasm than accuracy. He hurled the limp body aside and whirled to meet the charge of the Lord of the End Times. Archaon bore down on the orc, intending to ride him under, but Grimgor was too fast. He slid aside, avoiding the thrashing hooves of the hell-steed, and lunged at its rider. His axe slammed into Archaon's shield, buckling it and knocking the Three-Eyed King from the saddle.

Sigmar felt a thrill of hope as he watched the orc stalk towards the fallen Everchosen. Of all of them, he had thought the brute the least likely to strike the killing blow. But fate, it seemed, had other plans.

'I will not be felled by a beast,' Archaon snarled, his voice carrying over the clamour of battle. He surged to his feet, even as Grimgor reached him. 'I am Archaon, and I am the end made flesh,' he shouted. He slashed out, nearly opening the orc's belly. 'What do you say to that, animal?'

'Grimgor says shut up and die,' the orc roared. Axe crashed against sword, as the brute hurled himself at Archaon with wild abandon. Back and forth, they reeled through the melee, trading blows that would have felled dozens of lesser opponents. The orc's axe scored red lines across Archaon's armour, and Archaon's blade drew blood again and again.

Finally, axe met sword and the two weapons became tangled, and their wielders strained against one another, using every ounce of strength that they possessed to hold their ground against their foe. For a long moment they stood, head to head, the Lord of the End Times and the Once and Future Git, the Three-Eyed King and the Boss of the East. Then, with a guffaw, Grimgor's skull crashed against Archaon's helm. Sigmar saw the strange, flickering gemstone set in the Everchosen's helmet shatter, and realised that Archaon was the Three-Eyed King no more. The Everchosen would have to make do with the two he'd been born with – what was left of the Eye of Sheerian speckled the broad expanse of Grimgor's brow.

The blow broke the stalemate, and the two warriors staggered apart. Archaon reached up to touch the crumpled face of his helm, and he howled in rage. A strange energy suddenly illuminated the blade of his sword and rippled up his arm, and then he was striding in with liquid grace. Grimgor met his advance, and each time they traded blows, black lightning streaked from the point of impact, until at last the orc's axe succumbed and shattered in his hands. The orc staggered back, eyes bulging.

He didn't stay off balance for long, however, and he tossed aside the remains of the useless weapon and leapt for Archaon, hands reaching for the Everchosen's throat. Archaon rolled into the collision, and his sword's point erupted from between Grimgor's shoulder blades in an explosion of blood. The orc staggered, and slumped with a guttural sigh. His thick fingers clawed uselessly at Archaon's cuirass as he slid to the ground, and a writhing amber haze rose from his form, to coalesce briefly in the air before collapsing into wisps of light which were drawn towards the shimmering void growing within the warp-artefact.

Grimgor's warriors uttered a communal howl of fury as their boss fell, and flung themselves at the Swords of Chaos with redoubled ferocity. Archaon beheaded one as the orc clawed at him, and turned to meet Sigmar's gaze as the latter leaned forwards in Deathclaw's saddle. The griffon hurtled across the cavern, the Reiksguard galloping in his wake. Behind him, Sigmar heard the death-scream of a dragon, but he could not afford to take his eyes off his enemy. 'Archaon,' he roared. 'Face me, Destroyer.'

Chaos knights hurriedly interposed themselves, and died beneath Deathclaw's talons. Sigmar smashed Ghal Maraz down on upraised shields and shattered thrusting swords. Axes and swords hacked into the griffon's limbs and flanks, and its shrieks of pain and rage filled Sigmar's ears, but he could not afford to retreat, not now, and never again. He caught sight of elves and zombies to either side of him, fighting against the daemons that sought to envelop his desperate spearhead. He heard the crackle of magics, and saw screeching daemons evaporate as they swooped towards him.

Deathclaw gave a great shudder and lunged with a heart-wrenching cry, to slam into a rearing steed. Sigmar was flung from the saddle, as was the rider of the horse, and as he rose to his feet, he saw that he was face to face with Archaon.

Sparks flew as Ghal Maraz smashed against the Slayer of Kings. Lightning rippled along the hammer's rune-etched head, vying with the dark fire that swirled about the Everchosen's daemon-blade. Nearby, Deathclaw and Archaon's steed fought savagely, and the rocky ground was spattered with blood and ichor as the two animals clawed and bit one another. 'I beat you once, follower of lies,' Archaon roared, thrusting out a hand. 'I ripped your lightning from you, and shattered your last redoubt, and I will do it again...'

Sigmar grinned fiercely as nothing happened. Blood streaked his face and beard, but he felt no weakness. Not now. He batted Archaon's hand aside and slammed Ghal Maraz down on the Everchosen's pauldron, knocking him back. 'Well? What are you waiting for?' he said. He thrust the hammer forwards like a spear and caught Archaon in the chest. 'Take my lightning, Everchosen.'

Archaon staggered back. 'I – what?'

Sigmar tapped his own brow. 'We're on an equal footing now, boy. Just me and you.' He swung the hammer again, and Archaon barely parried it. Each punishing blow bled into the one that followed and Sigmar pushed his opponent back, until Archaon slashed at him, gouging his armour and cutting the flesh beneath. Behind him, the warp-artefact gave another blinding pulse, and the cracks in its surface grew wider. He heard Deathclaw utter a shrill cry, and saw the griffon fall, tangled with Archaon's mount in its death-throes. The latter gave voice to a final whinny before Deathclaw's talons tore out its throat, and then both beasts were still. Sadness swept through him as he bashed Archaon's sword aside and drove his hammer into the Everchosen's cuirass, turning one of the skull tokens hanging there to powder.

The griffon had known he wasn't its master, though he wore the man's skin. It had served him regardless, and it had served him well. He had not known Karl Franz, though he wished he had. That the beast had loved him so, enough to fight on as it had, spoke well of the Emperor. Scattered memories, not his own but those of the body he had taken possession of, filled his mind, and he saw the Imperial Zookeeper hand over an egg to a youth on the edge of manhood. He saw the first faltering steps of the cub, as Karl Franz fed it morsels from his own fingers. And he saw their first battle, and felt a savage joy as the griffon defended the body of its wounded master. *I am sorry*, he thought. *I am sorry for it all*.

'You will fall here,' Sigmar said, fighting for breath. His strength was ebbing. 'Whatever else happens, you will fall.' He felt the ground tremble beneath his feet, and he saw that the warp-artefact was no more – it had been completely consumed by the swirling void it had given birth to. The roiling surface of the sphere ate away at the cavern around it, and a crackling, empty void of white was left in place of the churned rock. His heart sank.

'It doesn't matter,' Archaon said. 'Nothing matters. I've won. This world will burn, and something better will rise from the ashes.' He launched a flurry of blows that Sigmar was hard-pressed to block. He was moving slower now, and the entire right side of his armour was slippery with his own blood. Archaon didn't seem to tire, but Sigmar, for all his power, knew he wasn't so lucky. His heartbeat hammered in his ears and his lungs burned, but despite it all, despite the danger, he knew he wouldn't have traded places with anyone.

This is where I was meant to be, he thought. Despite the fury of battle, he was calm. *This is my reason for living, this is why I was born. This moment is mine*. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a white-furred shape lope towards him, and he smiled. *Hello, old wolf. You told me once I would come to a bad end, and here we are*.

Archaon's sword slipped past his flagging guard and smashed into his cuirass. Sigmar fell back, off balance. He struck the ground hard, and Ghal Maraz was jolted from his hand. He stared up at Archaon, as the latter lifted his blade in both hands.

'To think, they believed that you could save them,' Archaon said.

'To think, I once thought you might do that yourself,' Sigmar said. Archaon hesitated. Sigmar smiled sadly. 'Diederick Kastner, son of a daughter of the Empire. You could have been the sword that swept my land free of Chaos forever. In a better world, perhaps you have. But here and now, you are nothing more than another petty warlord.'

'You know nothing about me,' Archaon said, still holding his sword aloft.

'I know you. I saw you born and I saw you die, again and again. I saw your soul twisted all out of shape by the honeyed words of daemons, and I saw you turn your back on me. I saw and I wept, for you, and for what I knew you would do.'

Archaon lowered his blade. 'No...'

'You made yourself a pawn of prophecy,' Sigmar said. 'You set your feet on this path. The daemons helped, but it was you who walked into the darkness. It was you who fled the light, Diederick.'

'You are not Sigmar. The gods are all dead, and he was a lie,' Archaon grated.

'Are they dead, or are they a lie? Make up your mind,' Sigmar said. He could see Ghal Maraz's haft, just out of the corner of his eye. He stretched a hand towards it.

'You are lying,' Archaon roared. He lifted his sword, but before he could bring it down, there was a flash of white fur, and then Wendel Volker was there. Axe and sword connected with a screech, and the former exploded in its owner's hands. Volker staggered, and Archaon's sword chopped down, through his shoulder and into his chest. Archaon tore his blade free and the Reiksguard fell. Sigmar rolled over and reached for the hammer, but Archaon kicked it aside. 'No! No more distractions. No more lies,' Archaon howled. 'You die now, and your Empire dies with you.' He made to move after Sigmar, but something stopped him. Sigmar looked down, and saw Volker clinging to Archaon's legs.

'I told you once, Everchosen. When a wolf bites, he does not let go,' Volker croaked. 'And I told you that you would die here, whatever else.' Archaon looked down in obvious shock, and Volker grinned up at him. 'This is *my* city, man, and you will not take it!' Ice began to spread across Archaon's greaves, and he roared in anger and pain as the cold gnawed at him. Then the Slayer of Kings flashed down, and Wendel Volker, bearer of the godspark of Ulric, was no more.

Sigmar saw Volker slump, and heard, deep in his mind, the death-howl of the god he had worshipped in his youth. He had no time to mourn, for even as Archaon tore his blade free of the body of the last of the Reiksguard, the Everchosen pivoted and brought the howling daemon-blade down. But Volker and Ulric's sacrifice had given him the time he needed to recover, and call up the lightning that was again his to command.

Sigmar thrust his hands up, and felt the blade crash against his palms. Lightning crackled between flesh and the hungry bite of tainted steel, and Sigmar slowly closed his fingers tight about the blade. Then he pushed himself erect, driving Archaon back with every step. The Everchosen tried to push back, but the Emperor was too strong.

And then, with a scream that was of joy as much as it was of pain, the Slayer of Kings shattered in Sigmar's grip. Archaon reeled as smoking shards of the daemon-blade tore into his armour. Blinded, dazed, he stumbled back. Sigmar lunged forwards and drove his fist into Archaon's featureless helm, buckling the metal, and driving him back, over the precipice, and into the maelstrom of shadows.

Archaon, Lord of the End Times, vanished into the darkness.



TWENTY-ONE

The Depths of the Fauschlag

Sigmar shoved himself to his feet and, Ghal Maraz in hand, backed away. The sphere shuddered like a sick animal. A moment later, it shattered and collapsed in on itself, leaving a swirling rift of energy in its place. The white had become black, and it hurt Sigmar's eyes to look upon it. Howling winds sprang up, buffeting all those who remained in the chamber and pulling them towards the writhing void. Sigmar saw that he and the other Incarnates, along with Teclis, were the only living beings in the cavern; every elf and human who'd descended into the depths with them was dead. Sadness warred with relief. Better death than what would have awaited them in the void. The powers of the Incarnates protected them from the energies now filling the cavern, but mortals would have been swept away within moments of the rift's explosion.

All around him, the remaining daemons began to shudder and come apart. Their flesh ran like melted wax, and they were pulled, drop by drop, into the maw of the void. The fitful pulses which had marked the sphere were gone, replaced by an ominous rumble whose intensity grew with every passing moment. Sigmar turned away from the rift and began to force his way towards the other Incarnates, fighting the pull of the wind with every step.

The rock beneath his feet ran like water in a whirlpool, its hue and shape changing from one second to the next. Leering faces formed in the shifting stone, and vanished as soon as he looked at them. All around the chamber, the laws of nature were coming undone as the raw stuff of Chaos leaked into the world through the rift.

'We were too late,' Malekith snarled as Sigmar reached them. The Eternity King had to shout to be heard over the wind. He supported Teclis, and one of the mage's arms was flung over his shoulder.

'No,' Gelt shouted. 'No, we have not lost, not yet.'

'What can we do?' Alarielle screamed. She leaned against Tyrion, and Sigmar could tell from her face that she felt every single one of the torturous changes the cavern was undergoing. 'It is but a trickle now, but it is growing stronger with every passing moment. We cannot hope to contain it!'

WE MUST. WE WILL, Nagash thundered, facing the void. ***THIS WORLD IS MINE. NAGASH WILL NOT FALL. NAGASH CANNOT DIE. I WILL NOT. NOT AGAIN.***

'He's right,' Sigmar said. He looked at Teclis. 'If we combine our magics, as we did against the warplume barrier, will it be enough?'

'I – I do not know,' Teclis said, shaking his head. The elf struggled to stand on his own, and pushed away from Malekith. He held his staff and leaned against it. 'The Winds of Aqshy and Ghur, they are lost...'

'They are not lost,' Tyrion said. 'I – we – can all feel them still. They are here, with us.' He looked at his brother. 'We must try, brother. Else what was it all for?'

Teclis stared at his brother in silence for a moment, his robes rippling in the shrieking wind. Then he nodded. 'You are right, brother. You are always right.'

'Except when I'm wrong?' Tyrion said, smiling.

'Even then,' Teclis said, grinning. He shook his head. 'You know what to do. The winds know their task, and they will guide you in the doing of it. I will try to bend Ghur and Aqshy to it as well. Even without hosts, they will be of some use.'

Sigmar looked at the others, and then, as one, they spread out, moving to the edge of the void. As they approached the roaring maelstrom, each Incarnate summoned the last vestiges of their power, and flung it forth, seeking to cage the uncageable. Sigmar groaned as the lightning crackled from him to spend its fury on the swirling rift. The void sought to draw the power from him, as Archagon had done at Averheim, and it took every ounce of his remaining strength to prevent it. He clutched Ghal Maraz in both hands and drew the lightning tight, focusing his will through the ancient hammer.

He saw Teclis set his staff, at the centre of the line, and begin to draw the Winds of Fire and Beasts into himself. He was not a suitable host for either, let alone both, and the winds struggled against him. Sigmar watched helplessly as the elf's flesh began to boil and peel. What Teclis was attempting was a death sentence, but they had no other choice. *Our lives for that of the world. That's a fair bargain*, he thought. He gritted his teeth against a sudden surge of pain. A light was growing in the chamber, as each of the winds was pitted against the audient void. And then, against all probability, the rift began to shrink.

We're doing it, Sigmar thought. *Gods of my fathers, wherever you are now, help us last just a little longer. Give us all strength.* His body shuddered, and he felt as if the meat of him might separate from his bones. Smoke rose from the head of Ghal Maraz as he poured bolt after bolt of celestial lightning into the yawning abyss.

Something flickered, just out of the corner of his eye. He twitched his head to the side, and his eyes widened as he saw a familiar shape detach itself from the dark at the edges of the cavern and rush forwards silently. Sigmar flung out his hand. 'No!'

Balthasar Gelt turned at Sigmar's cry, but his reply was lost as Mannfred von Carstein's sword erupted from his chest. The wizard was lifted off his feet by the vampire's blow, and a beam of golden light sprang from his limp frame and vanished soundlessly into the void. 'Mine,' Mannfred howled. 'The power will be mine. Even as this world is mine.'

Teclis, seeing the loss of Chamon, stretched out a hand, as if to grasp the Wind of Metal and haul it back from the abyss, but the effort was too much for him. Sigmar watched in horror as Teclis of Cothique, High Loremaster of Ulthuan, was ripped apart by the triumvirate of magical winds, and reduced to swirling ash. Even as Teclis perished, the rift gave an ear-splitting shriek and, in a flare of inky black light, tore free of the Incarnates' control. Sigmar was flung back across the cavern, and he struck the ground hard. The other Incarnates had suffered similar fates, or had retreated at the first convulsion of the rift.

As Sigmar picked himself up, he saw that only Mannfred and Nagash were left standing next to the rift, and the vampire gesticulated at the liche, his feral features twisting in triumph. 'Vlad told me to pick a side, and I have, master. Better to be the right hand of anarchy, than the slave of Nagash. Walach was right, the blood-soaked fool. Aye, and Kemmler as well. You are nothing but a disease, Nagash... a plague on all the world, and with this power, I shall drive your midnight soul into the void forever. And it shall be me who rules this world, and rides its corpse into eternity. The world shall have a new Undying King, and you shall be forgotten!'

The vampire spun towards the rift, and, as Teclis had, he thrust out his hands, as if to draw the winds to him. Instead, however, it was the raw substance of the rift which answered his call. It washed over him, and Mannfred's laughter degenerated into a scream as he staggered back, his flesh smoking.

The rift flared and Sigmar added his screams to those of Mannfred, as did all of the remaining Incarnates. The void tore the winds loose from their hosts and drew them into itself. Sigmar thrashed as the celestial magics of Azyr were dragged from him a second time, and sucked into the nightmare abyss. He collapsed, his body trembling, and his strength gone. He saw the other Incarnates fall, one by one.

Nagash was the last. For long moments, the Undying King stood unbowed against the howling void and his own dissolution, as the magics that had given him form slowly unravelled. He fought against the void, as if determined to wrench back the Wind of Death through sheer will. Then, at last, the Great Necromancer threw back his head and screamed desolately one final time before he suffered Teclis's fate and was torn apart by the swirling energies.

As the ashes of his former master were swept into the void, Mannfred staggered blindly away from the rift, clawing at his seared flesh. He ranted and

railed in a language Sigmar did not recognise, and called out for people who were not there. Sigmar tried to push himself to his feet, but he lacked the strength. He heard the scrape of steel on stone, and turned to see Tyrion lurch to his feet, sword in hand.

Mannfred did not notice Tyrion's approach until the last moment, and as he whirled, fangs agape, Tyrion slammed his sword up through the vampire's belly and into his black heart. Mannfred screamed and clawed at Tyrion's arms as the elf lifted him off his feet. Sunfang flared as the magics forged into the blade awoke, and Mannfred thrashed as he burned to ashes from inside out. Tyrion jerked his blade free, and what was left of Mannfred von Carstein collapsed into ashes, to join those of Teclis and Nagash in the void.

As Tyrion stepped back, the cavern gave a great crack. The walls shifted and sickly yellow blood dripped down from the cracks. Vast sections of the cavern floor fell away, into nothingness. Boulders and stalactites fell like rain. Sigmar looked up as a great spill of rock tumbled down towards the Everqueen, and he shouted to Tyrion, who whirled about, but too late. The Everqueen would have perished there, had Malekith not lunged forward and thrown her clear, towards Tyrion's reaching arms. The Eternity King vanished amidst the thundering downpour of rock a moment later.

Sigmar shoved himself to his feet, and took a staggering step towards the fallen rocks. If there was even a chance that Malekith might be saved, he intended to try. But as he drew close to the expanding edge of the rift, a dark shape rose out of the void and smashed into him.

He turned as Archaon lurched into him, the Everchosen's fingers scrabbling for his throat. The Lord of the End Times roared incoherently as he battered at Sigmar, his words lost in the howl emanating from the ever-expanding rift. Sigmar smashed him down with Ghal Maraz, but he was on his feet a moment later, reaching out to grab the haft of the hammer. The two men struggled for a moment on the edge of the void.

Then, they were gone, lost amidst the swirling darkness.



EPILOGUE

Autumn 2528



Neferata stalked through the ruins of Middenheim, as the world died around her, and wondered why she had come. She had left the uncertain safety of Sylvania, left her new kingdom in the hands of her greatest rival and only friend, Khalida, and made for the certain doom of Middenheim. She had flown through the tortured skies, urging her abyssal steed on to greater and greater speed for reasons she could not articulate. Her armour was scorched and scarred, and wounds marked her flesh, but she felt no pain. There was no more time for pain, or fear, or anything save sadness. She looked up, and watched the sky burn. Her steed screeched in agitation where it crouched on the northern gatehouse.

You were right, Khalida, she thought. It is the end, and nothing we have done means anything any more. All our petty grievances and spiteful schemes are as dust before the doom that is coming to claim us all.

A whimper caught her attention and she turned, seeking out its source. She saw a woman, clad in ruined armour, crouched nearby, amongst rubble and the bodies of elves, dwarfs and northmen. Neferata sniffed, smelling Vlad's blood on the woman. She moved towards her, sword in hand. The woman had been beautiful once, and might have been again, if there had been time.

'But there is no time,' Neferata said, softly. 'There is *no time*.' The end had come and gone, and all that was left now was for the carrion birds. She could feel it on the air and beneath her feet. She looked down at the woman, pondering. Then, hesitantly, she stretched out a hand.

'Her name is Isabella.'

Neferata whirled, her heart thudding in her chest. Arkhan the Black staggered towards her, through the smoke and fire, leaning on his staff, his ragged robes swirling about him. When he reached them, the liche looked down at Isabella. *'Vlad must have saved her somehow. He was always a determined fool.'*

'Not a fool,' Neferata said softly. She sank down and cradled Isabella, as if the other woman were a child. 'Just a man.' She looked up at him. 'You survived.'

'I did. Thanks to Settra.'

'Settra,' Neferata said, unable to believe her ears. She shook her head, dismissing the thought, and asked, 'Nagash?'

Arkhan extended his hand. Neferata's eyes widened, as she took in the slow dissolution of Arkhan's skeletal fingers. *'The Undying King is gone, and his magics with him. Soon, I will join him. The Incarnates have failed, and the world is coming undone beneath our feet.'*

Neferata looked up. 'We will all join him. The world is done,' she said. Isabella whimpered, and Neferata murmured comforting nothings to her. 'All our striving, all our pain... for what?'

Arkhan was silent for a moment. He looked down at her and then placed a hand on her shoulder. *'For the chance at something better,'* he said. He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. *'Do you feel it, Neferata?'*

She jerked her hand away. 'Feel what?'

'One last roll of the dice,' Arkhan said.

'Spoken like a gambler,' Neferata said. She hugged Isabella close and stroked the whimpering vampire's matted hair. Crimson tears rolled down her cheeks and plopped into the dust. Arkhan reached out and wiped them away, before he turned away, to face the growling dark that crept through the streets towards them. *'The End is here, my queen. The all-consuming black fire of the empty spaces between worlds. I see it, even as Nagash must have seen it. It will devour the world, bit by bit, until nothing is left. Until our world, our history, is but dust on the cosmic wind. When they have finished toying with the remains, the Ruinous Powers shall turn away. They will turn their attentions to other worlds, other times, and it will be as if we never existed.'* Arkhan extended his hand without looking at her. She took it, and he hauled her to her feet. She still held Isabella. The city trembled around them, and a strange light rose from the cracks in the street.

'But I see something else, in the void... I see a figure, shining with the power of light and the heavens, swimming through the dark, determined to stir the embers of our passing and free the seeds of a new world, and new life,' Arkhan went on, his rasping, creaking voice filled with something she thought might be wonder. He touched his chest, and she saw a light shimmering through the rents in his robes. He glanced at her. *'There may yet be hope, though that word feels strange to say.'* He looked down at his chest, and touched a black mark on his robes, in the shape of a hand. *'I thought she had cursed me, but I think she knew, in the end, that it would come to this. I see a figure, small in the darkness, but it will grow stronger, and I will help, even as oblivion claims me.'*

Neferata looked at him. Questions danced through her mind, but she could not speak. She wanted to tell him to abandon whatever mad fancy had seized him. She wanted to tell him that her powers might sustain him, that together, they could hold off the end of everything. But the words turned to ash on her tongue. Arkhan turned fully towards her, and caught her chin in his crumbling fingers.

'Run, Neferata. Run and perhaps you may yet outrun the end. Perhaps you may survive, to flourish with those seeds of life I will help plant in the world to come. Run to Sylvania, fly back to our people, and lead them, in these final hours. Lead them into death, and into the new life the old gods of the sands once promised us.'

'Arkhan...' Neferata murmured. She caught his hand, and kissed his mouldering bones, and then stepped back. 'I will lead them.'

'I will buy you what time I can. It will not be much, but it will be all that I can give. Go, quickly,' Arkhan said, turning back to face the destruction. Neferata turned without another word and ran, Isabella cradled to her chest. Behind her, Arkhan extended his arms, as if he might bar the doom of all the world through sheer determination. Amethyst energy crackled along his bones and leaked out through the cracks in the same. His robes flapped about him as he lifted his staff high, and spat the words to every spell and incantation he knew that might hold back the tidal wave of destruction.

She could almost imagine him smiling, in those last few moments as she fled Middenheim on the back of her abyssal steed. A flash of purple from behind her and the crack of splitting air told her of his fate, and she closed her eyes to weep for the only man she had ever loved.

The world died around her, as she fled. Middenheim fell first, consumed by the nightmare forces awakened in its depths. The hungry darkness crept outwards from the void where the Fauschlag had once stood, and crawled across Middenland, consuming the Middle Mountains and the Drakwald. It was at once empty and full of squirming, abominable shapes, like vast serpents or the writhing tendrils of some immense, unseen kraken. Riots of colour and sound filled it, only to vanish and reappear. The keening of a thousand daemons washed across the stricken land ahead of it.

Beastmen stampeded out of the Drakwald in their thousands, fleeing before a doom that called out to them, even as it drove them mad with fear. Neferata saw them below her as she flew, vast hordes of panicked animals, and the Children of Chaos were soon joined by others – humans, orcs and even ogres,

all fleeing before a doom they could not understand, and had no hope of escaping.

The darkness grew, devouring one province and then the next, over the course of the days and weeks that followed. Talabecland vanished, and then the Reikland, swallowed up by the cacophonous void birthed in the heart of Middenheim. Averland fell next, and then the others, one by one. In their mountain holds, the remaining dwarf clans saw nothing of the end, and would not have fled, even if they had.

The Grey Mountains crumbled, and even its staunchest defenders could not prevent the wave of desolation from washing over what remained of the kingdom of Bretonnia. The great forest of Athel Loren vanished, as if it had never been. The new-born over-empire of the skaven followed, and no burrow was deep enough to hide the scurrying hordes of terrified ratmen from obliteration.

The world shuddered down to its roots as it was consumed. In Sylvania, what was left of the peasantry, as well as refugees from Averland and the Moot, sought safety in the ruins of Castle Sternieste, where the dead made ready to protect them as best they could. By the time Neferata reached her lands, the sky had gone black from horizon to horizon.

Her abyssal steed smashed into the battlements of Sternieste, its form wreathed in smoke. It groaned and shuddered as Neferata hauled Isabella off its twisted form, and lifted the nearly comatose vampire up. Her retainers met her on the battlements, their eyes wide with fear. 'Mistress, what--?' one began.

'The end,' Neferata snarled. 'Where is Khalida? Where are the liche-priests? Where are the necromancers? Summon them all! Gather them here, so that we might--'

'We might what, cousin? Escape our fate, one last time?'

Neferata turned, and saw Khalida, once High Queen of Lybaras, and once her cousin, standing nearby, staring out at the encroaching darkness. Even now, her thin limbs wrapped in crumbling wrappings and her ceremonial vestments tarnished with age and battle, she was the very image of a queen. Neferata snarled in frustration. 'And you would meet it gladly, then?' She shook her head. 'I will not go like a sheep to slaughter. Not now, not ever.'

'You speak as if we had a choice, cousin,' Khalida said.

'There is always a choice,' Neferata began, but the words died in her throat as she saw the distant shape of the great bone wall raised by Mannfred in the year before Nagash's resurrection crumble like sand. The darkness swept over it, and Sylvania shuddered like a dying beast. Below, in the courtyard, the surviving humans screamed and wept in fear. Neferata shook her head. 'Too late,' she muttered. She looked down at Isabella and kissed the other vampire on the brow. 'I am sorry, little one. I was not fast enough.'

'Yes,' Khalida said. She turned towards Neferata. *'Time has caught up with us at last, cousin. The Great Land is dead, and soon we will join it.'*

Neferata laughed sadly. 'Maybe it is past time. But I will not do so cowering in a hole.' She looked at her cousin and smiled. 'We are queens, cousin. We are daughters of the Great Land, which was old when the world was young. Let us die in a manner befitting our station.' She extended a hand. 'Will you join me, Khalida?'

Khalida stared at the proffered hand, and, after a moment of hesitation, took it. Down below, the warriors of Lybaras, Khemri, and Sylvania raised their shields, as if bronze and steel might be enough to resist the destruction sweeping towards them. Frightened humans cowered behind skeletal warriors and armoured vampires, seeking protection from those they had once feared.

And then, the final darkness swept the last of the old world away.

The world came apart and the hungry dark stretched out towards the stars, unsated. The raw stuff of Chaos consumed the heavens in an orgy of uncreation. Stars flickered out one by one, until only darkness remained. It might have taken moments, or millennia, but the Dark Gods were not bound by the flow of time, and did not mark its passage.

But even as the ashes of the shattered world settled in the void, the powers and principalities of Chaos moved away, already bored by their triumph. The four great powers turned upon one another, as they always did, and mustered their forces for war. The Great Game began again, on new worlds, and the Dark Gods broke off from the swirling void at last. Had they not done so, they might have noticed a mote of light, within the dark.

The tiny pinpoint of light tumbled through the dark. It had once been a man, though it had forgotten its name. It fell for what might have been centuries, until it came to a shard of the world that had been. Desperate, it reached out and caught hold of the shard with a grip that could shatter mountains, saving itself from the storm of nothingness.

As it slumped, exhausted, thought and memory returned, and soon, its strength as well. And with strength came memory – a name. And with that name came purpose. Gathering what remained of his strength, he stretched out a hand.

And then a miracle took shape in the void...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Reynolds is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*, all three featuring the White Scars, and the Blood Angels novel *Deathstorm*. In the Warhammer world, he has written *The End Times: The Return of Nagash*, the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*, and the novels *Neferata*, *Master of Death* and *Knight of the Blazing Sun*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

[An extract from *Archaon: Everchosen*,
by Rob Sanders](#)



'You shall know me by my works,' the prognosticator howled.

They knew him by his pain. The agonies erupting from his ruined face. The gasps of relief and hope – both sweet and dangerous – that escaped his broken body inbetween tortures. They called it the Cracker. An ugly name for an ugly contraption. With the victim's head braced between the unforgiving metal of a chin bar and a closing crown-cap, the two were drawn together by the slow turn of a handle screw. It had earned such a name for its effectiveness in producing confessions.

'Battista Gaspar Necrodomo,' a priestly witch hunter read from a blood-spattered scroll, 'his holy vengefulness, Solkan – God of Light and Law – has judged you witchfilth and false prophet, denying the poor and ignorant of this republic the comforts of his guidance.'

'You will know me by my works,' Necrodomo spat. His words escaped the clenched mantrap of his own jaw in a hissing rasp. Bloody lip-spittle sprayed the interrogator sitting opposite. One of the priests milling in the dungeon-darkness beyond tore a strip from his ragged grey robes.

'Grand inquisitori,' he mumbled, kissing the rag and handing it to his spiritual superior. The interrogator dabbed his speckled cheeks and the whiteness of his beard.

'Again,' the grand inquisitori said.

'No,' Necrodomo groaned, his pleadings pathetic and palsied. A priestly servant of Solkan turned the screw and fresh agonies filled the dungeon chamber. Necrodomo's screams were muffled shrieks of gargling desperation. As the turns of the screw abated, the freshly blinded seer sobbed and moaned.

'You are a charlatan,' the grand inquisitori said slowly, his voice threaded with the certainty of his age and station. He was the Avenger's high hand in these low dealings of the world. 'You are the herald of lies. You are an artist of nothings. You read the eye, the lip, the face and write false prophecy on the stars. You tell gullible widows what they want to hear, no? A sayer of soothings. Saw you this coming, prognosticator?'

'No...' Necrodomo managed through his shattered jaw.

'If you had stuck to prattlemongering,' the venerable inquisitori told him, 'you just might have escaped the attentions of the brotherhood. Though Avenger knows, your professed haruspexery would have been known to him – he who sees all and judges all. Your time would have come, Necrodomo. Necrodomo the foreteller. Necrodomo the skygazer. Necrodomo the reader of futures dark. Now to be known – if known at all – as Necrodomo the Insane. By my order.'

'No...' Necrodomo whimpered. 'Know...'

'This, however,' the grand inquisitori continued, picking up a bony fistful of pamphlets that littered the table, 'this goes beyond the pilfering of credulous coin. *The Celestine Prophecies. Signs and Wonders. Transcendentia. The Days of Doom to Come. The End Times.* This is heresy in our midst. This is demagoguery, spreading fear through the people. It is a challenge to the Republic. It is a corruption advertised and an invitation of vengeance. It is what brought us to you, Necrodomo. It is what brought you to this.'

The grand inquisitori gestured at the quill and pots of ink on the table and the thick, unmarked tome that sat before the groaning Necrodomo, its pages clean and waiting for his confession. 'Help me by helping yourself, Necrodomo. Confess your crimes to the brotherhood. Allow Solkan into your heart and I promise a death swift and clean enough to take you to his judgement. Why dally here in the meaningless filth of lies and conspiracy? Why suffer here as well as before the Lord of Light and Law? Commit your contrition to these pages and let me grant you the relief of death.'

'Forgive...' Necrodomo begged through shattered teeth.

'It is not for me to do so. Only the Avenger can grant you that. All I can grant you is an unburdened conscience and free passage. Your crimes are grievous. These bold pronouncements of coming apocalypse, printed and passed between the people. We are the light in the ignorance you sought to spread with your writings of the trembling world and the End Times you profess are to come. The world already trembles, Necrodomo. It trembles with the vengeance of Solkan the Mighty. It trembles with his judgement on the unnatural and the wicked. This is the greatest of your sins, false prophet. Fear is not your weapon to wield. It is ours. Armageddon is not yours to portend. The world is the Avenger's to destroy at a time of his choosing. If his servants fail, if the land can bear no more evil and the filth of corruption floods the—'

The oratory was shattered by a single clap. Followed by another. And another. Like the grand inquisitori, the witch hunters and priestly torturers of the chamber turned to the entrance. Stepping down from the rusted ladder that led from the trapdoor in the dungeon's ceiling, a lone priest in the hooded, ragged robes of the Avenger stood in slow applause. Sallow clouds of brimstone drifted down from the chamber above and descended about the interloper.

'How dare you interrupt the holy work of—' a priest began.

'Enough,' the interloper said, the word drenched in the sickly, mellifluous urgency of an infernal order. The final clap was louder and more insistent than the caustic applause that had preceded it. With the sound echoing about the dungeon like a thunderclap, the priests and servants of Solkan proceeded to untie the ropes about their waists and disrobe.

'What do you think you are doing?' the grand inquisitori barked at them. As he stared about in righteous incredulity, the witch hunters and interrogators crafted swift nooses from their belts. The grand inquisitori was out of his seat, his beard shaking and his eyes screwed up with rage. 'Stop this madness at once. The Avenger compels you.' He turned back to the priest standing at the ladder. Within the darkness of the interloper's hood, the inquisitori could make out the pin-prick glow of eyes ancient and burning like the embers of eternity. The inquisitori hadn't realised that he had soiled himself. A pool of urine was gathering on the filthy dungeon floor about him. 'Guards! Guards!' he roared. Above he could hear the clink of the plate, helms and halberds of the Reman Republican Guard.

The interloper looked up through the open trapdoor entrance. Something like a momentary storm passed through the chamber above, the influence of the sudden tempest felt on Necrodomo's apocalyptic pamphlets, which were blown from the table. The screams were brief. With the interloper still staring through the dungeon opening, it began to rain blood. The Republican Guard gaolers were now nothing but a cruel drizzle drifting, dripping and dribbling from the trapdoor entrance. The interloper allowed the downpour to blotch his robes to a gory crimson. As his ghastly gaze returned to the grand inquisitori, the trapdoor slammed shut and thundered with heavy chains securing the dungeon entrance.

The robed thing moved across the chamber with the dread purpose of something unreal. As it passed them the servants of Solkan dropped from stools and improvised furniture to dance a spasmodic jig from their belt-nooses and the rings set in the dungeon ceiling. The interloper drifted through the forest of hanging priests.

'Sit,' it commanded.

The grand inquisitori wailed as his knees gave way, causing him to fall back into his interrogator's throne.

The interloper moved towards the throne like an ancient evil. It pulled back its hood, revealing the full, unspeakable horror of its daemonic visage to the chamber. The robes fell like a fearful whisper from its barbed unflesh. It grew with each flagstone-pulverising step of its taloned feet, twisted bones blooming with muscle that ruptured into existence about them, lending the beast a glorious brawn and sinew. It dragged a serpentine tail, shot through with spikes, behind its infernal form, while both the daemon-crown of horns warping their way out of its head and the thumb-claws erupting from the dreadful magnificence of its wings scraped the dungeon ceiling.

Like a nightmare, it lowered its blood-curdling skull and moved up behind the interrogator's throne. Necrodomo, still clamped between the bar and crown-cap of the torture device, had no eyes with which to behold the beast. The grand inquisitori found, with his heart in the grasp of terror, cold, dark and despair that he could not move. As the daemon brought its unseen face forward, both the venerable priest and the prognosticator found their cheeks bathed in the radiance of infernal royalty. A princely power of hellish birthright; a creature of unimaginable darkness; horror incarnate.

The grand inquisitori felt the thing touch him. At once all that had remained pure and noble in the man shrivelled within his soul. Darkness blossomed within the priest. Every ill-deed committed in the service of selfish weakness and temptation grew through his being like a rampant cancer. His eyes turned to inky twilight as his face became a cadaverous mask of ghoulish anticipation. The daemon clasped the grand inquisitori's head in its claws.

'You search for darkness in wretched madmen,' the daemon prince whispered to the venerable priest – every word falling on the inquisitori with the force of a furnace, 'when you should have been searching for it within your own ranks. No matter... You are mine now and have no need for this vessel of flesh. Before I take your soul, there is something you should know, priest. A gift for the journey *you* are about to take.' The daemon leant in closer. 'Your. God. Is. A. Lie.' With that, the daemon prince crushed the grand inquisitori's skull between its claws with effortless ease.

Slashing both the headless body and the back of the throne from the seat with a swoosh of its serpent tail, the daemon prince took a seat before Necrodomo. Necrodomo the foreteller. Necrodomo the reader of futures dark. Necrodomo the Insane. The thing drummed its talons across the desk, prompting the torturous contraption known as the Cracker to rust to disintegration about the blind prisoner's head. Necrodomo pulled away immediately. The prognosticator was out of his mind with pain, but something spiritual and instinctive told him that he was in the presence of a dangerous evil. He felt fear without sight. Dread without sanity. Being contorted within the vice for so long, Necrodomo found that his legs no longer supported him. Crashing to the filthy floor he scrambled away from the daemon prince like an animal until he felt his back against the cold stone of the dungeon wall.

'Do not fear me,' the beast told him. 'I am your saviour – as you are mine. My name, for all it matters to you, madman, is Be'lakor.' The monster allowed the 'r' of its name to hang like a forlorn echo. 'I am known by many titles: the Harbinger, the Herald and the Bearer. To the northmen, I am the Shadowlord.'

In the Empire and the *civilised* lands of the south, I am the Dark Master. To you, mortal, I am simply Master.'

Necrodomo curled up in agony. He was rocking, shaking and whimpering.

'You are Necrodomo. Though your heretic name shall be whispered in the shadows, your work shall echo through eternity.'

Be'lakor looked down on the pamphlets decorating the desk. 'I am an appreciator of your work – charlatan or not. Now I wish to become facilitator. Your masterpiece is yet to be written.'

The beast laid its claw on the empty tome intended for the prognosticator's confession. Under the touch of its talons, the leather of the cover moaned and warped to a gruesome ghastliness. Its spine became as barbed bone and the bronze lock-clasps holding its pages closed melted into sets of jaws that snapped open. The cover smoked as hellfire scorched fresh lettering into the leather. As the tome writhed to stillness and Be'lakor removed his talon, the words *LIBER CAELESTIOR* afflicted the cover in the dark tongue of his Ruinous masters, accompanied by the name BATTISTA GASPAR NECRODOMO.

'We shall wield your prophecies like a weapon,' the Dark Master told him. 'We shall make history together, you and I. We shall unite the gods and harness war, famine and plague in honour of a champion of ultimate darkness. We shall craft through destiny a warrior worthy of the challenges to come. Worthy to bear the blessing of each of my Ruinous masters in equal measure and be called Everchosen of Chaos. He will be the key, as I am the keeper of the coming apocalypse. Between us, we shall herald the coming of the End Times – the doom you spoke of, my friend. Rejoice, soothsayer. They are coming. When we do... when I have no more need of your words or his deeds, I shall assume the Everchosen's flesh in true coronation – the flesh your prophecies shall exalt to the status of legend – and I shall take my rightful place as Lord of the End Times. Once more the world will be mine to plunge into darkness and ruin.'

Necrodomo groaned and shrieked. If the pain of torture hadn't driven him into the embrace of insanity, then the daemon prince's words had. He was gone – a willing host to oblivion that, like a leech, sapped him of the last of his mental strength. The prognosticator moaned insensibilities. He laughed at his agonies and shrieked at nothing. Necrodomo let go and Be'lakor let him.

'No matter,' the daemon prince said to the madman. He opened the tome to its first blank page and selecting a quill, dipped it into the ink on the table. 'I will assist you. I will transcribe. I have a name already. The name I shall bequeath my champion. The name I shall eventually take, with the body of the Everchosen I shall possess and assume. A name of your southern tongue, prognosticator, honouring both the ancient I have been and the eternity I have yet to become. We shall be known as... Archaon.'

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