

The background of the cover is a dramatic illustration. On the left, a large, dark, and somewhat abstract figure, possibly a dragon or a giant, is shown in profile, looking towards the right. The figure has a textured, scaly appearance. In the upper right, a large, curved, metallic object, resembling a horn or a piece of armor, is visible. The overall color palette is dominated by dark browns, blacks, and greys, with some highlights in gold and blue. The title text is positioned in the center-right area.

WARHAMMER®
THE END TIMES

THE SIEGE OF
NAGGAROND

S P CAWKWELL

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Season of Blood, Year 223 of the Age of Vengeance

The horde snaked its way towards Naggarond, a black and crimson serpent of doom that brought horror, destruction and chaos wherever it went. From his vantage point riding along the cliff, Kruath could see it far below him. In the wake of the army's advance lay desecration of the highest order, even in so bleak a place as the Land of Chill, shattered buildings, broken bodies and enough blood to sate the thirstiest barbarian for a lifetime.

Still they marched, their destination and ultimate intention clear. But they were not the only ones making for the seat of druchii power. Alone, Kruath raced ahead of the marauder army to bring warning of what was to come... for what little good it might do. He spurred the horse harder, determined and desperate.

The horse was a fine animal, a perfect example of the dark steeds of lost Nagarythe, and he could feel the play of powerful muscles beneath its flesh as it galloped towards the south. Kruath had been riding hard for days. Weariness was growing and he had no idea how much longer he and the horse could maintain the pace. Still the need to get home, to bring news of the oncoming storm, kept him going, and the horse served him admirably.

A fine animal it may have been, the warrior thought morosely, but even a fine animal had limits and the horse's pace was noticeably slowing. Foam flecked its mouth and it was panting steam into the morning air. They had ridden hard with only necessary pauses to feed and water the animal. Every rest break increased the warrior's anxiety. There were things that ran and flew ahead of the Chaos army that would not just kill him were they to catch up to him; they would feast on his flesh while he still drew breath. He had to keep riding.

Patting the creature's neck as it snorted, the warrior looked south, towards Naggarond. Bleak tundra stretched as far as the eye could see, occasionally broken by shattered spars of black rock and equally black streams and becks. Standing sentinel over the frigid waste, the Iron Mountains stabbed at the clouds like infernal talons. Not so very long ago, Kruath would have been glad to return to the city of his birth. For all its labyrinthine threats and tangled knots of political intrigue, the city was infinitely preferable to the lengthy turn of duty all warriors had to serve on the watchtowers. Like the countless others who thronged through its black veins, the dark elf was fiercely proud of the jewel of Naggaroth. Now, though, the pleasure of returning was soured by the knowledge of what followed in his wake.

Two more hours brought him within sight of Naggarond, the city's dark, implacable walls and towers soaring in his vision. Palaces and spires broke the skyline like a needle-toothed smile, and looming over it all, its cyclopean menace oppressive and inescapable, stood the Black Tower of the Witch King. With the exhaustion he felt, the northern gate seemed agonisingly distant, although it could only be a few more miles. Kruath's determination forced him onwards, even when the horse stumbled.

He covered the last few miles in a haze, focusing on nothing but his destination. He was within shouting distance of the gate when the horse's legs finally buckled and it crumpled downwards, pitching Kruath heavily to the ground. The warrior hit the cold earth of his homeland and remained there for a moment, stunned. He regained his senses with the urgency of the moment and left the dying horse thrashing on the ground. He began to run. At the gates,

warriors were shouting and several crossbows were trained on him. A phalanx of spearmen barred the passage and, minutes later, Kruath stumbled up to the menacing shield line and fell to his knees.

He lifted his head, inhaling deeply, struggling to catch his breath. Permanently burning sacrificial fires filled the air with their acrid scent. It was both invigorating and disturbing, but the familiarity of it and the passion that burned beneath it fired the determination in Kruath's blood once again and he raised his head. Pride surged and his spine straightened. He got to his feet.

'The Tower of Volroth,' he said, his voice clear and robust, giving no sign of the dramatic ride that had brought him here. 'It has fallen.'

'The forces of Chaos – barbarians, trolls, beastmen and other twisted things I could not even put names to – struck the tower hard and fast.' Kruath ran his fingers through his long, dark hair as he relayed what had become of the Tower of Volroth. A steadfast, long-standing rallying point, the tower was a sprawling edifice, a huge structure that housed hundreds of troops when at its capacity. It had stood proudly for decades and had always been a staunch bulwark against the forces of the north. But now...

'We were overwhelmed, my lord. The garrison was devastated in a few short hours. The horde poured in... *kept* pouring in... in numbers too many to count.' Kruath stood stock-still, his gaze locked firmly in front of himself whilst Kouran Darkhand, Captain of the Black Guard, walked a slow, considering circle around him.

'Continue,' said his superior, this single word the first reaction he had made since Kruath had begun to give his report.

'We fought hard and we matched the vile denizens with skill and spite enough to equal their frenzy. But they had the advantage of greater numbers. They came at us from all angles and kept coming.' Kruath shook his head, more in frustration than shame. 'They were too many, and we too few. When the gates fell, the defence turned into a rout. There were a few of us who fell back within the curtain wall in an ordered withdrawal, but by then, it was too late.'

The captain's pacing ceased and he came to a stop opposite Kruath, returning the other warrior's gaze.

'You abandoned your post.' It was a statement rather than a question and Kruath stiffened at the accusation.

'No, my lord, I did not. Four of us were sent to bring news back to Naggarond.'

'Four of you?'

'The others must have fallen along the way.'

The captain said nothing for a long moment, as if weighing up the worth of Kruath's words, perhaps mentally determining whether the other messengers had been felled by enemies or by Kruath, and then he resumed his circling.

'Proceed. Tell me of this horde.'

Kruath took a deep breath and relayed everything he had seen.

Blood. So much of it. Kruath had witnessed the carnage of battle on countless occasions. He had seen rituals to Khaine which were brutal and bloody as was appropriate and necessary to please the lord of murder. But the mindless violence of the forces who had struck the Tower of Volroth was something different. What they brought with them was carnage for the sake of carnage, violence as its own end. There was no skill or strategy to their method of battle. No grace, no purity. But there was definitely energy and determination. The Chaos warriors simply tore through the ranks of dark elves, driven to acts of horror by their insatiable lust for blood.

His own captain had been torn apart, limbs ripped from his still-living body by two barbarians who had been quarrelling over the prize and fighting to claim the right to the kill. As the captain

had died screaming, his attackers had turned on one another. The brawl ended moments later when the smile of another barbarian's axe cut through the scrap, biting into the throat of one of the fighters. The head was severed and the other barbarian snatched up the prize and held it aloft, screaming guttural cries to praise the Blood God.

Such exultation on the faces of the attackers. Kruath knew the holy ecstasy of ritual. There had been one time when he had been so caught up in the passion of the kill that he thought he might lose himself to Khaine's embrace. But this was something different and something without reason. This was not sacrifice or appeasement. This was slaughter and destruction to feed an appetite that knew no mortal bounds and could never be sated. Even when there were no enemies left.

They killed and killed and killed again. When they could not reach a foe they tore down tree and stone alike, blighting and burning the world with their touch. When there was nothing left for them to destroy, they destroyed each other, washing themselves in the polluted blood of their own and lofting their skins as banners. It was what had always served to contain them within the north, what controlled their numbers. There were few forces who could direct such rage. Few individuals who could contain such raw power.

But *she* was one of them. *Her*. The apparition gliding on leathered wings at the head of the horde. A great and terrible being, made flesh from the stuff of nightmares, she burst through the freezing morning mists, a slender, red-clad form who rode the cinders and the pillars of smoke. She was like a dark, avenging angel.

He knew who she was. He had heard the legends.

'Speak her name, boy.' The captain's voice came so quietly and softly that Kruath blinked out of his recollection. 'Confront the truth and give us knowledge of our enemy.'

Kruath knew that the captain had worked out the identity of the Chaos army's commander, but he nodded nonetheless.

'Yes, my lord.' He took a long, calming breath. 'It was the Blood Queen.'

The Blood Queen was just one of the names that belonged to the notorious daemon princess of the northlands whose legends were told to children at night to ensure their compliance and obedience. The Blood Queen. The Gore Queen. The Consort. Valkia the Bloody. A name that sent thrills of terror and desperate yearning for battle down the spine in equal measure.

The captain inclined his head and nodded.

'Continue,' he said, as though Kruath's revelation had not surprised him at all.

Kruath knew that the appearance of Valkia the Bloody would sit in his thoughts until the moment he died. She had flung her beautiful, cruel face to the sky, screaming a guttural battle cry in a language beyond his comprehension. Her daemonic wings bore her aloft, every eye on the battlefield raised to look upon her terrifying, otherworldly presence. Kruath could not tear his eyes from her. The sheer majesty of her was overwhelming and it was all that the dark elf could do not to fall to his knees. He knew one thing for certain.

I am in the presence of the divine.

Despite the horror of her blasphemous appearance, there was no denying the sense of power radiating from Valkia. Her spear struck heads from shoulders and punched through armour with ease, delivering perfect killing blows to any of those who were unfortunate to be in its path. Kruath felt the adulation directed towards this horrendous daemon woman, felt it emanating from those who even now slaughtered his people. It was she who led this unstoppable wave. It was she who drove them further, bringing the tide south into the Witch King's realm. Kruath and three other warriors were despatched with due haste to bring warning to Naggarond. If they failed in their task, Valkia's unnatural and unholy army would smash over

the city's threshold. They would consume the great stronghold and leave nothing but blood and ashes in their wake.

Of the four messengers who had set out from the tower, only Kruath remained.

Naggarond will not fall.

He had believed it then, he had believed it as he raced the horse across the distance from the tower, and he believed it now. Kruath's weariness was great, but desperation gave him strength and he was back on his feet in seconds following his dramatic arrival.

When his news was delivered, they had sent word to the captain of the guard, who in turn summoned Kruath to deliver his news first-hand. And now, here he was. His frantic race ahead of the enemy had brought them little time to prepare for the onslaught and that was an advantage that Volroth had not been granted.

A fresh sword and tall shield were located for Kruath and he was marched up on to the walls with hundreds of other warriors. They took up their defensive positions, preparing themselves for the battle to come. The attentions of all were deeply focused on the protection of their city and when the light drained unnaturally from the sky, given the earliness of the hour, they witnessed the approach of the Chaos horde. Its arrival was heralded by a darkness that seeped across the land, bringing horror in its wake. The people of the city were unperturbed. Let the enemy come. They would greet any attack in kind.

Barbed, iron portcullises barred the gates and a ring of enraptured blue fire surrounded the walls, its unnatural light flickering from their obsidian surface. Bolt throwers creaked as they were winched into readiness within the narrow towers and the parapet bristled with spears, halberds and serrated blades. Naggarond was a black jewel in a crown of blood-forged iron, a monument to cruelty and the dark, poisonous heart of a ruthless nation.

What approached this glistening jewel, stamping with murderous intent from the north, was madness – unmatched and undiluted insanity that would eagerly tear everything down, caper in the ruins and make sport of all for the amusement of the Dark Gods. Kruath knew his histories, and that the Chaos warbands had rarely ventured this far south. It had engendered a certain arrogance in the dark elves that could now prove to be their undoing. For too long they had believed nothing would or could come against them, that nothing could threaten their city.

Now *she* was coming.

Kruath's hand rested on the hilt of his sword. His eyes roamed the lines of warriors. Every face was turned towards the direction of the oncoming army. The commander of this stretch of the wall had not yet spoken or issued any orders, but Kruath recognised Kouran Darkhand in the armour and livery of the Witch King's own Black Guard. Darkhand held the haft of a huge halberd. The jagged runes on its barbed head read 'Crimson Death', a name earned through its reputation. Kruath's tired body found a new lease of life. Underneath this leader, they would achieve victory. He was certain.

A red cloak fluttered behind the commander in the light westerly breeze. Unlike that of others, there were no designs or details embroidered into the fine fabric. It was plain and straightforward, much like Darkhand himself.

Kruath knew little about Darkhand, but what he did know reassured him. Less inclined to playing the game of politics than other nobles of the city, Darkhand's focus was on the defence of his city and on getting things done. Right now, knowing what was about to arrive, Kruath could appreciate this.

Kouran Darkhand, Captain of the Black Guard, may have been low-born but as a warrior he was matchless, and serving under his command was something many warriors of Naggarond simultaneously feared and yearned for. Now, Kruath thought with bitterness, it would likely be

the first and only time he had a chance to impress the captain. The thought excited him and brought rage in equal measure. He embraced the feeling. It would not do to underestimate Valkia and her forces. There would be no escape here as there had been at Volroth. Here, it would be victory or death. Retreat was not a route they could take.

Captain Darkhand turned from his vigilant post at the wall and let his sharp eyes roam up and down the line of warriors. Kruath watched his commander's every move with intense concentration. For over a thousand years Darkhand had battled and fought, protected and defended. He was a living legend.

When he spoke, Kruath noted that it was not in the usual arrogant tones of other commanders under whom he had served. He did not raise his voice or roar in strident defiance. Kruath watched the infamous warrior with something approaching fascination. *He forces us to strain in order to hear him, he noted. As if the words are not for us, but for some higher power. He does not ask. He expects simply to be obeyed.*

'These walls have stood since we claimed this land as our own and you will hold them. In the name of the Witch King you will hold them. Look beyond the walls, my brethren. The enemy comes,' Darkhand said. He spoke with eloquent ease, choosing his words with care. 'An enemy that dares the wrath of the druchii. An enemy that thinks it cannot know fear. But mark this, each and every one of you, mark my words. They will be stopped here. They will die here, every last one of them, before they see the inside of Naggarond. If your death is required for our victory, then I expect it of you.'

Darkhand's words stirred loyalty and determination in Kruath's gut and he let his pride swell. Death in defence of Naggarond. It was no more than was expected of any of them and yet the captain managed to remind them, without speaking the actual words aloud, that any signs of cowardice would result in swift retribution, undoubtedly at the end of the serrated dagger he wore at his waist.

Overhead, the skies darkened and flickered with unnatural light. Forks of scarlet lightning split the heavens and a hot wind tainted with the stink of blood and iron washed across the walls. A few fat, black drops of rain pattered off the parapet and Kruath tightened his grip on the weapon in his hand in anticipation. The army approached. Its very presence was a blight upon the world and the fiends amongst its great host were sustained by its dark power.

Kruath felt his blood stir at the captain's simple but powerful choice of words. An exultant cry rose up in his chest and burst forth, only to be lost amongst the cheers of his fellow dark elves. When the noise settled once again, Darkhand continued.

'The animals of the north do not think. They have no great scheme or plan.' Darkhand's lithe form paced up and down the line as he spoke. 'They will come at us with mindless savagery and beat themselves bloody on our walls. There will be no glory here. I expect you to butcher them like the vermin they are.' He stopped his pacing and his eyes roamed once more. They flickered briefly over Kruath, who inclined his head in acknowledgement of his commander's gaze. 'Nothing more, nothing less. If you are still living when we cleanse this filth from our lands, then you can consider that your greatest accolade.'

There was the pause of a heartbeat and the captain finished his speech with four words that caught light like a match to a fuse.

'For the Witch King.'

The words began as a murmur, then became a chant and then, finally, a crescendo of screaming determination. Kruath bellowed the words at the top of his voice, believing in them absolutely. Then, as suddenly as the words had come, as thunder rocked the heavens and the boom of drums echoed across the hills, a silence fell across the walls.

In that infinite moment, in the calm before the storm, Kruath experienced a sensation of

complete and utter clarity. Every sound and every movement stilled. It was as though time ground to a halt for a single, perfect second. The warrior's eyes closed briefly and he allowed himself the luxury of drinking in the heady purity of the moment. The silence was unnatural. In that moment, Kruath came to know one thing with absolute certainty.

I will die before I let this city fall.

The horde was vast, an unbroken line of howling madness that stretched as far as the eye could see. Gangs of fur-clad barbarians jostled with clans of horned beastmen and canine-headed monsters. Regiments of black and red armoured Chaos warriors strode beside drooling, slack-jawed trolls and ruddy-skinned ogres. Shapeless amalgams of flesh, bone and iron crawled and skittered through the throng and monstrous hounds ran ahead, snapping and howling in the rising storm.

Through and over the army strode mottled giants, their lanky, pot-bellied bodies swaddled with rags and sheathed in plates of black iron. They bristled with hooks, blades and barbs, wielding clubs and hammers the size of wagons. Giants were rare in Naggaroth, and to see so many together was staggering. Huge, shaggy mammoths hauled twisted towers behind them, their blunt skulls shielded by wedges of studded armour. Mobs of masked warriors crowded the howdahs on their backs thrashing drums of stretched skin and offering incomprehensible adulation to their mad gods. One such beast was crowned with knotted brass and a huge icon of a stylised skull. Beneath that vile sigil a hulking brute butchered men and elves, his colossal axe claiming their heads and his meaty paws pulling hearts from chests. All were cast into a living, crimson fire that danced beneath an eightfold star, while tumbling from the sky were horrors in the shape of shrieking harpies, soaring in the updrafts of the hot storm wind.

The horde did not stop to make camp, did not break its stride as it raced towards the walls, such was its fury. Kruath watched as the open ground between the army and the city vanished and then thousands of dark elf arrows spoke in unison. A blizzard of bolts descended upon the blood-mad horde. With so many targets it was impossible to miss. Beasts and men died in their droves, bodies riddled with black-fletched shafts. Their demise did nothing to halt the stampede and the furious charge never faltered. The dead and dying were trampled beneath its feet, and countless voices rose in a howl of defiance that matched the rising storm in its fury. A second volley of bolts slaughtered just as many with just as little an effect. Amongst the churning mass of bodies Kruath spotted, here and there, a number of absurdly long ladders.

The marauder frontrunners of the Chaos army planted the feet of the ladders in the barren earth. A press of bodies pushed them forward and carried them aloft, bridging the distance swiftly. Darkhand readied his weapon, and in response to a sign from their commander, a veritable forest of spears and halberds presented themselves. From between the jagged crenellations Kruath saw a crude frame of bones and knotted wood rising to meet the wall where he stood. Kruath firmly planted his shield and leaned his weight forward in order to receive the enemy. The ladder slammed into place and a hacked and mutilated body jerked at its top, its empty, bloodied eye sockets staring accusingly. The defenders of the Tower of Volroth had been returned to Naggarond in a gruesome manner. The marauders had taken the corpses, lashing them to their siege-ladders, and were now dangling them across the parapets, in a jerky, stinking display of grisly puppetry. Several spearmen levered the ladder from the wall, but more were clattering into place all the time, each decorated with their own trophy designed to cause terror amongst the defenders.

Kruath's attention was fully on the attack on the walls, but he was acutely aware that somewhere on the ground, some distance away from their own pitched battle, the gates would doubtless be under heavy attack. There, the fighting would be many warriors deep, and the

heaviest losses would be felt. But he had no time to linger on the thought.

There was a heavy *thunk* as one of the city's bolt throwers fired on the nearest giant, its projectile humming through the leaden air. The six-foot shaft slammed into the monster, sinking several inches through the putrid flesh of its chest. The giant stumbled, roaring in rage and pain, but did not fall until three more of the huge bows struck home. The towering monstrosity staggered back a step, let out another roar of defiance and then finally toppled like a felled tree, its massive body crushing numerous warriors beneath its bulk. Barbarians and other creatures began swarming up the ladders while hounds and beasts tried to cross the moat's sorcerous fire. The stench of scorched bodies began to fill the air as many slipped from the ladders, tumbling into the flames. Kruath couldn't help but cringe as maniacal laughter came from them even as they burned.

It was Darkhand who claimed the first kill amongst the unit defending that section of the city wall. Kruath saw an axe-wielding marauder scramble over the top of the ladder and raise his weapon, but he got no further. The captain of the Black Guard gauged a deep wound into the barbarian in a welter of gore. He plunged from the ladder to die with the others still burning in the moat below. Then a red-furred beastman vaulted onto the wall and Kruath became far more interested in his own survival than the actions of Kouran Darkhand.

Repulsing the seemingly limitless tide of warriors surging up the ladders was repetitive and mechanical work. At times a champion or particularly crazed warrior would sweep a few feet clear of defenders, but then the lithe, murderous forms of Khaine's brides would appear in the fray and cut the offender to pieces before slipping away once again.

The flicker of lightning was matched by the flicker of magic as the few sorceresses in Naggarond waged arcane war on the flocks of harpies that filled the sky. Bolts of black fire and lashing whips of shadow rained broken bodies down on the army below, but there was only so much that magic could do. Kruath hacked his blade through the tattooed flesh of another barbarian and kicked its body into the street below. His gauntlets were slick with blood and his shield dented and notched from axe and club blows. He staggered back, gasping for breath and another warrior stepped in to fill the gap. Above him, the sun was dipping rapidly towards the horizon. He had been fighting solidly for many hours and his energy reserves were gradually dwindling.

Beside him, another barbarian – a woman dressed in furs – pitched forward, a fountain of blood spurting from her mouth. It splattered against Kruath's visor, temporarily rending his world scarlet. When his vision cleared, he wished, wholeheartedly, that it had not. The sight that greeted him was enough to deflate the ferocity that burned in his soul.

A lithe, crimson-armoured form with cloven hooves and curling horns descended from the boiling clouds. She was borne aloft by scarred, chiropteran wings and carried a jagged spear and vile, leering shield. Her burning gaze swept the walls, challenging any and all who dared to look upon her.

Valkia the Bloody had arrived.

'These creatures are beneath you, my love,' came the sneering voice from her shield. The animated face of Locephax, once a proud daemon prince of Slaanesh, now forced into servitude to this consort of Khorne, sneered up at her. But Valkia paid the creature no heed. Over the centuries, they had formed a strange sort of relationship and Locephax felt very strongly that it was his eternal right to criticise everything she did. He had courted for her attentions once and could not have lost any more badly. 'Why do you waste your time with these children when there are *real* battles to be won?'

It had become oddly companionable. Valkia lived for her consort, to please him and bring

forth the tithe of blood and skulls that he desired. But other than Kormak, her favoured champion, no other had been with her for so long. Locephax knew her better than anybody.

‘Everything you encounter is beneath you, Locephax,’ she replied. She was distracted and only half-listening to his mutterings. ‘Or so it seems to me.’ She flew at a steady pace, keeping herself at more or less the same speed as the seething mass of warriors beneath, who clawed at each other in their effort to reach the walls of Naggarond. The slower, more lumbering elements of the horde were at last starting to arrive. Valkia watched with swelling pride and anticipation as armoured handlers prodded and cajoled a line of twisted cannons into their optimal firing positions. They were monstrous creations: mouths of brass-framed barrels of knotted, bound souls mounted on carriages of skulls and ivory bone.

Valkia turned her full attention on the daemon mounted upon her shield. One slim shoulder lifted briefly in a shrug of indifference. ‘Remember, Locephax, my lord and master cares not from whence the blood flows, only that it *does* flow. I promise you that this city will burn in his name. It will be reduced to ashes. It will become a pyre, a monument to bloodshed. And we will do the same to the next. Then the next.’

‘But a *siege*? It’s so... *tiresome*!’ Even disembodied as he was, Locephax had the ability to give the impression that he tossed his head in superiority. She put a clawed hand over his open maw, squeezing with a threatening force that caused the daemon to fall into mutinous silence. The only sound now was the steady, rhythmic beat of Valkia’s wings as they carried her towards the city of Naggarond.

She soared across the ranks of the creatures of Chaos and as her winged shadow fell upon them, every last one raised its head, screaming undying devotion to her and her bloody cause. Her sharp eyes fell upon the armoured form of Kormak astride his Juggernaut. Her champion led a host of armoured ogres that swarmed around a brass, canine-headed ram rumbling towards the main city gate.

Since his resurrection following his death so many years ago, Kormak had been unable to speak. Valkia’s powers had been unable to remake the dead man’s vocal chords. It seemed ludicrous that a mute warrior could command an army, but command them he did. He led, as he always led, by example. Valkia’s army knew that if Kormak charged, that was what they were to do. A simple flick of the hand, a thunderous clap of his mighty gauntlets, and the army bent to the champion’s will. Valkia’s pride in Kormak, her harbinger, was boundless, and she watched him now as he led the assault on Naggarond.

She saw, she heard, she smelled the battle below and it was exhilarating. Her wings pounded the air harder and she gathered speed.

The walls were a crazed, pulsating scrum of combat. Everywhere she looked, elves, men and beasts struggled and slaughtered one another with reckless abandon. A loud *bang* indicated that one of the siege towers had finally juddered into position, wobbling alarmingly and threatening to topple forward before it stabilised. With a crunch of rudimentary gears, it dropped its bridge. Within moments, warriors began to pour from its interior onto the spears of the druchii. Scores of bodies tumbled down as incoming projectiles from crossbows ended their fledgling attack, but there were plenty more, and numerous warriors pressed forward. They crossed the bridge and moved the fight onto the wall.

Ladders rose and fell with mechanical certainty and mutant spawn began to drag hideously deformed and twisted bulks up the sheer face of the city’s defences. Claws, tentacles and grasping paws dug deep, finding purchase where they could, or digging into the obsidian surface.

The fighting was most intense wherever knots of black-armoured druchii held the line. They wielded barbed halberds with consummate skill, cutting down marauders and beastmen with

an economy of motion that belied the size of their weapons. Valkia, flying overhead, allowed herself the briefest of moments of satisfaction at the sight. So much slaughter was a pleasing thing and her pride swelled. It was time, she reasoned, to make her entrance.

Her eyes narrowed as they fell upon one of the dark elves. The warrior wielded an impressively ornate glaive. He held himself with the stance of a seasoned fighter, his ragged, scarlet cloak streaming behind him. This champion was a murderous blur, his blade claiming lives without pause. He weaved in and out of his own warriors, leaving them unharmed. Valkia approved and she admired. But more importantly, she had found her prey.

Valkia plunged from the sky like comet, a piercing death-shriek on her lips as she descended on the wall. The impact of her landing caused a network of cracks to spread through the ancient, black stone. Her own people and the druchii scattered in every direction, forced apart by the mighty shockwave. She straightened her back, proud, aloof, her noble face raised in defiance of those who stood in her way. She had impaled one of the Black Guard on her spear when she landed. She stared impassively at the shivering corpse then shook it free with a flick of her wrist. This done, she turned to confront her prey, the dark elf champion.

She allowed herself a moment or two to appreciate the finesse and skill that the creature brought to his craft. His whirling, dizzying dance brought him now to a complete halt, his fixing upon hers. She watched, every sense fully alert as he brought the halberd around. He held the weapon before him, ready to confront her.

Screaming faces in her armour plating twisted and contorted as she moved, every step the prowl of a true predator. The joints between the armour plates stretched like exposed sinew as she drew her wings against her back. She tipped her head on one side and bared her fangs in a parody of a sultry smile. Her eyes ranged up and down the elf's sinewy form, clad in barbed armour and coated in a fine film of blood and gore.

An old hunger bubbled up inside her. It was the most exhilarating feeling she knew and it always came just prior to claiming a skull worthy of the throne of brass. Such a skull was a prize trophy and her consort would commend her for dropping it at his feet.

'Let us dance, you and I,' she purred and the two warriors closed the short distance between them, coming together with a clash of steel.

Darkhand's cloak whipped out behind behind him and his weapon turned in his grasp like a living thing. Spear and halberd fell against each other in a hail of blows faster than the eye could follow, the Black Guard's speed matched by the daemon queen's ferocity. Anything attempting to breach the furious circle of their battle died, crushed, beheaded or simply struck aside with casual disregard.

From his position several feet away, Kruath could not help but let his attention be drawn towards the staggering display of skill and brutality. Something about the proximity of the daemon woman fired the bloodlust in his soul, bringing forth a desperate and driving need to turn and launch himself once more at the enemy. It took extreme control on his part to force down the temptation to give in to the berserker rage, and even then he only barely managed to grip on to his senses.

The crash of weapons helped pull him from his inner struggle and he caught a glimpse of the tip of Valkia's spear as she lunged for Darkhand. Its tip glistened in the light of the fires raging in the background of the confrontation, and Kruath wondered if it was poisoned. Afterwards, a near miss spattered his captain's breastplate with what he realised was blood. The spear wept sticky ichor – perhaps even the blood of those that it had slain.

Kouran Darkhand's eyes were fixed on the daemon princess's form, which was clad in crimson plates of screaming souls. Kruath imagined that his superior was attempting to gauge her weaknesses to find a flaw in her battle stance that he could exploit. Darkhand was a

seasoned, fearless warrior; he would find some way to win this battle. Kruath watched as the captain of the Black Guard let out a bellow of rage and surged forward to re-engage Valkia in battle.

Darkhand and Valkia's deadly skirmish brought them within arm's reach of Kruath and her pervading scent tickled his senses. A strange smell emanated from the daemon when she got close: a heady concoction of scents. There was the unmistakable copper reek of spilled blood mingled with the floral smell of decaying roses, which produced a perfume at odds with itself. It was sweet but cloying and sharpened with the bitter taint of corruption.

The hypnotic effect of Valkia's odour passed. Two barbarians charged towards Kruath, breaking the spell of fascination that had kept his attention so riveted. Within minutes both of them lay dead beneath his sword. One barbarian gurgled and tumbled from the walls, his throat slit from ear to ear. The other fell to a fatal stomach wound.

Kruath kicked the dead barbarians from the wall and moved a few inches closer to Darkhand and Valkia, wanting more than anything to plunge his blade into her armoured back. Watching her fight was an education in itself. He had learned his own blade-craft on the streets of Naggarond, murdering his way to supremacy until his conscription. He knew his skill with the sword was greater than most of these untried thugs who dared to call themselves Black Guard. What were they next to him? *He* had survived Volroth while so many others had perished. If he could bring down Valkia or even simply wound her... *then* his ascension in the ranks would be assured.

Kruath blinked. He had always been filled with belief in his own abilities, but this was something even stronger. Now he was more than confident of his own capabilities. He *knew* he could achieve everything his heart desired.

But such a thing, the ever-diminishing logical side of his personality, told him it would only be a possibility if he could manage to control the rising urge to kill everything. And kill. And kill.

Kruath's eyes were drawn to the daemoniac head mounted on the shield Valkia wore. To his crawling horror, it swivelled its hideous eyes and looked right back at him. The needle-fanged mouth curled upwards in a wicked smile and a forked tongue flickered out and ran a line around the thin, reptilian lips.

Come closer, boy, came a whispering, sibilant hiss in the confines of his head. Kruath shook his head, blinking hard to shake the sensation. He had been mind-touched before by one of the city sorceresses and he had despised the feeling then. This was magnified exponentially and brought bile rushing to his throat. The daemon's eyes closed once, before flaring wide open. The previously black irises were replaced by steadily glowing orbs of arterial scarlet. It was a piercing, hypnotic stare and Kruath felt inexplicably drawn to it.

Come closer. Is she not magnificent? Is she not glorious? Come, boy. Embrace the bride of Khorne. Bask in her glory. And then, when you can bear her majesty no more, take your sword and run it through her. Slaughter Valkia the Bloody where she stands. Do this thing and my god's reward to you will be infinite.

The daemon shield's words were utterly compelling and Kruath knew that it was possible. A brief thought fluttered through his consciousness, wondering why it was that this daemoniac thing was whispering promises to him and not to Darkhand. Surely the captain was the greater threat? And then Kruath knew. The daemon clearly understood that he, Kruath, was the greater warrior. He could kill Valkia.

And he could also do so much more...

He believed in himself utterly. He could do this impossible thing. He *knew* he could do it. The world around him melted away into a smear of sound and colour as he focused on this sudden, new-found and very singular purpose. He could do it, the subtle voice in his head suggested,

and Locephax's crimson eyes burned that certainty indelibly into the back of his mind.

Driven by a desperate determination to prove himself, Kruath pushed his way closer to Darkhand and Valkia, shoving a crossbowman from the wall and gutting a canine beastman on the way. He could not remove his gaze from Locephax's eyes and the lure of greatness that drew him on.

Seconds later, Valkia, still engaged in her battle with Darkhand, turned her attention briefly to another attacker. She slammed the shield into an elf who was attempting to stab her from behind. It crashed against the unfortunate warrior's face with the sound of breaking bones and tearing flesh. Kruath's trance was broken once again. Robbed of Locephax's direct, hypnotic gaze, the haze of madness lifted and reality flowed back in a rush. He saw the bloody mess of the druchii's face, the meat drooling from the daemon-shield's lips, and wondered how it was that he had gotten so close to the furious battle raging in front of him.

Darkhand twisted inside a spear thrust, using the momentum to turn the motion into a left hook that struck the daemon on her right cheek with a satisfying crack. Valkia's head snapped around and she turned with the blow, pivoting on the spot. The butt of her spear, Slaupnir, smashed into the captain's helmet, launching it from his head and down into the streets below. Then she spread her wings and leapt into the air, knocking warriors of both sides into the magical fires. She hovered just outside of Darkhand's reach and the cruel, beautiful face split in a wicked grin.

'You fight well, dark elf,' she said as her wings beat slowly, allowing her to maintain her untouchable position. 'Let's see how well you take a full assault.' She lifted her head and rose up, disappearing into the smoke and clouds of the boiling storm.

Kruath watched as Darkhand, clearly confused by this sudden move, turned circles, Crimson Death held before him, the captain's dark hair whipping around his sharp features. In the heat of battle, there was little time to stop and contemplate the enemy's actions. But Valkia's sudden withdrawal caused Kruath to pause. He looked about him, taking in the sights and sounds of the pitched battles that were keeping elves and barbarians alike occupied. He did not consider for one moment that she had fled; all accounts he had heard or read suggested that the minions of the Blood God did not retreat. He dropped low, looking over the edge of the wall in case she had dropped down below the dip of the city's protection, but there was no sight of her.

'Come back and fight me, witch!' Darkhand's voice threaded upwards through the contrails of magical fire and were echoed back down at him by a mocking, male voice that sounded not unlike the voice which had echoed in Kruath's head. He shuddered involuntarily as it called.

Come back and fight me, witch!

The laughter grew louder and louder until moments later, Valkia plunged down through the skies, her scream increasing in pitch and volume as she descended on Kouran Darkhand, Slaupnir held before her like a bloody lance. Kruath could see the outcome in his mind's eye and in that moment, he saw his chance. Ambition, bloodlust and the influence of the daemon twisted in his mind. It choked what hold on the present he might have had and blinded him with a glorious future. He could do what so many others had tried and failed to do.

The captain was wholly focused on Valkia, his eyes turned upward to the descending daemon. If Kruath struck quickly, he could do it. Then, when the siege was inevitably broken, he would kneel before the Witch King and claim Darkhand's power for his own. He could do it.

Kruath stabbed another beastman that had made its way over the wall, barged a warrior aside and ducked beneath the grasping pseudopods of a shapeless *thing* that had reached the embrasures.

He would kill Darkhand. He would kill Valkia. He would kill everyone who stood between him and what he knew with absolute certainty was his birthright. He would be the new captain

of the Black Guard and he would become a legend.

Glory. Riches. Fame. Respect. All these things beckoned him, though he heard nothing but the pounding of the blood through his veins as he prepared to kill his commander.

His moment of self-absorption did not last long. His course towards the battling pair took him past the closest sentry tower, one of hundreds that rose at intervals along the wall's vast length. There was a resonant boom, louder than the crack of lightning and the roar of battle shook the earth. Faster than his mind could comprehend, and faster still than his reflexes could work against, the wall exploded, flattening the surrounding warriors with hunks of black stone and sending the structure plunging into the moat of fire. A great cheer went up from the horde as the wreckage formed a dusty bridge across the sorcerous flames. Then something struck the wall beneath Kruath and his world turned into a jumble of sky and flying rock.

There was no time to consider the implications of what had happened because a blood-slick, obsidian surface rushed up to meet him. Within seconds, Kruath's ambitions were as crushed and broken as his body.

He died in terrible agony, his dream unrealised.

Darkhand heard Valkia's shriek of fury as a great plume of dust and smoke eclipsed her prey and her dive turned into a swoop that carried her clear of the carnage. He breathed again, unaware that he had even been holding that breath. Far to the rear of the army, a line of Hellcannons belched their fiery projectiles, punishing the city's defences. It was by no means anything to be grateful for, but it had perhaps saved him from death at Valkia's hand. The daemon hissed her disappointment at the interruption of the duel and spread her wings, allowing a passing updraft to carry her into the sky. She held her position for a while, her wings beating powerfully and keeping her hovering. Her gaze remained locked on Darkhand for a few moments longer. Then she let out a battle cry and turned her attentions elsewhere, her interest in Darkhand lost.

Darkhand stepped back, deftly avoiding the sprawled, crushed body of a fallen warrior. He vaguely recognised the ruined face of the rider from Volroth, but dismissed the detail as trivial. Victory was all that mattered, not the dead. He wiped the blood from his eyes and looked about. Valkia was gone, the duel interrupted, and he was free to turn his attentions back to the heart of battle. He turned his head this way and that, seeking the rest of his Black Guard and assessing the situation. All he saw was dust and fire.

A huge section near the top of the wall had been blasted away and had collapsed into a fan of rubble, crushing hundreds of warriors and forming a rough ramp that bridged the moat. Warriors and crossbowmen were picking themselves up from the shattered rock and offering desultory resistance to the marauders and beasts that were already scrambling to exploit the weakness and gain the walls. He allowed himself to catch his breath and scrambled down to stand beside two other dark elves who were battling a troll. There was hope all the time the Black Guard still stood, and Kouran Darkhand would stand in a position where others could see him and recognise that hope.

'Black Guard! To me!'

His voice was loud enough to be heard over the sounds of battle, the clashing of steel the screaming of the dying, and those who could hear him answered his rallying call as swiftly as they could. They formed a solid knot of fighters, packing themselves tightly together and delivering retribution on the Chaos army. Yet still the Hellcannons were eating away at the walls of their city. The Chaos army was unrelenting. It pounded and drove forwards, all around the great city, marauders and monsters attempting to breach the walls.

His blood fired.

‘The jewel of Naggaroth is not for these vermin,’ he roared. ‘If they want blood, then let us give it to them! Drown them in their own! For Naggarond! For Malekith!’

The rousing words ignited a fresh rush of determination in the elves and in perfect unison they inched forwards to fight back the flood of barbarians preparing to surge into the city.

A shadow overhead raised a ripple of shouting and pointing amongst the warriors battling closest. A huge manticore bearing a sorceress soared above the wall and headed for the rear of the Chaos lines. Valkia raced in her wake but other sorceresses struggling with the harpies broke from their combat temporarily to hurl arcs of power at the daemon princess. The diversion was successful, if costly, as flocks of harpies descended on the walls to hurl screaming figures over the parapets. Valkia ducked and weaved between the magical assaults and shielded her body from another. Black lightning crashed against Locephax and the former daemon prince of Slaanesh absorbed it into his twisted being. His eyes and mouth opened wide and fingers of purple fire returned to the caster, immolating her with a flash of vile energies.

It was time enough for the beast-riding sorceress to cast her own spells, and blades of shadow fell among the Hellcannons, ripping crew apart and shattering chains of binding. Several of the weapons simply vanished with thunderclaps of power, while others went mad, running amok through the barbarian hordes and crushing all in their path. A ragged cheer went up from the walls of the beleaguered city as the bombardment faltered. The sorceress turned her steed back towards the walls, its leathery wings keeping her from the reach of the howling mob below. The Hellcannons had caused minimal damage during their relentless assault, knocking a hole at the top of a single section of wall. Any breach the Chaos army had hoped to achieve with the siege weapons had failed – and now they had lost the means to further that line of attack.

Darkhand scoured the skies desperately, searching for the warrior queen, but the winged horror was nowhere to be seen. He quelled his rising sense of disappointment and focused on the defence of the walls. More barbarians were arriving all the time, but their fury, and the weight of numbers between them and the walls made it impossible for them to reach the city. Thousands of marauders streamed around the city, breaking off towards the east and west and into the Iron Mountains. In doing so, they continued their march further south in search of easier, or more immediate prey upon which to slake their thirst for blood.

Naggarond had withstood the initial onslaught and as it had done for countless years, it would continue to stand firm and proud. However, it was not going to be an easy task.

Darkhand glanced up at the huge, sinister figure of the Witch King and paused in his retelling of the siege. Malekith was a silent and taciturn audience, but he listened to everything. He sat astride the sinuous bulk of Seraphon, his ancient black dragon, and led a long column of warriors and Black Guard across the northern reaches of Naggaroth. How easily Darkhand could guess at their ultimate destination, but years of association suggested to him that it was unwise to assume the thoughts of the Witch King and more, it was utterly foolish to question him.

‘That, then, was how we broke their attempt to lay waste to Naggarond on the first day, my lord.’ Darkhand continued once the lengthy silence suggested that Malekith had nothing to say. ‘We robbed them of their momentum and deprived them of the kill, and the greater number passed us by and continued south. Had they chosen to press the attack...’

There was a creak of ancient joints and armour as the Witch King turned to regard the captain. Wisps of power smouldered from the carved sockets of his monstrous mask and curled around the knotted crown that he wore at his brow. The attention of the Witch King was like an open blast furnace turning its heat upon you and Darkhand stiffened under the sudden scrutiny.

He fought with his instincts to shuffle like a recruit. Malekith crooked one finger: a barely perceptible movement that indicated Darkhand should continue. The captain swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

‘Had they chosen to press the attack, then we would have broken them still. Your warriors, my lord, are as tenacious as they are loyal. As it was, we bled them for ninety days and nights before...’

Supplies of bolts for both the crossbows and the siege weapons were all but exhausted and the ground before the city was littered with thousands of punctured corpses and the speared bodies of giants and mammoths. Still they fought on. Darkhand was weary, exhausted, bruised and battered, but still he led his men in the defence.

The twisted siege towers that had been dragged to the walls lay in smouldering, stinking ruins on the charred grounds before the city gates, the still-burning flesh of their occupants filling the air with a sickly scent. New towers were brought forth from time to time; most were patched together from the ruins of others. Daily they attacked and daily they were destroyed. Each tower was capable of housing large waves of warriors, beastmen and mutants, disgorging them onto the front lines.

But the flood had not lasted. Mostly the attacking force came in sporadic bursts – but the fact of the matter was that they still came. So much death and yet so many continued to attack.

Darkhand watched it all and adjusted battle strategies. He engaged Chaos troops until it seemed there could be no more to give. The twists of fate had granted him a second shot at the great prize and he grasped it with both hands.

He engaged Valkia for a second time atop a pile of stone spreading out between two of the remaining towers. Their interrupted duel resumed as though the intervening time had not happened. The two warriors came together in a second clash of strength and will. Darkhand gave his all to the fight despite his weariness and the tiredness that dogged at him.

He ducked an early flurry of blows, spinning away from the daemon woman. As he fought, his halberd unceremoniously removed the head of one of her marauders who had strayed too close in a moment of bloodthirsty madness. Valkia followed Darkhand with unnatural, bounding grace, casually cutting a pair of crossbow bolts from the air with her spear as she came. Three months of near-constant battle had chewed the walls of Naggarond into a ragged stretch of ugly, black rubble pierced with towering, obsidian fangs. Skirmishes continued, fresh – but ever-decreasing – waves of barbarians attacking daily, but never with the sheer impact of that first day.

Valkia thrust her spear at the retreating dark elf, the tip of it scoring the surface of one of his pauldrons. She had quickly grown used to the wicked enchantment worked into her foe’s armour and the pain that came with striking him. She was consort to the god of battles; her immortal frame would far outlast the yielding flesh of her enemy. To her, this was simply prey that kicked back. And she *liked* that in her victims.

She lunged again, but Darkhand turned the strike aside and spun, delivering an artful kick that was designed to trip her.

Valkia hurdled the kick, bringing her weapon down in an overhead strike that would have pinned him to the floor had he not intercepted it. Spear and halberd locked together in a spray of arcane sparks and sizzling blood. The earth shook, dislodging a shower of broken rock and bodies from the rubble, but neither warrior spared a glance at what was happening as they wrestled to gain the advantage. Valkia’s eyes burned into Darkhand’s soul and he could feel his self-control begin to soften. He felt an urge to yield to this creature. His iron will was not as indomitable as he had thought.

No, came a whisper in his thoughts, a whisper that came in his own voice. *Naggarond must stand*. He ripped his gaze from hers and ducked backwards, breaking the deadlock briefly before their weapons re-joined.

A slaughterbrute bounded across the debris, snorting and bellowing in fury. Corded muscles rippled beneath its hide and saliva flecked its jaw. It towered over the figures struggling on the walls, its crimson-skinned bulk studded with spines and the hafts of broken weapons. Its head was the size of a cart and sported a face that was an unnatural cross between canine and reptile and a wide maw studded with rows of jagged teeth. Valkia shrieked in frustration at yet another interruption, but turned the creature's charge in her favour. She nimbly moved to the side, leaving its thundering passage clear. It charged up the rubble, bloodied saliva flying from its mouth and Darkhand was struck temporarily motionless as he stared at it bearing down upon him.

As the creature came closer, he braced himself to receive the charge.

He was robbed of his chance to kill it by a nest of serpentine heads striking outwards from the city side of the rubble. A hydra, bleeding from a score of wounds and enraged beyond control, rushed the approaching brute, sinking both teeth and claws into its hide. The impact was tremendous, breaking bones and crushing flesh in an instant. The beasts rolled and struggled, biting and clawing at each other. Darkhand embraced the moment of distraction and leaped with grace onto a ruined section of rampart. Valkia hovered there, her wings working slowly in the hot wind, fanning the drifting cinders and ash.

'Everything you know will be as ashes,' she hissed and stared at him. 'Blood and ashes.'

Darkhand did not reply. His gaze was fixed on a point somewhere over Valkia's right shoulder where he had seen a sight that filled him with grim resolve, awe and a sense of impending victory. He looked at the red-armoured daemon and a slow smile spread across his face. It gave him intense satisfaction to see a look of momentary distrust... confusion, even, in her smouldering eyes.

'Centuries from now,' he said, 'my city may fall to ashes. But it will not be today.' The daemonic woman halted her attack and stiffened as a marrow-curdling scream tore through the mists. She turned her head in the direction of Darkhand's gaze and curses spat forth from her perfect lips. Darkhand felt a surge of joy at the sight before him. The timing was superb and even though he had been sure, in his heart, that he would witness this turn of events, he was still glad enough that he was right. Darkhand's eyes settled upon the huge creature that had hove into view. He had seen this beast's arrival on countless occasions but it always took his breath away.

Its name was Seraphon and its bulk was enormous, the vast wingspan eclipsing the wan light from the north. Its gnarled, scaled flesh was harder than iron or stone and with powerful beats of its wings, the dragon descended from the clouds like a stygian god. Darkhand gripped his halberd and drove his gaze upwards to seek out the beast's rider.

Seated high between the dragon's shoulders rode Malekith the Witch King. Black lightning played around his fingertips and a nimbus of shadows danced at his brow as he cast his burning gaze over the marauder horde.

Seraphon swooped low and a huge blast of acrid breath crumbled the remaining siege tower, eliciting a great cry of defiance from the defenders of Naggarond. Acid-eaten bone and decaying wood collapsed in splinters, crushing warriors and blocking the approach. Seraphon swept the length of the wall, its claws and breath scouring the rubble of life and butchering marauders by the score.

Valkia's gaze turned upwards. Her breath hissed out slowly through her fangs and the muscles in her neck tensed. She flicked a furious glare at Darkhand and then, with a few beats

of her wings, took to the air in pursuit of the dragon.

Malekith kept the battle tight, Seraphon's wings easily keeping him steady, hovering just above the city, allowing its rider the ability to focus on his opponent. Forced into the position of a bystander, Darkhand clenched his hands into fists as he observed the encounter. Archers on the walls were loosing their projectiles at Valkia as she drove herself upwards with tremendous force. Each arrow fell shy of its mark, falling to the ground and peppering the ravaged grounds before the city.

Valkia soared to a great height and then, at the peak of her ascent, dove downwards, leading with the tip of the spear, screeching a promise of death. She landed on the dragon's back and her cursed spear drove through the thick skin of Seraphon's haunches. Most normal weapons could not hope to penetrate the armouring of dragonhide, but then Valkia's spear was anything but normal.

Malekith turned in his throne and howling bolts of darkness sprang from his fingertips, scorching the air but failing to find the lithe, swift form of Valkia. Seraphon roared in pain and fury and ceased holding his position. He took off into the city, his sinuous body winding between the spires and towers of Naggarond as he sought to dislodge the unwelcome passenger.

Valkia dragged her weapon from the dragon's flesh and turned her attention to the throne ahead. Malekith had turned in the saddle and Darkhand could see from the flickering light at his fingertips that he was preparing another spell. Black flames sprang from his fists but before he could release the magic, Valkia hurled Slaupnir towards him.

The barbed head of the weapon punched through the back of the riding throne and emerged from the other side. The Witch King was faster than she had anticipated and he twisted aside at the last moment, avoiding being skewered by inches. Roiling balls of fire left his hands in the same instant and Valkia was forced to block the attack with the head of Locephax. The blast dislodged her from the dragon's back and she tumbled in the air for a few moments before righting herself. Seraphon flew his sinuous body around the nearest tower, and once turned, descended after Valkia, snapping hungrily with his cavernous jaws.

She beat her wings, lifting clear of the dragon's path just as his maw snapped shut. Darkhand felt a wrench of disappointment. The spectacle had arrested any further attempts he might have made at fighting and all he could do was watch as Valkia's momentum carried her over Malekith's head and beyond his throne. She wrenched Slaupnir free without breaking her stride and kicked off into the air. Dragon and daemon wove between the towers of the city, the dark magic of the Witch King clawing at her but never quite finding its mark, sending shattered stone raining into the streets below.

Unable to land a killing blow on the dragon, Valkia looped beneath the beast's jaws and onto his head. Seraphon bucked and heaved, but the winged warrior kept her footing, lunging once more towards the seated figure of the Witch King. Malekith turned the spear aside with his own jagged blade and backhanded Valkia with an armoured fist. The blow would have crushed the skull of a lesser being, but she simply turned with the impact and used the momentum to drive a thrust at the Witch King's heart. Malekith caught the haft of Slaupnir with his free hand only a few inches from his ancient breastplate.

Daemon eyes locked with those of the Witch King. From his vantage point atop the rubble, Darkhand could hear the final exchange.

'These lands are mine.' Malekith's voice hissed from deep within the grotesque helm. He held Valkia's spear at bay, but the tip wobbled as it crept its way towards his armour. 'You will never take them.'

'They are not yours now,' Valkia replied. She pushed Slaupnir harder, seconds away from

driving it into the Witch King's body. 'I will take them from you, as I will take your head for my lord and master.'

'No.'

The single word was spoken with the conviction of the ages. Malekith snarled, sheathing his sword and thrusting his hands towards Valkia's face. A blast of night-dark energy smashed into her, hurling her from the dragon's back and into the path of his jaws. Seraphon immediately exhaled a huge, stinking cloud that entirely engulfed Valkia's form.

Darkhand caught his breath and everything around him seemed to slow until it paused... just for a heartbeat. When time resumed, a crimson-clad figure with tattered wings plunged from the dark cloud, trailing ribbons of black smoke. It descended, twisting and spinning from the skies above Naggarond. With a resounding *crunch*, it struck one of the wall towers with enough impact to shatter the stone before finally tumbling into teeming hordes and trampling feet of the Chaos army beneath.

'That was...' Kouran Darkhand continued. The retelling of the siege had taken most of the day, during which they had marched north at a punishing pace. Now, however, the Witch King halted, his armoured hand held up for silence.

'You led my people well, Captain Darkhand,' he said in his quiet tone. 'We prevailed. Valkia the Bloody is no more. Our city stands firm. In time, we will sweep the invaders from our lands.' He turned his head away from Darkhand to stare out across the horizon. 'We will rid ourselves of them, or Naggaroth will claim them once and for all.'

Darkhand opened his mouth to respond, but Malekith shook his head. 'No,' he said, pre-empting the question. 'No.'

Lightning flickered in the sky and Malekith's gaze moved up to the heavens. 'Our trials are just beginning.'

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The End Times are coming. With Naggaroth besieged by the hordes of Chaos, the Witch King Malekith makes the decision to abandon the Land of Chill and make one final attempt to seize the throne of Ulthuan.



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