



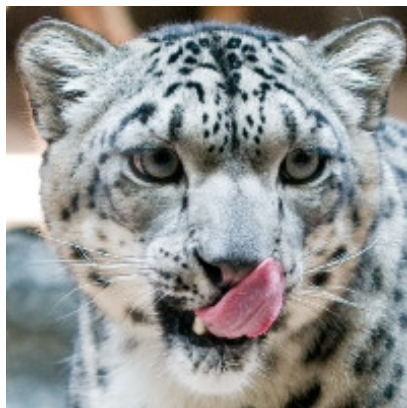
**Heirs of the Laughing God- A Deadly Wit**  
An Aeldari Audio Drama (2018)

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**Created** by



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**LIST OF CHARACTERS:**

- \* Duruthiel the Red Swan – Great Harlequin of the Masque of the Fading Dawn;
- \* Adroniel – Death Jester;
- \* Echo – Shadowseer;
- \* Endorieth – Starweaver pilot;
- \* Averan Swiftscorn – silent Harlequin;
- \* Ork Warlord

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There exists a place between the material and immaterial which most mortals refer to as reality and the warp, amongst which there spans a network of gates and tunnels that allow one to traverse vast distances in a fraction of a time it takes that even the light of a star. To the Aeldari who inherited this remarkable piece of cosmic engineering it is known as the Webway. Many are its secrets lost to time, unnumbered are the pathways beset by neglect and demonic intrusion in the age since the cataclysm of the Fall that all but destroyed the Aeldari race.

Yet there are still those that know the darkest places beyond the reach of the drifting craft-worlds, routes and gates away from the covetous gaze of the dark city of Commoragh. They name themselves the Harlequins, warrior troubadours dedicated to the trickster of Aeldari legend, the fickle god Cegorach. They call no people their own save for the troupes that make up their scattered masques and their home is simply the starships that carry them and the places of chance where they might rest awhile. They are the dancers on the precipice, the players of fate, the heirs of the Laughing God.

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Across a broken expanse of the Webway known to the Harlequins as the Rift of Endeavor singing resounded through the fabric of the interdimensional network. A starship traversed the ancient tunnel-way. It was called by its inhabitants the 'Last Laugh', formerly a raiding frigate of a craft-world corsair fleet its current occupants had found drifting in the void. Aboard the 'Last Laugh' the Harlequins of the Fading Dawn gathered at the request of their leader. They waited in the chamber of gates, a crystal-domed hall beneath the whirling red and gray of the Rift of

Endeavor. Half a dozen plinths and pillars dominated the hall, ancient portal-ways attuned to the power of the Webway.

Two figures entered, natural grace and hidden technology allowed them to move with the lightness of step barely touching the marble-like floor. The first was garishly attired as most Harlequins are.

Adroniel (barely heard): "...did anyone care..."

His particular motley, an arrangement of white bodysuit patterned with red diamonds, a jacket of black and silver and exaggerated grinning mask of sculpted scarlet and gold.

Adroniel (barely heard): "... your self-mockery... before the fall"

Duruthiel (barely heard): "before one must first attempt..."

Streamers of bright blue and yellow playfully followed his step, tied to his wrist and elbow a long mane of the same color cascaded from the crest of his skin-tight scalp.

Duruthiel: "It's really just a matter of perspective, my morose suggestive of death... To truly sore the Red Swan must risk dashing against the rocks".

The second figure was a stark contrast to the first. A tight suit of black, so deep it sucked in the ambient light of the chamber rendering her a shadow. An outfit of artificial bone gave her the appearance of an animated skeleton complete with an elongated skull visage. While her companion had a slender sword and an elegant pistol at his hips, she carried a long-barreled shuriken cannon, its weight offset by suspensors so that it weighed no more than a feather.

Adroniel: "You really should not refer to yourself in the third person, Duruthiel. It betrays your towering arrogance".

Duruthiel: "The Red Swan is Great Harlequin of the Mask of the Fading Dawn, ascendant among his peers, the embodiment of the Laughing God. It is right that he places himself above the mortal concerns and title of dull Duruthiel. How else should Cegorach's chosen son refer to himself?"

Adroniel: "Usually I or me suffices, you grotesque incarnation of self-aggrandizement. You are Duruthiel, whether you choose it or not. This affectation for demigod is only distracting. It will be the death of you, of all of us".

Duruthiel: "Something has to be. Why not a little self-belief?"

One of the Harlequins broke from the several dozen waiting, his bodysuit concealed beneath a long coat striped black and white. A cowled hood of yellow and black surrounded the helm fronted with the mirror-finished mask that sparkled with shifting images, passing glimpses of faces in shock, horror and despair. He wore an ornate backpack called the 'Credain', a pair of fluted chimneys extending above each shoulder and from these apertures drifted a multi-colored vapor. This was Shadowseer of the Mask, oracle of the Laughing God.

Duruthiel: "You will see, Adroniel. What do you think, Echo? Is the Red Swan to be undone by his own ambition?"

Echo: "Red Swan dares what he will. Yet all of us stay only one step before the fate that stalks us".

Adroniel: "Typically cryptic. Yes or no, Echo? Is Duruthiel's insistence on calling himself the Red Swan the hint of annoyance or not?"

The Shadowseer's mask fled through several expressions of distaste and settled on one of sneering disgust.

Adroniel: "I think that is clear".

Duruthiel: "I am surrounded by tedium given form. Heed my fay, troupers! Blessed am I that not all of us so do as my two companions here. Which of you stand ready for an adventure? Who would follow the Red Swan into death-defying battle?"

Harlequins (chant and laugh): "Aye!"

The Great Harlequin moved to the central webgate plinth and made several complex motions in the space above it, wrist turning and twisting, fingers moving as though playing a keyboard or plucking strings. At his command the portal stirred into life, a golden arch shimmered into being above the wraith-stone step. Pale blue fire clawed across the gap between, leaving impressions of a night sky above shadowed squat buildings.

Duruthiel: "Well said, brothers and sisters on the winding road! We hunt a brutal foe, a foul ork that has risen to the pinnacle of its crude kind".

Duruthiel waved towards the broader space of the chamber where sleek war machines hovered inside the tethers of grav-cradles: Starweaver transports, Voidweaver attack craft and smaller Skyweaver jetbikes.

Duruthiel: "Onto our noble steeds, children of the Fading Dawn! Onto glory!"

Harlequins (chant and laugh): “Yeah!”

The Red Swan and his two associates followed the masque as they mounted their craft. They climbed aboard the midnight blue Starweaver with flashes of multicolored sparks splashed on the streamline nose. The gunners primed their weapons as their crafts lifted from docking cradles. Drawing his power-sword, the Great Harlequin motioned to the active portal and laid a hand on the shoulder of his pilot.

Duruthiel: “Lead the charge, brave Endorieth, and guide us to a magnificent victory!”

Adroniel (sarcastically): “Oh, to a pointless death. I doubt the Laughing God cares which”.

(Aeldari pass through a portal)

(numerous orks laugh while seated at the bonfires)

The sky was near cloudless. A trio of crescent moons hung not far above the horizon, their ghostly pale sheen cast upon a riotous assembly of crude buildings, walls and square towers seemingly thrown haphazardly at the sides of the steep gorge. Dozens of large bonfires dotted the ramshackle town in broad meeting places linked by a maze of streets, while narrow alleys were intermittently lit by a harsh blue glare of gas lanterns. Crowds of hunched broad-shouldered creatures seethed in the light and shadows, the pounding of their drums rising up from their revels. Celebratory gunfire crackled, raucous laughter and bellowed conversation was swallowed by the cold air.

(Aeldari crafts emerge from the Webway)

A golden star erupted in the dark skies opening to become a swirling passage from the Webway. A silhouette of jetbikes, transports and attack craft quickly resolved into solidity. Bursting into the firmament with its engines at full the Starweaver of Duruthiel and his close companions led the attack. Endorieth activated the holo-fields as they left the sanctuary of the Webway.

(Endorieth opens fire)

In moments, the outline of a craft shimmered into a smear of black, red and orange against the stars.

(laughing Harlequins launch a sudden attack)

Behind them other distorted shapes flew from the breach between worlds, each a haze of fluctuating colors and shadows. The Harlequins clung to the swooping craft, their coats and crests, cloaks, tassels and loincloths fluttering. Some hung with one hand, just the tip of a toe upon the flat of the carriage board, daring each other to lean out further and further. Others sat with legs wrapped about the rails, weapons raised in their hands, rune strings and bright ribbons flapping like the pennants on a lance.

With his back to the rail Duruthiel turned to Averan Swiftscorn, last of his closest associates, the clique known among the Masque as the Red Swan's Tragedy.

Duruthiel: "What better feeling than this, my silent friend? A foe in front, a weapon in our hand and a song in our hearts. This is life being lived".

The mastermind replied with a particular tilt of her head, a slight lob-sided shrug and a complex gesture with two fingers of her right hand. A glove shimmered as its power-field burst into life bathing the fist with gently lapping cerulean flame.

Adroniel (laughing): "Ahaha, yes, indeed his head is full thrice as big as before. Even Averan is tired of your pretensions, Red Swan. Your attempt at a carefree regard fools no one".

Duruthiel: "I am hurt, Averan, companion of the longest time. With a flick of the wrist you disembowel me as if you wielded that Harlequin's caress against a savage greenskin".

Echo: "On hot winds are carried the pyre fumes".

(orks open fire at the invaders)

The Shadowseer's enigmatic announcement was made plain a moment later when the bright muzzle flare of cannons lit up both cliff-tops below them. The first shells exploded far behind the descending flotilla in the empty air around the still-gleaming Webway entrance. Dark red detonations lit falling debris, hot sparks that plunged towards the ork settlement far below.

Averan signed some more ending with a swift finger drawn across her throat.

Duruthiel: "No cause for concern at all. We are but zephyrs on the winds to these barbaric brutes. There is not a gunner among them that could spy

our true position, nor a wit combined in all their brains to foretell our intent”.

Another battery opened fire from a cluster of more heavily walled fortifications at the head of the gorge. Rockets corkscrewed up on tails of green and purple sparks to pass some distance ahead of the Harlequins diving attack.

Duruthiel (smiling): “See? I do not know why I keep such company, when I could spend time with worry-me-nots instead”.

The rockets exploded above the attack craft, blooming into white flares of illumination that did not dissipate but floated on the wind casting an actinic glare across the whole gorge town.

Adroniel: “Any more masterful insights? Perhaps, you would like to pelliber the stupidity of our foes some more? May hap wax long on their deficiency of preparedness or their lack of intellectual weight”.

Duruthiel: “It means nothing...”

(explosions interrupts the Great Harlequin)

The holo-fields of the Harlequin’s craft obscured their exact position but their blurs against the quartet of bright illuminators that drifted slowly ground-wards allowed the ork gunners to guess their approximate course and speed. The enemy filled the sky ahead of the descending Harlequins with anti-aircraft fire. An insistent tapping on Duruthiel’s shoulder drew his attention to Averan who pointed to the darkness beyond the lights of the orks’ sprawl. Pinpricks of fire became flares of blue light as jet engines shrieked into life propelling ork interceptors into the air.

(ork pilots and gunners laugh in the distance)

Around them multi-bladed gyro-copters buzzed into the skies, orks hanging in gun-cradles beneath. Outlandish multi-barreled weapons stabbed beams of energy and flurries of tracer fire shrieked up towards the Harlequins.

Echo: “A beast descends. It bowls a fire. Wrath of the green shall send all to their doom. It falls upon us moon-laden and rageful”.

All eyes turned upwards. At first, there was nothing to be seen. The Harlequins did their best to plot a swooping descent below the incoming fighters but the ork fliers adjusted their ascent to move to a directly opposing trajectory.

Adroniel (giggling): “There, against the second moon! Something big!”

Six plumes of fire thrust the immense sky engine forward. Like an impossible ship, the orks’ sky cruiser powered down from higher altitude, armored turrets upon its flank turning toward the flotilla of Harlequin craft. A rippling salvo of blossoms erupted among its length from turret and small arms filling the air with plasma, bullet and las bolt. Spotlights like the glaring eyes of a cruel alien god burst into ruby life from a hull constructed to resemble such a deity. The crackle of its attention flared across the holo-fields powered by some unknown bizarre orkish technology.

Echo: “The red eye sees all”

Duruthiel: “Up, brave Endorieth! We shall slay this beast before it is the doom of us all. Up! Up!”

At his Great Harlequin’s command, the pilot guided the Starweaver out of its steep descent. As it banked sharply back towards the incoming sky cruiser the Harlequins upon its fighting platform dangled like multicolored streamers hung upon carapace of tail like bunting. Climbing abruptly the Starweaver jinked and twisted into the teeth of a gunship’s firestorm. The ruddy glare of a spotlight fell directly upon it.

(siren goes off)

Endorieth: “We are seen”.

Adroniel: “Cegorach’s tears! For all our sakes fire the mirage launchers!”

At the pilot’s urging the Starweaver dispatched a pair of spinning grenades each dispensing a scattering cloud of silver and red fog. The dispersing mist formed the image of a vast phoenix, giant wings beating, feathers streaming gold and black flames as it wheeled towards the incoming ork interceptors. A sky cruiser’s all-seeing eye followed the phantasm’s ascend and the ork gunners turned their fire upon its incorporeal form.

Ork Pilot (surprised, later laughing): Oh? What? Ahahahah!”

Duruthiel (laughing): “Ahahah, what was that about crude intellect, my good friend? These beasts would chase rocks if we painted them brightly”.

Ork Pilot (opening fire): “Waaaagh! Waaaagh!”

Averan drew their attention to a pair of interceptors that had broken away from their squadron, heading directly for the conjuration of the mirage launchers, nose cannons spraying wildly.

Duruthiel: “The plot twists, but we can yet follow the script, dear friends, if we focus”.

The Great Harlequin manned the shuriken cannon of the Starweaver and with a nod directed Adroniel to ready her weapon. The mastermind gestured towards the incoming attack craft pointing two fingers at each, head cocked to the side as if aiming.

Adroniel (laughing): “Ahahah, head on, yes! We will be upon them before they know where we are”.

Duruthiel nodded first to the aircraft on their left and then to the one on the right.

Duruthiel: “I hither? You thither?”

Adroniel (unsure): “Are you telling me or asking me?”

Duruthiel: “You would try the patience of Cegorach, bone-feetish terradon”.

Adroniel: “Thank you, but which should I shoot?”

Duruthiel: “Shoot right”.

(both laughing Aeldari open fire)

The two Harlequins fired their shuriken cannons filling the air with a starlet silver of monomolecular disks. Duruthiel’s salvo slashed across the canopy of his target turning glass to splinters that shredded the ork within, before the volley ripped throat and air-mask clad face to pieces. The craft spun away rolling and yawing violently as the ork’s death spasms jerked the controls.

The Death Jester aimed for the intakes of jet beneath the blunt nose of her target, painted in likeness to a shark’s maw. Her short but accurate burst turned the turbine within to flaming sparks and falling shards. Devoid of power, the aircraft continued on for a moment with all the grace of a brick, the pilot wrestling comically with the controls as ork and craft plunged into the darkness.

Ork Pilot: “Zogging thing!”

(orkish aircraft explodes)

A detonating air burst not far behind the Starweaver cut short any thought of celebration. Endorieth swung the transport sharply to the right banking between two more blossoms of shellfire. Ahead of them, the mirage

phoenix rapidly dissipated becoming a falling curtain of stardust cut through with plasma blast and machine-gun fire. The mirage launchers spent, Starweaver had only the holo-fields to misdirect any orkish ire. Barely armored its crew and transport exposed to the elements, it could not withstand even the most brushing contact with one of the rapidly multiplying shell bursts that filled the air with thunder and fire.

Duruthiel: "Swiftly, back to the sky cruiser before the thuggish crew think to look again for us".

Echo: "The skin wards all injury. A heart beats within. Severed must be the cord of the great monster's life".

Adroniel: "Shuriken cannons are no threat to this foe. Perhaps, you'll think to convince them to surrender with your legendary oratory?"

Duruthiel: "If your razor wit does not slice the metal beast in twain, nor your lightning tongue slay the crew, we must endeavor by more personal means. We shall board it!"

\* \* \*

The first the ork gunner knew of its attacker was a blur of light through the gun port just beyond the red-hot muzzle of its rapid firing cannon. Roiling splinters of red and blue detached from the strange miasma and resolved into a leering unmoving face, a moment before a blade lashed out and took off the top of the ork's head.

Duruthiel landed on the swinging gun bridge and dived through the port rolling to his feet amid a pile of spent shell cases and discarded bones from the gunner's last meal. He became a blur of motion again as his dathedi suit turned him into a fractal holo-stream distorting outline of the motion. The others of the Tragedy followed through the opening, momentary silhouettes of white and red and blue against the night sky before they fell upon the orks.

Duruthiel (laughing): "Ahahaha!"

The Great Harlequin sped along the line of gunners manning the battery along one flank of the broad fuselage. His power sword pierced through padded jerk intestines and tough ork flesh with equal ease. A smaller greenskin that had been lugging a large shell towards one of the main turrets dropped its cargo and pointed at the intruders whilst raising the alarm in earsplitting fashion. Other slave gretchin took up the call though not before two more of the larger greenskins had been dispatched.

Snorting and grunting in their crude tongue gunners and loaders turned from their large war cannons to confront the interlopers, sluggish and clumsy. In the relatively closed confines of a gun deck Adroniel used gleaming four arm- mounted blades to slash and dismember.

Duruthiel (laughing): “Yeah, tarry not! The foe rouses slow, but our stage is most constricting and filling far”.

Adroniel dashed past decapitating another ork as it rushed to the Great Harlequin, a serrated cleaver raised to attack.

Adroniel: “Tarry not yourself! Less talk, more killing, huh?!”

Averin’s Harlequin’s caress lit the interior with flashes of pale blue as her hand became a deadly weapon. Its molecule-disrupting field disintegrated flesh and bone with a lightest touch as she danced silently to the swarm of small greenskins. A hatchway opened mid-deck spilling several more greenskins up from the level below Echo met them with crystalline Neuro Disruptor in hand. His mask cycled through a range of surprised and delighted shadow faces as he opened fire. A scintillating cone of power had flared across the synaptic pathways of its targets. Glazed eyes, brains scrambled, they fell to the mesh-decking twisting with seizures, nervous systems overloaded with contrary signals.

A clump of feet from the deck above warned of further reinforcements about to make their appearance.

Adroniel: “These guns have been silenced but if we remain, so shall we”.

Duruthiel: “The commander is this way, follow me”.

The Great Harlequin led them along the corpse-littered deck towards a set of steps that had ascended towards the nose of the sky cruiser. Shadows moved on the upper steps from the deck above betraying the presence of waiting enemies.

Duruthiel: “Slow but not idle of the mind are these brutes. An ambush awaits”.

(orks grunting unbearably)

Before anything more could be said Averan ghosted past, a drift of gray mist lit by the ruddy lanterns of the sky cruiser’s interior. This fog wraith slipped soundlessly up the stairs and seen the mastermind fell upon her foes. Actinic flare flickered from the Harlequin’s gauntlet greeted by the orange fire of ork pistols discharging mindlessly at their spectral attacker.

Duruthiel: "How cute, let us not be lax".

(Aeldari ascend the stairs and run down the halls)

The Great Harlequin found himself in a broad command bridge surrounded by banks of arcane dials and gages linked by coils of crackling wire and brass piping. Three orks in heavy suits of powered armor swung ponderous crackling claws at the after-shimmer of Averan's wake. Their black and red plates sparking with discharge from her Harlequin's caress. A greenish glow of a power field enveloped each warding away the mastermind's deadly touch.

The front wall of the command area was dominated by a massive plate of thick glass, through which could be seen the mounting levels of ork pound piled upon the gorge walls.

Adroniel was at Duruthiel's shoulder a moment later. Her shuriken cannon spat a stream of lethal disks into the backs of the orks manning the bank of controls beneath the immense main canopy. The dead pilots slumped across their controls amidst the crackle and spark of the shattered meters and cracked screens.

The sky cruiser lurched violently catching all unawares. The Harlequins acrobatically kept their footing while orks tumbled and fell about them, armor and weapons clattering.

(alarm siren goes off)

Controls broken, the sky cruiser pitched sharply ground-wards while flames erupted across the panels and sparks flew from overloading circuitry. The white canopy filled with the blazing lights of the town lamps and fires. Anti-aircraft shells flared closer as the gunners on the surface turned their cannons upon the plunging gunship.

Duruthiel: "The deed is done. The act has run its course. Time for us to depart the stage".

Such was easier said than done, as the armored orks, presumably the cruiser's commander and lieutenants, regained their feet and stomped towards the Harlequins cutting off their route back to the steps. The orks' ungainly energy weapons buzzed and fuel cells burned with an unhealthy yellow glow. The gleaming muzzles of their guns swung toward the dathedi fractured shapes of the Harlequins.

Duruthiel: “It seems, an unexpected encore is upon us. Yet time still for improvisation”.

The Great Harlequin’s hand flew out. A cluster of miniature charges flew from his grasp, each no larger than a coin. They exploded into arcs of coruscating power around the trio of heavily armed beasts and forked plumes of purple and white energy. The haywire field billowed above the orks like a storm cloud. Electromagnetic discharge leapt from the powered systems of their armor to nearby consoles and machinery. Shuddering and thrashing, the greenskins were helpless, as Duruthiel leapt away heading for an open hatch that led to a clear night sky beyond.

Duruthiel (laughing): “Ahahaha!”

His swift steps brought him out onto the roof of the main gun deck. Heavily riveted and pitched at a steep angle by the cruiser’s dive. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw his companions close at hand, a cascade of colors against the dull metal of the hull. Past them, he saw the buildings of the ork’s settlements on the gorge walls so close that he could discern individual windows. On the roofs and balconies greenskins were looking up, some firing at the crashing sky cruiser and the weaving blurs of the other Harlequin craft around it.

Duruthiel: “A steed, a steed... All that is mine is yours for a steed!”

They ran up the incline using well bridges and protruding rivets for footholds, heading towards the fitful glare of the engines of the stern.

Endorieth: “Offer accepted, Great Harlequin!”

(Aeldari run towards the Starweaver)

Illuminated by the glare of the jets Endoriath’s Starweaver veered between the plumes of flickering fire raking sideways along the fuselage.

(Aledari board the vessel)

One by one the Harlequins leapt aboard, Duruthiel the last. He stopped before jumping and turned to see the ork commander at the door to the bridge. Flex of haywire discharge still fountained from his armor, brutish eyes glared with unquenched rage.

(ork commander roars in anger)

Duruthiel switched off his dathedi suit so that ork could clearly see him. He tipped a cocky wave raising the hilt of his sword to his brow in mock salute and leapt upon the board of Starweaver as it slid past.

Duruthiel (laughing): “Ahahaha!”

The anti-grav craft lifted sharply almost throwing him to the floor of the transport platform. The sky cruiser seemed to drop away. A few heartbeats later, the huge gunship plunged into the upper levels of the gorge town. Fuel tanks detonated on the impact, ammunition stores exploding shortly after. A meteor of flame and metal carved a ruinous swathe through the ork settlement leaving a broad fire-wreathed scar in its wake.

\* \* \*

Duruthiel: “An inconvenience strikes us. I had hoped to enter directly upon the fortress of the warlord. But see how the crash of the sky ship and the intensity of the orks’ fire makes that impossible. We shall have to alight as close as possible and fight on foot”.

Adroniel: “Fight through the streets of the ork town? To attack the citadel at the summit? You have taken leave of your final shred of sense, Red Swan. We shall all be dashed against the walls like waves on an unforgiving shore”.

Echo: “Upon the light foot the Laughing God leaps from melody to melody ever changing his path but always heading in the same direction”.

Duruthiel (clapping his hands): “Exactly as Echo tells it! We shall not fight on the streets, but from the roofs. These clambering fools shall not catch us if we are fleet of foot and daring of thought”.

Averan caught their attention and swiftly gestured for a few moments, motioning toward the looming ork citadel several time as she did so.

Adroniel: “As I said, did I not?”

Duruthiel: “We need not go through the walls if we go over them. A feather on the breeze we shall be carried to victory if we do not burden ourselves with unnecessary concern”.

At the Great Harlequin’s signal, the flotilla descended to roof level, scouring the gently sloped rooftops and open terraces with their heavy weapons before they deposited the Tragedy and other troupes of the Fading Dawn.

(laughing Harlequins rapidly disembark the Starweaver)

The buildings were closely arranged, the alleyways between no obstacle to the acrobatic Harlequins, their natural grace aided by the antigravitic

effect of their flip belts. In places cable bridges and planks had been left as crossing points and the masque sped across the rooftops more swiftly than the orks could master to confront them. Though in their wake the growing mass of alien brutes and smaller creatures boiled through the streets intent upon their slaughter.

Above them Starweavers, Skyweavers and Voidweavers dodged the raking fire of the remaining ork interceptors to make attack rounds against the pursuing mobs. A strafing of the ork aircraft frequently missed its targets stitching bloody wounds through the surging hordes on the ground while Harlequin craft darted to and fro above the ork masses.

Duruthiel: "There's quite a crowd that attends our key performance, but they are to be disappointed. The last act shall be finished before they arrive on the scene".

Echo: "The wind shifts bringing fresh scent for the hunters".

The Shadowseer swept a hand out to the right. Bejeweled bands about his wrist gleamed in the dazzle of his holo-suit. Duruthiel read his intent seeing a rammed shattered cluster of buildings that ran up the wall of the fortress itself.

Duruthiel: "These ignorant savages build a castle and then leave a ladder against its wall. We shall avail ourselves of the oversight".

Adroniel: "And once inside this lair what then?"

Duruthiel: "We find its king and take the crown, head and on".

Adroniel: "Ahahaha, while his court sit and clap in admiration, no doubt".

Duruthiel: "Feel free to play with the princes and princesses while I do the deed. I would not like to think of you bored and idle while I entertain their ruler".

(Aeldari walk away)

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Hurrying through the light and shadows Duruthiel and his masque came to the teetering conglomeration Averan had seen. To the Great Harlequin's surprise, the ramshackle building was not guarded.

Duruthiel: "I presume the sentries are tired of their honoris duty, when there was battle to be joined".

As the Harlequins entered on foot, the anti-grav craft of the masque slid away across the town luring the vengeful mob on a false chase into the depths of the gorge. Inside was pitch-black, lit only by the ghost gleam of their holo-suits. After a plain entrance hall they came out into the starlight again, a small rectangle of pinpricks in the velvet night above bounded on three sides by the silhouette of the buildings and on the forth by the jagged rampart of the citadel wall. In the faint illumination they saw rows and rows of barred openings in the walls. Above, floor after floor of cells mounted up through ramshackle scaffolding, ladders and precarious stairs until the view faded into the distance.

Adroniel: "A prison, castoffs from the warlord's favor, perhaps, kept close at hand for easy gloating".

Duruthiel: "Children of the Emperor, forsaken against their fate, bound into terror unto death and death is the release they long for. A clamor of torment lies in this place, a torture of souls in pain. Slaves..."

Adroniel: "Of no concern to us, Red Swan. We are sent to your destiny, remember?"

The troops split across the gantries and narrow walkways ascending with light steps to the levels above. They crossed swaying rope bridges and creaking beams with all the ease of the level flat ground.

Adroniel: "Blood of Khaine, the captives are waking. They will draw the orks, I am sure. We must not be caught here, speed on!"

Duruthiel stopped however as pale-skinned hands thrust between the bars, fingernails broken to the quick, knuckles bulging like skeletal digits.

(Prisoners start to plead for mercy)

In the gloom of the cells he saw sunken faces contorted and drowsy, long hair, lank from scalp and chin. Some of the slaves shuffled even closer, blinking and squinting. The gleam of dathedi suits revealed swollen malnourished guts and emaciated limbs. The Great Harlequin stepped away with a shudder and cast his gaze to the battlement above. With a nod he signaled for the Tragedy to move on following the troupes that had continued ahead.

Duruthiel: "This clamor shall wake all foes to our progress".

Adroniel: "Then waste no time with pointless words and make more haste".

Echo: "From the lamenting of the disfavored comes the darkness. The great powers sup on the nightmares waxing strong as they drain hope from the misbegotten and unremembered".

Adroniel: "What point in releasing them? They are too starved to fight. The orks will slay them out of hand".

Duruthiel hesitated at the next ladder. His eyes lingered on a human male pressed close to the bars. The man's ribs showed through paper-thin skin. His eyes were sunken and devoid of any understanding deeper than a farm beast.

(ork roars above)

From a turret above a single cannon barked sending a shell down into the mess of gantries and struts. Whether the orks suspected the intrusion of the Harlequins or simply wished to silence the noise of the slaves was impossible to tell. Another muzzle flash warned of a second turret turned upon the haphazard maze of cellblocks and walkways.

Adroniel leapt past Duruthiel using a rough wall to bound up to a scaffold bank above, flipping herself onto the upper level with one hand.

Adroniel: "No time to lose, Duruthiel. The foe has murderous intent for this place".

Duruthiel pulled himself up to rungs, but hesitated still looking down into the fire that had started on the lower levels. The smell of charred flesh wafted up towards him as the opened space acted as a huge chimney.

Adroniel: "It is simply mon-keigh killing mon-keigh, just what they always do. This is no place for the Laughing God. It is a death trap".

Echo: "In alliance even the unspeaking beast can carry its burden. What strength is shown to sacrifice the weak save to bolster the grandeur of the benighted gods of the warp?"

Duruthiel: "Our corpses would lie beside theirs. Better that the enemy remains distracted".

The Great Harlequin dropped back to the platform at the base of the ladder drawing his sword.

Duruthiel: "Cegorach's mercy, I cannot allow it. Does not the Laughing God dare the grasp of She Who Thirsts to snatch up our fleeing souls even as her grip closes?"

Duruthiel's sword sang as he lashed out cutting the crude lock from the nearest cell door.

(Cell door slowly opens with a squeak)

Duruthiel: "Make swift work! A thumb to the eye for the great enemy! Let not desperate prayers rise to the ears of the dark powers but have them answered by a folk more kind to look upon them and more gallant of act".

Adroniel: "Oh, fool, you doom us!"

Duruthiel ignored her and sprinted along the scaffold, sword flicking out to sever half a dozen more locks. The humans staggered back in their cells unsure what to do. They tried to crowd toward the vague dancing zephyrs that released them from their bondage, but the Harlequins moved swiftly, leaping and running from their lunging grasps, spinning and ducking away from grateful embraces.

The orks fired again. The plume of the shell's detonations engulfed the opposite side of the prison, turning several cells to fire and rubble. Duruthiel suppressed a cry of dismay and used the crisscross of piping and a loop of cable to swing up to the floor above where his sword cut more orks. The scaffold thrummed with padding feet as dozens of humans poured out of their cages shouting in their crude tongue, kissing and hugging each other. Levering away timbers and poles the freed prisoners set about their shackles and the doors above their cells. The breakout spread like a fire from one level to the next across the broad quadrangle of stacked enclosures. Soon hundreds were free pouring down and into the gate hall and from there into the street beyond to cause havoc among the stony sprawl that had been raised by their labor and tears, built on the graves of their families.

Duruthiel climbed quickly leaving the humans to complete the task he had begun. He caught up with Adroniel who waited at the summit of the jail, in the shadow of the citadel wall itself beneath the angle of the firing guns. A few troopers below were less fortunate. The next salvo crashed into a gantry where they still worked to free the slaves incinerating three of Duruthiel's followers, sending two more tumbling to a messy end far below.

Adroniel: "Happier now? Shall I name those that gave their lives for these animals?"

Duruthiel: "They confound the orks and distract from our presence".

Adroniel: "Circumstance, such was not your intent".

Duruthiel: "Reward for a good deed I would like to think. Unwitting but they repaid their debt".

Echo appeared out of the smoke and gloom. The telltale flicker of more holo-fields scaled the ladders and stairs behind him. The Shadowseer gestured toward the rampart not far above their heads.

Echo: "The king stirs".

Duruthiel: "Time to make royal greeting".

\* \* \*

The Masque of the Fading Dawn awaited the word of their leader. They were gathered above the citadel wall, eyes cast up to the great turrets above that continued to lay down fire upon the prison and surrounding buildings. From this vantage point it was clear to see the spreading wave of humanity casting out from the jail into settlement, erring and wreaking havoc in its passage through the workshops where the slaves had been forced to labor beneath whip and gun.

Duruthiel: "Can I go forward when my heart is here? A king awaits appointment or I shall be a disappointment"

Adroniel: "All that lies within is more death but that is no cause to turn about. If you think to enter the lair of this monster, you will fail. In close corridors and dank chambers we shall be cornered like scuttled rats and exterminated like such vermin".

Duruthiel: "You worry over much for one that plays the part of the last ending, Death Jester, but on this you are right. It is nonsense to throw ourselves into the gullet of the beast to pierce its heart. And I reckon the solution to draw the monstrous king out of his throne room and onto my waiting blade".

With no further explanation Duruthiel leapt to the wall, the uneven stones, crude stanchions and armored plates provided more than enough handholds for the Great Harlequin and his masque to ascend. Like a ripple of light reflected from a dark mirror the troupes slipped silently of the wall. Gaining the summit Duruthiel looked around. The wall enclosed a roughly semi-circular expanse, flattened and built from the rock-face of the gorge. On the far side of this courtyard was a keep dug into and built from the naked stone. Out buildings of various purpose, discernible and unknown, clustered around beast pens

and storage vats, built along ramps leading to the walls and on the edge of gateways and shafts sunken into the gorge. Sputtering lamps lit the flat ground but much was in shadow.

(a mob of roaring orks emerges)

A surge of ork warriors poured forth from guard houses and watchtowers to man the defenses around the main wall moving out through the gate to confront the marauding humans, taking them away from the Harlequins.

Duruthiel: “Excellent, silence these nagging guns and find what sport you can among the loitering guards. All that you slay, cast their bodies into the courtyard yonder to be seen by their absent king”.

Aeldari (in chorus): “Aye!”

Dispatched by his words the troupes moved swiftly along the stone and metal rampart falling upon the two flanking gun towers. The glitter of holo-suits faded into the night as they moved further on.

Duruthiel located opened stairs leading down to a ledge that ran around this portion of the wall, lined with crates and other stores. From there he bounded to the roof of the work-shack, the anti-gravity lift of his flip belt allowed him to land soundlessly on the corrugated metal roof. The rest of the Tragedy followed him down to the ground where he remained for a moment in the shadow of a large oil tank regaining his bearings. His gaze rolled the carelessly piled barrels and boxes close at hand.

Duruthiel: “If one is to draw forth this loathsome king from his throne hall, as one might remove the sting from the blister. How should we do it? Set alight his hall? Slay his courtiers?”

Adroniel: “If the warlord has not yet come forth with the mayhem that engulfs his settlement I think he cares nothing for property or follower”.

Duruthiel: “Truth. And if the king had issued forth with his army we would be poorly placed, I fear, to confront him. I would prefer my foe not ringed about with the legion of retainers”.

Adroniel: “So, how do we separate the warlord from this mass?”

Duruthiel: “How indeed... Put yourself in the mind of our foe”.

Adroniel: “Ahahah, wait a moment while I beg Echo to turn his Neuro Disruptor upon my head, that I might sink to the level of these orkish brute’s thoughts”.

Duruthiel: “Ahahah, indeed. We must sink to the depths of low imagination and intellect. What thing might I prize above all others while I am this unthinking monster?”

Adroniel: “As you have already decided, you know the truth, spare us this overture and answer your own question as you so clearly long”.

Duruthiel: “Reputation”.

Adroniel: “You think to shame it?”

Duruthiel: “I think to raise a challenge it must answer or sacrifice all authority and leadership”.

Adroniel: “I hope you have been practicing your orkish insults in that case”.

Duruthiel: “Better still to make offense that crosses boundaries of language and culture”.

Adroniel: “Were another to say so, I might have doubt, but you, Duruthiel, are certainly an irritant that crosses boundaries of language and culture. I consider you a close companion, friend even and I can barely contain the urge to strike you after a dozen heartbeats in your presence”.

Duruthiel: “Ahahaha, never let it be said that the Red Swan does not understand his own unique talents”.

Duruthiel stepped out of the shadow of the cabin and waved for the Tragedy to follow. In the dim light his dathedi suit swathed him with a luster of twilight purple and the flutter gleam of fire.

Duruthiel: “This stage is not yet ready, the props and set must be perfect. Set it afire! All of it!”

\* \* \*

Turning his fusion pistol upon the scattered barrels Duruthiel opened fire. The fuel dump ignited in a heartbeat, the detonation of the first barrel set off others sending metal and flame soaring into the sky. The hot wind of the explosion washed over the Harlequins, crests and ribbons fluttered, holo-suits crackled between light and darkness as they attempted to compensate for the sudden brightness. The troupes of the Fading Dawn had not been idle. Ork bodies lay piled against the foot of the wall. Mobs of greenskin beasts pounded to and fro chasing after the darting glimmers of dathedi suits leading a merry chase around the ramparts and compound.

Taking lead from the Great Harlequin the masque turned their attention on stores and buildings, transforming corpse mounds to pyres and out buildings to bonfires. Generators exploded into sparking fountains, the crackle of haywire grenades leapt across transformers and coils of flashing cables. Pylons were toppled and water tanks overturned catching crowds of pursuing orks in electrified pools.

Echo: "The whisper speaks louder than the shout if the correct words are spoken".

Adroniel: "We make sport of its warriors and bring ruins to its citadel, but there's still no sign of this alien king".

Duruthiel: "You indulgence and a moment more, ahahahah!"

The Great Harlequin left the comparative shelter of the clustered buildings, moving quickly into the open ground before the gatehouse of the central fortress. He stopped. One moment a blur of color, the next the chameleonic nature of his holo-suit blended with the night shadows.

Duruthiel (singing): "Monster king, monster king! Where are you? Your house is burning down. Monster king, monster king! Won't you play? The Red Swan wants your crown".

The Great Harlequin shut off his holo-suit revealing himself in the clear of the spreading fires.

Duruthiel (laughing): "Ahahahah!"

He stood on the toes of one foot and slowly pirouetted, curling streamers and crest about himself. With equal precision and grace he turned a slow cartwheel and another and then performed a perfect handstand. Several orks converged out of the darkness, broad blades in their massive fists intent upon the Great Harlequin.

Duruthiel: "Stay your hands. The Red Swan shall entertain his boorish critics".

The beasts raised heavy pistols turning their aim on Duruthiel. Performing a hand-spin, he activated his suit and disappeared into a sliding melange of blue and white. The glare of muzzle flash lit the space where Duruthiel had been moments before. The blur of bullets cut through the mist of his passing and fining harmlessly away into the night.

Duruthiel (laughing): "Ahahahah!"

A swirl of red and blue engulfed the first ork an instant before blood fountained from its chest and its arm seemed to whirl away with its own accord, arterial spray coating the hard floor.

Ork (roaring): "Smite that pointy-eared!"

As the three others turned sluggishly towards their attacker Duruthiel struck again. A blaze of white and green leapt over the nearest, a flash of a blade leaving a neat cut from chin to scalp. As the Great Harlequin landed the ork's head split apart like a sliced fruit. Ducking beneath an axe Duruthiel slashed his blade through the legs of his next foe removing the feet as he spun. The ork staggered away on bloody ankle stumps not sure what had happened before it fell face first into the dirt. The last fired wildly at the prismatic apparition that had slain its companions. Metal slugs punched into the flesh of the footless ork and ricocheted from its armor plates. The image of Duruthiel coalesced behind the firing ork standing nonchalantly with arms crossed, one leg cocked as though leaning against a wall.

Ork (roaring): "More dakka!"

His blade protruded from the back of the ork's neck, put free as the brute's corpse toppled forward.

Duruthiel: "Success, what light through yonder gateway brings, it is the void and my king - a summon".

The portal of the central keep opened outwards, spilling harsh white light across the open ground.

Ork Warlord (slowly stomping): "Someone's looking for some dakka? And I am going to give it to him!"

The creature that emerged was near twice as tall as Duruthiel and several times as broad. In one hand it carried an axe as tall as the Great Harlequin, its edge lined with a spinning band of serrated teeth that gleamed with the power field. In the other, a gun of equal size spotting three barrels joined by a profusion of pipes and wires to a gleaming power cell.

Duruthiel: "So big... It is fortunate that its stench mask is now residing in my reaches".

(Several huge orks roar in unison)

Behind the warlord came its retinue, half a dozen orks of near equal proportion armored in overlapping plates and carrying an assortment of cruel-looking blades and firearms.

Duruthiel: "What a pretty sight you are, beautiful king. Spare me your blushes. There is not a better head on which a crown might sit, but I have..."

(ork warlord charging preventing Duruthiel from finishing)

Duruthiel leapt aside activating his dathedi suit to become a streak of flaring color, somersaulting from the path of the bullets and energy blasts that erupted in his direction. The gunfire followed him as he sprinted for the cover of the ork hovels where the rest of the Tragedy sheltered.

Adroniel: "Is your brain impaired? Go the other way!"

The Great Harlequin realized he was drawing the storm of gunfire towards his companions and cut left diving low so that the bullets screamed over his head. He rolled to his feet and sprinted away from the others darting them a glare of their lack of gunfire.

Duruthiel: "Are you waiting upon written invitation?"

His holo-field became a blur of white against the burning fuel tank, the scream of the orks' tracers just a few strides behind.

Adroniel: "I thought perhaps you desired to face the king alone".

Duruthiel: "What nonsense is this?"

Adroniel: "Is it not fate that guides you today? Would you not tread in the footsteps of Cegorach and gloat upon the demise of the poet, your own end?"

Duruthiel found sanctuary behind a low wall of metal and stone that housed a large pumping mechanism. Blasts and bullets slammed into the scamp cover turning metal to slag, sending deadly splinters of stone querying past his head.

Duruthiel: "I said nothing of the kind, spike-tongued Death Jester. Would it please you to see my remains scattered about this foul castle?"

Adroniel: "I am at a loss to know why I should risk death in this cause. Though I do not desire yours. What import is the demise of this warlord?"

Duruthiel: "What import? Is not my life a prize worth saving?"

Adroniel: "If your life was so valuable what brings us here to risk it in the first instance? Did you think to simply drop in and slay this monster without pause?"

Duruthiel: "I had hoped for... an easier script, I confess. Your assistance in sealing the matter would be kindness itself".

Adroniel: "And yet I am disinclined to give it without knowing the purpose beyond the extension of your tenuous existence".

The pump bandits' enclosure gave up the final fight, reduced to spinning remnants by the battering fusillade of the warlord and its guards. The torrent of fire had masked their continuing approach and as Duruthiel sped towards fresh cover, he saw that they were no more than a dozen strides away. He fired a shot on the run, aiming for the warlord. The blast from his fusion pistol struck it high in the shoulder turning armor plate to scattered droplets. The warlord staggered back a step waving on its companions with its blade as it flexed the injured shoulder. Duruthiel used his speed as the surest defense, his silhouette a kaleidoscopic cloud of splinters as he sprinted around the incoming orks.

Duruthiel: "While this cheering banter is a playful joy, the singing of your shuriken cannon would be an even greater delight to my ears".

Adroniel: "And to mine, your reason for bringing us here. What thread of the fate scheme do we twang with this assassination? What rite do we rong?"

Duruthiel: "None, no greater cause, no twisting of fates or striking a blow against the great enemy".

Adroniel: "Then what?"

Duruthiel had the orks between him and the rest of the Tragedy. He stopped for just long enough to fire another shot. The blast vaporized the chest of an ork sending its stumbling back into another behind. He started running again, then doubled back towards the injured warlord.

Duruthiel: "It was the barbed words of the Allilinath Screamspear, that devil from the Masque of Reaper's Mirth. She insulted my leadership, impugned the skill and bravery of the Fading Dawn".

Echo: "By wicked terms the shadow of death falls upon all. A shining leor for the amusement or the Reaper bitten upon with vehemence until the trap is sprung".

Adroniel: "Allilinath Screamspear laughs at you even now, Red Swan. A trickster tricked and our deaths a merriment to her. What ego to risk all for the salving of that slight wound?"

Duruthiel's blade shone like a splinter of ice in his hand, bounding left and right. He dodged between the bursts of fire from the ork bodyguards intent upon the warlord.

Duruthiel: "Not slight this wound, her stroke was laid upon all our courage and dedication to Cegorach called weak. This challenge I set myself on oath to prove to the Reaper's Mirth and all others that the Fading Dawn are no lesser masque than they".

Echo: "From night rises the sun and all bathe in its glory".

Duruthiel: "Exactly".

The ork warlord took three lumbering steps, ponderous and implacable, turning towards the incoming Harlequin. Duruthiel fired his fusion pistol again.

(Ork warlord moans in pain)

Armor and flesh melted in the blast of intense radiation, fusing against greenskin ribs to the molten remnants of the warlord's breastplate.

Adroniel: "The honor of all is at stake, you attest?"

Duruthiel: "Yes, what Echo said".

Adroniel: "Then you should have made it clear at the outset that such was the wager".

The warlord raised its gun awkwardly. There was no choice but to commit and hope that the Tragedy played their supporting roles. The warlord opened fire and Duruthiel leapt, his flip belt propelled him higher even than the giant ork, over the stream of purple bolts coursing from its weapon.

Duruthiel: "As I contested to you earlier, I ascend above others even if I should later crash. It is my gift".

As he descended, sword held before him, the Great Harlequin saw the blur of the others bursting from cover.

Adroniel: "Ahahah, oh, you are a fool twice over, Duruthiel, but you are our Great Harlequin. I would have no other lead us".

He watched for a moment the bone-clad figure of Adroniel, her shuriken cannon leveled at the ork bodyguards. A hail of slashing disks whined through the brutes cutting into armor and green flesh. Where they struck bone and muscle, the virulent bio-agent impregnated within the ammunition blossomed into energetic life. Toxins and stimulants flooded through the Death Jester's victims racing through raging blood vessels to their vital organs.

Ork Warlord: "Going to cleave you between your pointy ears, laughing boy!"

Duruthiel: "My poor ears! Even the humans would be appalled to hear such mutilation of their tongue".

Duruthiel landed atop the warlord. Its broad shoulders were large enough to carry the Great Harlequin as he plunged his blade into the side of its neck. Beset by the poison within Adroniel's shurikens the bodyguard stumbled and staggered. Arteries exploded and lungs frothed jetting forth bloody bubbles from the ork's fanged maws. Jerking as the neurotoxins spread across synaptic links and nerve endings the beasts flailed to the ground, veins like cords within their thick skin. Eyes, noses and ears flooded with thick blood.

Duruthiel somersaulted clear as the warlord flicked up its serrated blade, narrowly avoiding the spinning shards of its teeth. He landed behind and rolled again as it staggered back, almost crushing him.

Ork Warlord: "You ain't like a grot, you dancing little freak! One touch from gut slicer here and you'll be ready for me pot!"

Duruthiel: "An invitation I am loathed to reject, but my social plans are currently in flux".

It turned leering down, blood streaming from the wound in its throat. The axe swung again and Duruthiel bent backwards. The growling blade parted the air where he had been an instant earlier.

Duruthiel: "If I offered insult, I apologize. I had no idea your species were so sensitive to my unkind comments. And destroying your air cruiser was more of an accident than intention. Perhaps some form of bucanes, some poetry of my own devising will make amends? But I must make one last cutting remark".

Quelling to his feet the Great Harlequin jumped again spinning in mid-air. The blade caught deep this time, its field gleaming edge parted rope-like

tendons and windpipe carving the head of the warlord. The other Harlequins fell upon the surviving guards as Duruthiel landed softly, the severed head at his feet. The warlord's headless corpse swayed first one way and then the other until it toppled backwards, a spume of crimson glittering in the sparkle of Duruthiel's holo-field. The Harlequins' caress and powered blades made short work of the remaining lieutenants, a whirl of flashing brightness that left the orks scattered about the ground like their ruler.

Duruthiel holstered his pistol and took up the warlord's head by its topknot. With a bow he held it aloft grinning inside his mask.

(Harlequins laugh and chant saluting the victory)

Duruthiel: "A gift for the Reaper's Mirth".

Adroniel: "One I shall be happy to help you deliver for I would have strong words with Allilinath Screamspear".

Duruthiel: "Heavy upon her ears shall they fall, I hope. We should be away. The town is roused against us and the ire of our hosts grows stronger. The turrets are silenced. Let us call down our steeds to speed our return to the 'Last Laugh'".

Called together by their Great Harlequin the troops and craft of the Fading Dawn assembled in the ruins of the courtyard, leaping upon the Starweavers, Skyweavers, jet bikes and Voidweavers darted back and forth, their weapons cutting down any group of orks full-hardy enough to mount a counter-attack.

Lifting away from the scene of his victory Duruthiel looked down and saw the devastation that had befallen the ork settlement. The burning gouge of the sky cruiser was an open wound upon the town. Hundreds of slaves still poured through the streets, now armed with weapons taken from their former captors.

Duruthiel: "Does the heart good to see the caged run free, whatever the uncertainties are faced that await them. Aye, not all was vanity today".