

The cover art features a central figure, a Necron Lord, depicted in a highly detailed and menacing manner. He has a pale, bald head, a dark, mask-like face, and a body that is a complex of dark, metallic, and organic-looking parts. He is surrounded by numerous sharp, dark, spiky appendages and limbs, some of which are holding glowing green vials. The background is a dark, atmospheric scene with green and purple hues, suggesting a desolate, alien environment. The overall style is dark and gothic, characteristic of the Warhammer 40,000 aesthetic.

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**

**RISE**

**BEN COUNTER**

The cover art features a central figure, a Necron Lord, depicted in a highly detailed and menacing manner. The figure is skeletal and metallic, with a dark, almost black color palette. It has multiple arms, some holding long, thin blades or staffs. The figure's head is a pale, skull-like face with glowing green eyes. The background is a mix of dark green and purple hues, suggesting a dark, atmospheric setting. The overall style is highly detailed and dramatic, typical of Warhammer 40,000 cover art.

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# RISE

BEN COUNTER

# CONTENTS

Cover

Rise – Ben Counter

About the Author

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# RISE

**Ben Counter**

It was a rising and seductive pain; a delicious, serpentine thing that wound around his bones and seethed through his muscles. He felt it galloping up and down his spine, accompanied by the slow suffusing of his brain until his senses were bathed in red agony.

It would devour him, if he let it. It would become a part of him from which he could not separate, and he would never wake up.

Skanis demanded his body fight it. He felt his wrists and ankles straining at the straps that held him down. Another restraint around his neck choked him as his body arched against the slab. He forced his eyes open and his sight, sharpened by hours in darkness, picked out the glimmer of metal.

The face of the haemonculus grinned down at him. Its name surfaced from Skanis' memory. Urviel. The haemonculus' face was a mask made from the skin of another creature, fastened to the front of its skull by metal staples. Its emaciated ribcage was skinless and organs slithered between the white bones. Four many-jointed arms sprouted from his shoulders, each ending in medical implements and powered saws instead of fingers. A filthy length of hide was wrapped around its waist, with pockets and loops holding blades and drills of every dimension.

'It wakes,' said Urviel. One of its extra arms ran bladed fingers down Skanis' chest.

'Is it done?' gasped Skanis. The tide of pain was receding, slowly relinquishing each joint and organ.

'Oh, little bird,' said Urviel. 'It will never be done.'

Skanis thrashed against the restraints. A panic welled in him and he wondered if he would ever leave the haemonculus' lab. He realised the creature's promise to transform him could have been a trick to lure him upon the slab in order to experiment on him forever, to turn him over and over again into new shapes of malleable flesh until his life finally gave out.

Urviel held up a hand. A mockery of contriteness passed over its mutilated features. 'I jest,' it said. It released the buckle holding the strap around Skanis' neck, then freed one of his hands. Skanis pulled at the strap around his remaining wrist as the haemonculus backed away.

The laboratory was almost pitch black and infernally hot. Body parts from a dozen species hung on the walls, arms and legs racked together, heads hanging by lengths of chain from the ceiling. Cages held heaps of spoil and rags that might once have been alive. The floor was swamped with noxious fluid. Every workbench and operating slab was covered in the detritus of Urviel's work. Scalpels and forceps. Vials of corrosive. Rib spreaders, circular saws, industrial shears, bottled organs and a bowl of eyes.

Skanis released his ankles and slid off the slab. He stumbled, his legs unsteady beneath him. His body felt different – tauter, quicker and more sensitive. He still wore the battlegear of his warrior clan, now opened up in several places, recut and cinched in around his new, slenderer frame. The pain was pooling now in the areas the haemonculus had worked on – his knees, hips and shoulders, two hot red strips down his back, a deep throbbing ache in his bones. His whole body felt tuned up and tightened. He moved an arm experimentally, and the limb reacted with an insect-like quickness.

'What have you done?' he asked, his throat so raw that the words came out in a croaking hiss.

'All that you asked,' said Urviel. 'I hollowed your bones. Your pelvis is new – something of my own design. Do you like vertebrae? You have many more. My speciality.' Urviel's fingers folded in on themselves like the fronds of an anemone. 'I like spines.'

Skanis craned his neck, trying to get a glimpse behind him.

'Indeed, it is as you wished,' said Urviel, 'They are there. Freshly harvested. I am so glad I found a home for them before they decayed.'

'I have to use them.'

Urviel shook his head. 'Not here. You will never leave the ground. You need thermal currents for the first time. I have seen it. Commorragh will not let you go with ease. You must rise above it first.'

‘Then I will.’ Skanis reached a hand behind him. He felt delicate frills of flesh there, and the nerve endings he found fired back sensations from skin and muscle he had never possessed before. ‘I will leave this city of filth behind.’

‘You will return,’ said Urviel. ‘It is addictive. You will never find another drug quite as intoxicating as the changing of the flesh, little bird. But before you go...’

‘What?’ said Skanis impatiently.

‘You must know how few of you find what you seek,’ said the haemonculus. ‘Always they say they will be the one to prevail. If one in a hundred, one in a thousand survives, every one believes it will be him. I have done fine work. None better in fact. But even so, the fates say you will die.’

‘What do you care?’ retorted Skanis. ‘You have your payment.’

‘Six corpses,’ agreed Urviel. ‘Young and fresh.’

‘I can never go back to my kabal because of what I did to get them.’ Skanis looked up through a gap in the ceiling of the ruin that served as the haemonculus’ lab. The spires of the city rose in every direction, dark spears thrust up into the cloud layer, their pinnacles lost in the smog that blanketed the city. He felt the new talons of his toes digging into the flagstones, and the grit of the floor beneath him made his stomach cramp in disgust. ‘And I will never return here, either. My feet will never touch the ground of Commorrhagh again.’

Kaledari Spire was the tallest structure in this region of Commorrhagh. Skanis had heard of it, but never entered, for his kabal had been obsessed only with holding onto the wretched patch of the city they considered theirs. To them, that tangle of streets and slaughterhouses was the entire galaxy. As Skanis looked up at the dozens of levels of the spire, he caught a glimpse of how vast reality was, of how endless a single soul’s experience could be if he only left the filth of the streets behind.

The spire entrance yawned, unguarded. The lower floors were in disarray. Fallen rubble choked the surrounding alleyways, and the archways were dark and blinded. Skanis’ sharp eyes caught movement, focusing in like a bird of prey seizing on its quarry.

A tiny winged shape struggled down in the murk. Skanis crouched down and saw it was a young razorwing chick. Half-lizard, half-bird, the razorwings were raptors uniquely adapted for the toxic atmosphere and cruel ecosystems of Commorrhagh. They were survivors. This one, however, was mewling and writhing on the ground. On the lintel of the archway above was a nest of metallic

fibres and bones from which the chick had fallen.

‘You tried to fly too soon,’ said Skanis. He picked up the chick and the ruffling of its knife-like feathers was a strange cascade of pain against the inflamed nerve endings of his palm. Its plumage was dark red and gunmetal, its beak bright silver and its eyes tiny flecks of flint.

‘Come with me. We will fly together.’ He placed the razorwing chick carefully on his shoulder. It dug its talons into the flesh and perched there, the pinpricks of pain a reminder that Skanis wasn’t quite alone in his quest.

He walked through the shadowy archway into the spire’s ground floor, aware that his talons had left the soil of Commorragh for the last time.

The lower levels of the spire were barely lit by age-clouded lanterns that shed pools of painful green light. Old, gnawed bones clogged crusted drains cut into the floors. Skanis realised this place had once been an abattoir where the fruits of drukhari raids had been dismembered for a purpose Kaledari Spire had long forgotten. Sculptures of kabalite warriors, with their features hidden behind the smooth faceplates of their armoured helms, stood sentinel along the walls. Chains and manacles were rusted away to brown stains. Acts of savagery had played out in dark splendour here. Now, it was worse.

Skanis felt eyes on him the moment he had walked through a second archway. It was not long before he heard the sound of skin against stone and glimpsed the flicker of a moving shadow.

Everywhere in Commorragh had its predators. Here, they were slithering things without faces that lurked and waited, shivering with anticipation of the first glimmers of body heat. Skanis knew the tales. Their own unnatural flesh was no good. They needed outsiders. They needed something warm.

Skanis backed up against the wall as he heard something slapping on the wet floor. His hand went to the splinter pistol in its holster at his waist. It was a custom model, one he had crafted himself, fully loaded with a core of fragmenting crystal. In his other hand, he had the curved dagger that he had possessed for as long as he could remember and honed against the bones of other kabalites.

The creature emerged into the light. Skanis had never seen one so close up before. Its flesh was not just dark; it glowed like black crystal, and the interior sparkled as if it were a portal onto a view of the void. Green light played along the rises and falls in its almost featureless face. It carried a pair of serrated blades and wore the remains of a set of dark burgundy robes, now barely clinging to it.

‘Come with us,’ said the mandrake, its voice a dry slither. ‘We will show you the way.’

‘You lie,’ replied Skanis. He was aware of more movement behind him. They were trying to surround him and cut him off, like a feral pack closing off the prey’s escape routes.

‘Grant us payment,’ said the mandrake. ‘A finger. Just a finger. It’s all we want.’

‘I remember your kind,’ said Skanis. ‘The archons hired you to spy on our enemies. You took gold and living slaves for your services. Everyone spoke of you with dread. But what are you now?’ Skanis indicated the chewed bones on the floor. ‘This is what they feed you? Scraps from their table? They have turned the mandrakes of Commorrhagh into animals, and you let them do it.’

The lead mandrake took a few steps closer. ‘We are suffered to live. One day we will rise again. We will eat our fill and take our desires. One day, outsider. For now, just allow us a taste. A few red drops and we will take you to them.’

‘You will devour me alive.’

The mandrake’s head tipped slightly to the side. With no features on its face to read, it was impossible to guess whether it was smiling or not. ‘Maybe. Would you like us to?’

As a second mandrake lurched screaming out of the darkness, Skanis’ reflexes surprised even him. The splinter pistol was out of its holster and levelled at the creature instantly. He pulled the trigger and a stream of crystalline shards punched through the face and upper chest of the mandrake. Liquid blackness poured out of its torn body.

The razorwing chick squawked and leapt off his shoulder, fluttering off into the darkness.

Skanis reeled with the unfamiliarity of his new body. He staggered and the wounded mandrake leapt at him. Its full weight barged Skanis into the wall behind him and his head rang off the stonework. Serrated blades stabbed towards his abdomen and he squirmed out from under the mandrake, falling back to the floor as the mandrake’s knives drew sparks from the wall.

Skanis’ mind whirled. He commanded his uncoordinated limbs to obey him. They jerked and spasmed as if they were wound too tight to be controlled. He scrabbled away from the mandrake, and its vestigial features contorted in what might have passed for a smile.

Its hunger was its weakness.

The mandrake pounced on Skanis, eager to rend and devour. Skanis rolled out

from under it and drove a hand into the back of its head, slamming it face-first into the floor. He raised his knife hand and drove it down, aiming for the place where spine met skull. Resistance gave way and the mandrake flopped down to the ground.

Skanis was back onto his feet and running without seeming to will it. The other mandrakes had smelt blood and were following him, led by the one who had spoken. Skanis wheeled around a corner and backed against one of the kabalite statues.

Their hunger was their weakness. In their desperation to feast on him, the mandrakes were no more than animals. They could not think. That was how he would beat them. While he was still learning how to use his new body, Skanis had to rely on his mind.

The lead mandrake rushed around the corner headlong, heedless of Skanis lying in wait. Skanis fired once, the shard flying wide, before he ran at the mandrake and let it stab its knife towards his chest. Within his guard, it was off-balance and Skanis parried its second blade, catching its arm in the crook of his elbow, wrenching it back and down.

He had learned to fight and kill while claiming his place among the warriors of his kabal. Skanis had been destined to be a future dracon or even archon, to assassinate his way into a position of power and lead an army of Commorrhagh. He cared for none of that now, but knew the murderous ways he had learned to get him there would serve him here too.

The mandrake's shoulder separated. Skanis slammed his other elbow into its back, forcing his weight down onto it. A third creature screeched as it leaped and kicked off the walls towards him, but Skanis shot it out of the air with a shard through the throat. It tumbled as it hit the ground in a flurry of obsidian limbs.

'You were once nightmares,' spat Skanis. The thing beneath him howled and hissed. 'Fear itself! Now you are vermin.' He drove his knife into the side of the mandrake's head. It spasmed under him, just once, then was still.

Skanis' heart was hammering faster than it ever had before. Finally, the pain caught up with him. He looked down and realised one of the mandrake's knives had sliced his forearm and opened up a long gash. Warm blood ran down his arm and dripped off his elbow.

He had been too slow. He was still getting used to his new form, and as heightened as his senses and reflexes were, he was not immortal. The first mandrake had nearly killed him. Had they been in possession of their senses, the next two would certainly have finished him. His hollow bones were fragile now,

and if he was caught unawares, he would die.

Skanis tensed as he spotted movement again, but realised it was the flickering of tiny wings. The razorwing chick hopped between the scattered bones and onto the corpse at his feet. Skanis held up his hand, slick with the Mandrake's blood. The chick landed upon it and nipped at his fingers to lap up drops of cooling blood.

Slithering footsteps sounded in the darkness. 'There will be more,' Skanis told the chick. 'I can't kill them all. Not yet.'

Ahead of him was an area of collapse and disrepair. A section of the floor above had fallen in, the debris forming a crude staircase. Lights glimmered in the levels above, and from somewhere Skanis could hear the strains of music.

'Upwards,' said Skanis to the chick. It let out a purring trill in response. 'Let us find who throws the scraps to these vermin.'

Music was coming from an orchestra of skinned and articulated corpses. Each body was from a different species. The huge shoulder muscles of an ork bunched and contracted as it worked the bow of a stringed instrument as tall as itself. The delicate rise and fall of its tones made a mockery of the creature's brutal frame. A human body bent over a drum made of another creature's ribcage and stretched skin, its finger bones tapping out the rhythm that underpinned the music. A four-armed, snake-bodied sslyth played a complex reed instrument with compressed air piped through its glistening jaws.

The music played for the benefit of a grand court inhabiting the lavish, perfumed mansion that took up this floor of the spire. Skanis' jaw clenched as he looked across the scenes of the court. He had hoped he could move through here unnoticed, reach the entrance halls past the main audience chamber and continue upwards. But that would be impossible.

The lord of this court watched over the grand hall. His bulk was considerable, though most of it seemed taken up by the machinery mounted on his back that hooked dozens of cylinders of narcotic fluids up to his spine. The skin of his face sagged like melting wax beneath the half-mask of idealised features. Surrounded by a pungent haze of opiates, the lord sat on a throne of near-naked drukhari, whose athletic bodies were twined into the shape of a high-backed chair big enough to support the lord's mass.

A trio of dancers moved in time to the corpse-orchestra's music. They had the lean, dangerous athleticism of the wych-cultists who fought in the arenas of Commorrhagh. A beautiful lady with an elaborate ivory-coloured dress and a

silver half-mask watched them, as did other, lesser ladies-in-waiting gathered around her like a flock of attentive birds. A gaggle of sycophants and fawners surrounded the lord's throne. Many of them were all but insensible from the narcotics pumped into them through lines hooked up to the lord's own apparatus, while others stood patiently to wait on his every need.

Knots of courtiers lingered everywhere, all in the impractically flamboyant fashions of Commorragh's nobility. Some admired the dancers or whispered advice to those more grandly dressed than themselves. Others simply observed, sending pages to carry messages back and forth through the court of Kaledari Spire.

The noble lady in white approached Skanis, accompanied by two handmaidens who carried the train of her long dress. Her silver half-mask had red-rimmed eyespots giving her a ravenous, daemoniac look.

The razorwing chick trilled in alarm and discomfort, as if it smelled something on the lady it did not like.

'You are a newcomer,' she said with a smile. Her voice was as clear and brittle as glass. 'Few come to Kaledari Spire. Certainly not one as exotic as yourself.' She ran a hand through the fleshy fronds protruding from Skanis' back, and he shuddered with the input from the new nerve endings the haemonculus had implanted there.

'I'm not surprised you are alone,' said Skanis. 'Your pets below are less than welcoming.'

'A passing fancy,' said the lady with a dismissive wave of the hand. 'The lord once doted on them. Now they are left to their own devices. They keep out the low-blooded and weak. You, then, are neither.'

Skanis looked her up and down. Her limbs and neck were overlong and her torso had a serpentine curve to it. He guessed her body had been elongated and altered, perhaps to give her greater height and presence, perhaps to fulfil some base desire of her lord. Beneath the silver mask, he could see the sutures around her jaw and hairline where her face had been removed and replaced.

'I do not intend to stay,' he said.

'Lord Fithrichol would wish to speak with you,' she said. 'It is not wise to deny him such a simple courtesy.'

Though the tone of her voice did not change, one of the wych dancers pirouetted close enough for Skanis to see the array of blades concealed in his close-fitting body harness. By the standards of the courtly machinations of Commorragh, it was not a subtle threat.

Skaniis followed the lady across the grand hall towards the throne. Every courtier watched him, some with a smirk of mockery, some with open curiosity or even desire. Skaniis tasted bile as he felt their eyes on him. This was the world of lies he hated even more than the brutal politics of the kabals. At least there was an honesty to the stabbed backs and slit throats that were a kabalite's world.

A narcotic fug surrounded Lord Fithrichol's throne. The pupil of the lord's one visible eye dilated as pistons in his back forced another massive dose into his system. 'Who is this you have brought us, Lady Chagrine?' he said in a voice well-oiled by courtly manners.

'Just a traveller,' said Skaniis. 'I am passing through your realm.'

'To the spire pinnacle, I take it?' said Fithrichol. 'Those new appendages of yours will do you little good down here. You need to get above the smog of the city. But why the hurry? In our desire to reach our goals, we so often forget to wait and while and experience what this wondrous city has to offer.'

Skaniis looked from one face to the next. The courtiers near the throne were a mixture of wyches, nobles and lesser servants, their features slack with sedate oblivion. The ones still in possession of their senses were either there to wait on Fithrichol's needs, or had been selected for their beauty to act as living ornaments for the court. The drukhari who made up Fithrichol's throne sweated and creaked as he shifted his abnormal bulk.

'I must refuse you,' said Skaniis. 'I cannot wait here. The sky calls to me.'

'Perhaps you have made an error,' said Fithrichol. 'Perfectly understandable. You are an outsider. You are new to the ways of my court. Let those errors be dispelled. I am Lord Fithrichol of Kaledari Spire. This is my kingdom. Everything in it is mine. When you walked over the threshold, you voluntarily entered my service unto death. This is the way it has always been. So you see the wondrous new life the fates have granted you. Service to me, in return for the deepest wonders of the mind, the sacred oblivion where the only freedom lies. You are a keen and deadly warrior, that much is clear to me. I value such individuals greatly. There will be much pleasure in return for your service.'

Skaniis recoiled inwardly and hoped his new body was under enough control to hide it. If he stayed here too long, someone in the court would find his guard down. A needle would prick his skin and he would fall into the stupor with which Fithrichol controlled the lackeys of his court. With so many eyes on him, there was no immediate way to escape without every able-bodied soul in the court giving chase.

'I see you doubt my hospitality,' said Fithrichol. 'Again, understandable. You

have not yet learned. Take a token of my good will.’ He waved a sagging-fleshed hand at the handmaidens attending Lady Chagrine. ‘Choose one. Choose two or three. Do with them what you will. Ravegar here is a fleshcrafter, purely as a hobby, but he has some skill.’ Fithrichol indicated a slender, sharp-faced attendant wearing simple black. ‘Purely an amateur, but he can make of your prizes whatever you desire.’

‘It would be my greatest honour to serve the Lord of Kaledari Spire,’ said Skanis.

There was a truth about this place, concealed beneath the surface by a web of lies so thick only an outsider could see it. It was in the fawning curtsy Lady Chagrine gave to her lord as she beckoned Skanis to join her and her handmaidens. It was in the way the wyches gyrated and pranced to the rise and fall of the corpse-orchestra’s rhythm. Skanis could just glimpse it beneath the veneer, something buried deep, something dangerous.

Something Lord Fithrichol was terrified of.

‘Choose,’ said Lady Chagrine. Skanis looked from one handmaiden to the next. They were all dressed in less lavish versions of their mistress’ ivory-white garb, all with the same slender, brittle beauty. Skanis chose one at random. She had pure black hair and eyes.

‘Her,’ he said.

‘Varithrya,’ said Lady Chagrine. ‘Honour your master.’

Varithrya gave Skanis a coquettish smile and curtsied before him. Skanis leaned in close to her. His senses were full of her perfume.

‘Give me the chance and I’ll kill him,’ he whispered to her.

Though her face did not change, he could sense her body go rigid with anticipation. The tiny talons of the razorwing chick pricked the skin of his shoulder, feeling the tension alongside him.

‘I just need a moment. It’ll be me doing the killing. No one need suspect you. Just give me the opportunity and I shall end him.’

Varithrya paused just a moment too long before she beamed at Skanis. ‘Will my master not present me to his lord?’ she said.

‘Of course,’ replied Skanis. ‘I must show off my prize.’

He led her by the hand back to the throne. He could feel her pulse quickening.

This was the truth, Skanis realised. The buried horror. The dread that occupied Fithrichol’s every thought. It wasn’t even a secret, not in the truest sense, because everyone in the court knew it. They just didn’t know that everyone else knew it too.

They hated Fithrichol. Every single one of them. They despised the way he manipulated them into slavery and kept them balanced against one another in a constant game of allegiance and servitude, reward and threat, patronage and abandonment. The whole court despised everything Lord Fithrichol was, but none of them dared act upon that hatred because each one thought they were alone.

‘A fine choice,’ said Fithrichol as Skanis presented Varithrya before the throne. ‘I had an eye on her myself.’

Varithrya bowed low with an expansive sweep of the arm. Her hand brushed against one of the many valves and switches controlling the narcotic-dosing apparatus mounted on the lord’s back.

Fithrichol sat back on his living throne. His one visible pupil dilated and he sighed out a long breath as a sudden spike of narcotics flooded his system.

In the half-second that gave him, Skanis’ dagger was in his hand. As Fithrichol’s focus returned, Skanis was aiming the dagger at his throat. By the time the tip of the blade touched his skin, Fithrichol was fully aware once more.

But it was too late.

Skanis felt bloated, sagging flesh parting under the blade, then gristle and bone. He rammed the blade all the way through Fithrichol’s throat and gave it a twist, opening up a ruby-red void in the lord’s neck. Hot, dark blood spurted down the front of Fithrichol’s clothing. Skanis angled the blade upwards and thrust it home again, punching it through Fithrichol’s palate and into the base of his brain.

The razorwing chick squawked as Fithrichol gurgled out a mouthful of gore.

The court merely watched. The music continued, for the corpse-orchestra had no understanding of what had just happened. But the wych-dancers were still and the courtiers stopped their scheming and fawning.

No one moved.

Skanis gripped Fithrichol’s body by the collar and threw it to the floor in front of the throne. The remaining air rattled out of the lord’s lungs.

‘Who wants it?’ demanded Skanis to the court, indicating the empty throne of twisted bodies. ‘Take it! Take it!’

It was Varithrya who reacted first. She grabbed a knife from Fithrichol’s body, an ornamental weapon with an ornate hilt and gilded blade. She leapt up onto the throne, brandishing the knife in all directions.

‘You treacherous whelp,’ screeched Lady Chagrine. ‘Tear her down!’ she shouted to her handmaidens. ‘Remove her from my throne!’

But the handmaidens did not obey. They surrounded their mistress, and the hate in their eyes was finally given form.

The wyches drew their knives. Those courtiers who were not lolling insensible grabbed whatever weapons they could find. In a few moments, the court was transformed from a place of fawning hierarchy to a melee where each individual turned against whoever was closest, and blood spattered onto the tiled floor as a scrum erupted in front of the throne.

No one noticed as Skanis took his leave of the scene of bedlam the audience chamber had become. He skulked away as raised voices and screaming echoed around the place. Varithrya was fighting off Ravegar, the amateur fleshcrafter. As the handmaiden rammed her gilded dagger into the courtier's eye, Skanis ducked through a side passageway.

Past the audience chamber was a grand staircase. It wound around a statue of a much younger and less artificial Lady Chagrine, sculpted frolicking in a fountain. Skanis ran past it and up the steps.

The screams of the dead and dying took a long time to fade as Skanis forged upwards. And even when they had fallen silent, the music of the corpse-orchestra remained.

It was after a long and punishing climb, through ruined floors and abandoned finery, that Skanis came to a realm of chains and cages.

The air was thrumming with the rumble of bestial breaths and heartbeats. In the near-total darkness, beasts paced or slept in their cages. Other gibbets and cells were suspended from the high ceiling that had once been part of a grand cathedral to a past lord or lady of the spire. The altar, where the lord had once accepted prayers and sacrifices, was surrounded by smaller cages with jewelled lizards and vicious rat-like predators kept captive.

The air was thick with the smell of dung and blood.

Skanis backed against a wall, keeping it between him and an enormous shaggy creature that slept chained to a pillar. He recognised the massive, powerful limbs and many-eyed crimson face of a Clawed Fiend, and knew it was a fine specimen worth a fortune in the city's fighting pits and execution arenas. Other cages nearby held khymerae, skinless quadrupeds with exposed skulls for faces, or fungus-based predators that accompanied orkoid war fleets and were little more than odious round bodies and teeth.

The razorwing clung more tightly to his shoulder. Everything here was new and uncertain to the creature, and truth be told, it was to Skanis as well. He had never

been this close to the beasts of the arena and battlefield before. His old archon had kept a gorewurm, a vicious tube of muscle with teeth at one end that sprayed acidic bile. It had been a child's pet compared to some of the creatures here.

Skanis crept through the menageries trying not to wake or disturb any of its thousands of inmates. Above him, a thing like a massive lizard crossed with a bat roosted in chains. A sslyth, with its fangs pulled out and fresh drill wounds in the side of its cranium, sat and drooled. A hive of insects mauled one another silently with their pincer-like mouthparts, encased in a glass maze.

'It is not often I have a guest who walks on two feet,' came a voice from the shadows.

Skanis tensed and cursed himself. The low susurrations of sleeping animals had masked the sound of the other's footsteps, and the clutter of cages and cells had cut off his vision. Even before he had been given new senses by the haemonculus, he had never been surprised like that. If he had, he would be dead.

From between two cages walked a muscular female figure in a close-fitting armoured bodysuit. On a loop at her waist hung the coiled whip of a beastmaster. Strapped to her back was a staff that ended in a two-pronged globe and her armour was covered in vials of poisons and sedatives. Her face was broad and sharp, and her shaven head was disfigured by three scars across her scalp deep enough to expose the bone. 'Are you, by any chance, responsible for the delightful commotion from below?' she asked.

'What does it matter to you if I am?'

The beastmaster shrugged. 'I prefer their screaming to their music,' she said. 'Fithrichol was a bad customer anyway. He always butchered my beasts and served them up to his followers.'

'Fithrichol is dead, and half his court with him.'

The beastmaster smiled. 'And none shall mourn them,' she said. 'But you're different. I haven't come across one of your kind before.'

'I am just passing through.'

'Did Urviel make you? Another customer I would not be sorry to lose.' The beastmaster took a few more steps closer to Skanis, who felt his muscles tense automatically. The beastmaster's eyes ran up and down him, as if she were assessing the pedigree of a valuable pit-beast. 'Good haunches,' she said. 'I wonder where he got them from. Talons from a ripperspine, grafted in with khymera skin. Did he give you the nerve-bundles from a barbed scuttler? Very good for the reactions. It's a signature of his. Tell me, do you have any idea where half of you is even from?'

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Skanis. ‘I will soar above Commorragh. I will ride the winds over its spiretops. I don’t care what beasts had to die to make it possible.’

‘But you’re so close to a beast yourself,’ said the beastmaster, with a smile that made something recoil inside Skanis. ‘You have shed what makes you drukhari and replaced it with something else. You are as enamoured with these creatures as I am.’ She turned and indicated her caged menagerie with a sweep of her hand. ‘I put them in cages. I train them. I buy and sell them. They exist at my pleasure. But you want to be one of them.’

The kabalite pride, the hot fury, wouldn’t let Skanis walk away. ‘If you are so far superior, beastmaster, then why do you lurk here in this filthy place? You are a slave to the lords and archons like every other vermin of Commorragh. What is it about this existence we find so alluring? This misery. This desperation. This servitude. Why does every single drukhari not strive to leave it behind?’

‘Because one day,’ said the beastmaster, face to face with Skanis now, ‘I will loose my beasts on the courts of the great and cruel, and I will become a lord of Commorragh. Then I will have everything I ever desire.’ She ran a hand along Skanis’ arm. The nerve endings flared up at her touch. ‘And I desire a lot.’

Skanis pulled his arm away. ‘Everything I desire,’ he said, ‘lies far above here.’

‘Wait,’ said the beastmaster as Skanis turned to walk away. ‘That plumage. Steel and the rust of old blood. I have sold thousands of razorwings but never one in those colours.’

Skanis glanced at the razorwing chick out of the corner of his eye. It still clung to his shoulder, shivering in discomfort with the presence of so many strange creatures. ‘It is not for sale.’

‘Everything is for sale. What is your price?’

‘To leave here,’ said Skanis

‘Oh, my dear,’ said the beastmaster, leaning close against Skanis. He could smell the spice and leather on her. ‘That is the only thing I can’t give you.’

Skanis spun out of her grip. In response, she drew the whip from her waist. He threw himself backwards as she lashed it at him and felt it draw a line of pain down one shin with a tremendous crack.

The noise woke the sleeping beasts. A rising cacophony erupted from everywhere at once as Skanis rolled past a cage of squawking flightless birds and into the cover of a pillar.

‘Give me the razorwing and you live,’ called the beastmaster over the din. ‘The best deal you will ever make!’

Skanis drew his pistol and fired in the direction of her voice. He heard the

shards bursting harmlessly against stone.

The beastmaster struck again, the whip extending into a barbed length that wrapped around the pillar and scored a dozen deep furrows against Skanis' ribs. He roared in frustration as the weapon was withdrawn. He fired again, glimpsing the beastmaster with her lash in one hand and the pronged spear in the other.

Skanis swapped a new shard cylinder into the pistol. He lost sight of her and knew he was outclassed. The beastmaster had the range on him and this was her territory. Only a lucky hit from the pistol would win this for him. That wasn't a good enough chance. If she caught him well with the barbs, if she approached from an unexpected direction and pinned him in place with her spear, he would be dead before he could pull the trigger again.

He broke from the cover of the pillar. The crack of the whip and the swish of air past his ear told him the beastmaster had almost caught him around the neck. He skidded into the cover of a bank of khymerae cages, and flinched as the feline horrors snapped and snarled on the other side of the bars.

'I have a cage just for you,' snarled the beastmaster.

Skanis saw what he sought through the gloom – not the beastmaster, but the Clawed Fiend. It had woken up with the commotion and was growling and pacing, stretching the chain that tied it to the pillar.

He might only get one shot. He sighted down the pistol, expecting the barbed whip to take his hand clean off. He squeezed the trigger slowly but firmly, as he had learned in the bleeding halls of his kabal a lifetime ago.

The shards sheared through the chain holding the Clawed Fiend. The creature flicked its head and the chain thrashed around it, clattering off the stone of the pillar.

Skanis broke and ran as the Clawed Fiend burst into the menagerie. Its huge, shaggy bulk threw cages to the floor, and where they broke open, other creatures were set free. Shin-high predatory lizards hopped and shrieked. A muscular worm-like creature bunched and sprang, leaving a spray of purplish mucus in its wake. One of the khymerae was loose and it pounced on the smaller creatures suddenly scurrying around its feet. Its jaws closed in a flash of red and it threw a writhing furry body aside.

'You maniac!' cried the beastmaster as the bloody tumult spread like a fire.

Skanis could see the scars on the Clawed Fiend's back and the burned patches where the beastmaster's prod had been used like a branding iron. She cracked her whip as it loped towards her, but it had suffered so much it didn't seem to notice the new red line opening up among the old scars.

‘You are mine!’ the beastmaster shouted at the Clawed Fiend. She cracked the whip again, but the creature didn’t flinch. ‘Obey me! Obey!’

Skanis didn’t stay around to watch what followed. He ran for the far end of the menagerie, darting around the beasts until he reached a twisted mass of rusted steel that granted access to the floors above.

He felt the razorwing chick shoot past his ear and grabbed it out of the air as he ran. Behind him, the Clawed Fiend bellowed and the beastmaster’s voice reached him from the tumult. He couldn’t tell if she was still cursing him, or screaming.

It didn’t matter. He would never be down here again.

To the ignorant, it might have seemed beautiful.

This high up, the layer of smoke and cloud was a hazy, translucent layer of grey laid over the city. Commorrhagh looked like the spiny hide of a flayed beast beneath the fug. The uppermost spires pierced the clouds, each trying to outdo its neighbour. Some were shattered and dark, long abandoned save by the few creatures able to survive at this altitude. Others blazed with light where the archons and nobles tried to banish the desperation of their lives with the pursuit of power or pleasure.

The outside of the spire’s pinnacle was covered in vanes and spikes, the remains of a communications system that had gone dark centuries ago. Skanis clung to one of the vanes against the shriek of the cold wind. His chest burned with each freezing breath but he exulted in the feeling. The lungs Urviel had given him were efficient enough to function up here. Any normal drukhari would have wilted and fallen asleep, never to wake up. Skanis was not normal.

Commorrhagh was beneath him now. Above him was just the sky, the veined purple of festering meat. Tiny winged specks wheeled in the upper cloud layer, forming loops and spirals as they swarmed. A flock of razorwings out hunting.

Skanis took the razorwing chick from his shoulder. It ruffled its red and steel plumage. He held the chick up into the wind and it spread its wings, and hopped out of his palm.

The tiny razorwing caught an updraught and soared high above the spire pinnacle. Then it looped down again, newly assured in its flight, and arrowed down towards the flock below. Skanis watched it merge with the pattern.

Now, it was his turn.

Skanis gripped the vane with both hands. He felt the flickers of pain down his back and the wrenching in the places where his ribs met his spine. He gasped out

loud as, even through the high scream of the wind, he could hear the sound of bone cracking and skin tearing.

Finally, with a wonderful wash of agony, his wings were fully spread.

They were beautiful. Skin – his own and donated from dozens of specimens in Urviel's lab – was spread across a framework of carved and hollowed bone. Scalloped lengths of flesh formed feather-like trailing edges. Urviel had carefully spliced new veins and arteries into the muscle, and they ran in a pulsing spider's web across Skanis' whole wingspan.

Skanis could have hung there forever, letting the knifing wind ignite the pain receptors of his new wings. But he had not come this far just for the sensation. That kind of quest was for the vermin of Commorragh, who destroyed themselves looking for a new experience to cloud over their misery. He opened his eyes, bunched up the grafted muscles in his legs, and launched himself off the spiretop.

The wind caught his wings and he flew straight across the top of the cloud layer. Protective membranes slid across his eyes to protect them from the wind. He hurtled, gathering speed, and angled his wings to soar up in a loop so fast and wide he thought he would breach Commorragh's atmosphere entirely. But then he reached the apex and dived again, pulled up to skim the smog layer, and left a rippling wake of disturbed smoke as he went.

Another spiretop rushed past beneath him. He glimpsed an eyrie built into its architecture – a nest-like structure where others like him survived far above the darkness of the city. He saw their wings, some feathered and some bat-like, and their masks that resembled narrow raptor beaks. They watched him as he soared overhead, and raised their daggers and swords in salute.

There were more spires too, stretching off further than Skanis' altered eyes could see. They had their own eyries, their own new angels, whose place was so far above the streets that they lived in another world.

The Scourges were the drukhari who had escaped Commorragh. They roosted in its abandoned spiretops and flew the air currents above the clouds. They were his people now, his species, apart from the rest of this miserable society. Skanis would find them and join them in abandoning the desperate cruelty of the drukhari. He would finally find what he had never had in the kabal – his own kind. He would be new. He would be complete.

The sensations of the flight were so overwhelming he didn't notice the wound on his forearm opening up again. The slashes in his leg and ribs were pulled apart too, and fresh blood flowed from them, dissipating in droplets into the

wind. He left a trail of red as he circled and dived.

The blood fell through the cloud layer and into the swirling flock of razorwings. The creatures caught the scent and formed into a great dark wave of bodies, swelling upwards to hunt down the source.

Skanis did not notice them until the first of them broke his line of sight and soared above him. He banked and flew with his new companion in the sky. Another joined it, then a dozen more, and as one they hurtled down at him head-on.

Where they passed him in mid-air, their knife-sharp feathers sliced deep into his skin. He cried out and tumbled, having to fight to stay aloft. More of the flock darted at him, slashing at him with every pass. His blood showered down and drove their feeding frenzy higher.

Skanis twisted and dropped to get out of the heart of the flock, but the lure of his blood kept them on him as if they were each tied to Skanis' body by an invisible thread.

One tiny shape detached itself from the swooping mass of razorwings. Its uncertain wings took it on a wide, halting loop until it fell back down towards Skanis, folding its wings back as it gained speed.

Skanis just saw it as it shot towards him. The razorwing chick he had rescued from the gutters outside Kaledari Spire.

The chick arrowed straight into Skanis' left eye.

Skanis cried out as the razorwing thrashed in his eye socket. He lost control of his flight and he fell, spinning end over end, into the cloud layer. His wings were tatters now. A hundred wounds sprayed blood into a fine red mist around him. The razorwings followed him, slashing and devouring as he fell.

The pet grotesque loped eagerly down the alleyway at the scent of putrefaction. Urviel followed it through the gloom, tossing bones and body parts into the hide bag carried by a second grotesque beside him. Each grotesque had been made of the same scraps he found here in the lowest levels of Commorragh, where the trash of the spires eventually found a way into Urviel's domain.

It was a good day. Something had happened up on Kaledari Spire and the bodies were still falling. Fresh corpses, still wearing the garb of a great lord's courtiers, were littering the gutter-levels. Urviel had almost filled the bag with severed limbs and caved-in heads.

'What have you found?' the haemonculus hissed as the lead grotesque snuffled and growled at a heap on the ground. Urviel approached to see a pale, thin-

limbed shape, broken against the stone where it had landed.

Urviel recognised the tattered wings that still clung to the corpse's back, and the unnaturally elongated bone structure.

'Hmm, yes, one of mine,' said Urviel. Patients and experiments came and went and Urviel no longer recalled names or faces, but he knew the pattern of feathered skin along the edge of the wing. Urviel lifted the draping tatters of membrane for a closer look. 'Did I know your name?' He paused. 'Yes. You thought you would be the one in a thousand who finds the eyries of the Scourges. But now you have come back to me. They always do.'

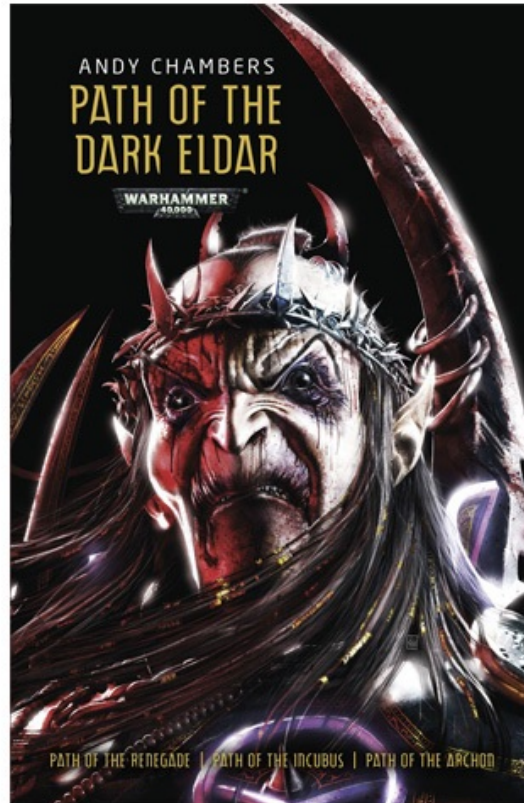
The grotesque gathered up the shattered body and threw it into the hide bag. Urviel's harvest for the day was complete, and it had been good. No matter how many drukhari came to be altered on his slab, no matter what dreams they had of moving beyond Commorragh, they always came back to him in the end. Another would come tomorrow, with the same dream, and the city would drag him back down, too. His flesh would become part of Urviel's next creation. Commorragh was a living thing. This was its life cycle.

Commorragh would hunger again. And there would always be another to feed it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ben Counter** has two Horus Heresy novels to his name – *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*. He is the author of the Soul Drinkers series and *The Grey Knights Omnibus*. For Space Marine Battles, he has written *The World Engine* and *Malodrax*, and has turned his attention to the Space Wolves with the novella *Arjac Rockfist: Anvil of Fenris* as well as a number of short stories. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit that has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

For millennia, Asdrubael Vect has ruled the dark city of Commorragh, crushing any who dare to cross him. His reach is long and his position unassailable... or so he thinks.



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