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BOOK I

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The End Times - Volume V

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So soon the hour of fate comes around. The Everchosen stirs from his dark throne, and prepares the blow that shall split the world asunder. Realms of old are fallen, lost beneath the fury of the northlands, or smothered by the vermin from below. Some heroes battle on, too stubborn to recognise that all hope is lost. Their time is past, a new age of Chaos and dismay beckons. Perhaps I am foolish also, for I fight with no hope of victory. I seek only to weaken the Dark Gods, to shake their hold upon the future. No other course remains; not to mortals, nor to the divine.

These are the End Times.

THE BRINK OF DOOM

The world is ending. Civilisation collapses, assailed by creatures of madness and decay. Ancient cities have been cast down, their defenders slaughtered or driven to live like beasts in the wild. The dead cannot be counted. Those who survive stare into a future bereft of hope, and curse the fate that led them here. And everywhere, crude tongues chant praise to the Chaos Gods, whose victory is at last nigh.

Across the world, the skaven have risen. The ratmen come in their uncounted millions, a tide of writhing vermin that consumes all in its path. No land is safe from the swarm. Petty kingdoms are consumed overnight; ancient realms are shattered. The temple-cities of Lustria have fallen, the fate of their masters unknown. The holds of the dwarfs are all but overrun, those that remain sealed shut in an act of desperate defiance.

The hordes of Archaon Everchosen have marched from the wild north, have drowned the Old World in blood and fire. The Empire is all but vanquished, its cities cast down, its greatest fortresses torn asunder. Altdorf is a festering ruin, Talabheim a scorched waste. Even Middenheim, famed City of the White Wolf, has fallen to the Everchosen's hordes. Middenheim is Archaon's proudest conquest, for its capture is a humiliation to Sigmar, the warrior-god of the Empire. Yet Archaon's victory is not complete. It will only be so when the fugitive Emperor is slain and Averheim, last of the Old World's great cities, is cast down. The Emperor knows this and prepares Averheim for what may be its final stand. What remains of the Empire's strength shelters behind the city's sturdy walls.

The men of the Empire do not fight alone. The remaining knights of Bretonnia gladly lend their lances to the Empire's defence, for their own realm is long past salvation. Alongside the Bretonnians fight Ungrim Ironfist and an army of dispossessed dwarfs, driven from the Worlds Edge Mountains by the skaven onslaught. Alone amongst their kind, these dwarfs forsake safety in favour of honouring the age-old alliance with the Empire. Thorgrim, High King of Karaz-a-Karak, could perhaps have brought unity to the dwarfs and salvation to men, but he has been dead these many months, slain by an assassin's blade. Those who fight beneath Ungrim Ironfist's banner do not do so out of expectation of victory. They seek only a glorious death before the last darkness falls. And death, glorious or otherwise, is the only guarantee.



There will be no help from the elves. Naggaroth has fallen to Khorne's rage, its blood-slicked stones now little more than the haunt of cannibals. Ulthuan is gone, shattered by magic and lost to the swirling waters of the Great Ocean. Those elves who remain now dwell in Athel Loren, ruled by Malekith, the Eternity King, and the Everqueen Alarielle. The elves do not doubt that the Rhana Dandra – the Last War Against Chaos – is upon them, and make what preparations they can.

Prophecy tells that the Rhana Dandra cannot be won, but the elves dare to challenge their destiny. Teclis, their greatest loremaster, unmade the Great Vortex. He sought to bind each of the winds of magic to a mortal host and thus create Incarnates – mortal champions infused with magical power fit to challenge the gods themselves. Alas, treachery and ill fortune soured Teclis' plan. Only two Incarnates arose amongst the elves. Malekith became the Incarnate of Shadow, and Alarielle the Incarnate of Life.

The other winds, lost to Teclis' grasp, sought hosts amongst other races. Shyish, the Wind of Death, had been stolen by Nagash long before Teclis broke the vortex. With its power, the Great Necromancer has transformed the land of Sylvania into a true kingdom of the dead, as much a land of myth as mortal reality. In his arrogance, Nagash believes himself mighty enough to outlive the End Times, to challenge the Chaos Gods alone if need be. The power of heavens gave fresh strength to Karl Franz during the fall of Altdorf, just as the wild magics of fire lent Ungrim Ironfist the resolve to survive the ruin of the dwarfs. The power of Chamon – gold magic – could perhaps have saved the life of Thorgrim Grudgebearer, but the old king was too stubborn to embrace its changing form. Chamon was set loose by his death, and remains masterless to this day. The fate of Ghur – the Wind of Beasts – is unknown, save that it travelled far into the east.

Yet Teclis has not abandoned hope. Thought dead by his people, he wanders the world, seeking a suitable champion to bear the power of Light he carries within his staff. That champion, or so Teclis believes, will unite the other Incarnates – even Nagash – and repel the forces of the Chaos Gods once and for all. Teclis alone believes that the Rhana Dandra can be won. It remains to be seen if he is correct.

'Salutations, Everchosen.'

The two-headed daemon's tone was laden with mockery, his pronunciation as stilted and uneven as his bow. Kairos Fateweaver aped the mannerisms of a supplicant, but Archaon knew that the daemon believed himself the master.

Armoured plates scraped upon bone as the warlord stirred from contemplation and settled his gaze upon the intruder. Archaon's throne was built upon the shattered ruin of Ulric's high altar, and fashioned from the bones of its priests.

The granite chamber lay heavily in shadow, but not so much so that Archaon could not make out the shapes of his knights standing in silent attendance. The Swords of Chaos' pitch-black armour drank in the light, leaving patches of darkness deeper than a man's innermost fears. Not that Archaon had feared anything for several lifetimes of lesser men.

Once, the chamber had been given warmth and light by Ulric's sacred fire. That callow flame had been no more divine than the acrid torches set about the chamber's perimeter. Ulric was a lie, just as Sigmar was a lie. By seizing Middenheim, Archaon had proven the former. When the Empire was naught but ashes, he would prove the latter.

The daemon shuffled his gangling form towards the throne, heedless of the warriors standing guard, and careful that his feathered wings didn't trail in the pool of blood dug into the chamber's centre.

The blood spat and bubbled as if heated from below – which it was not – and gore-steam eddied and flowed inches above the surface. Above, hung from the ancient rafters like poultry in a poacher's hovel, were scores of blackened corpses, whose blood had long since poured into the pool below. Every one of the bodies was headless, and their naked skulls had been added to the Everchosen's throne.

'What business have you here, daemon?' Archaon rumbled as Fateweaver drew closer.

The creature cackled. 'My master wishes to know why the Lord of the End Times takes his ease when victory is so near.'

Archaon rose to his feet. Not hurriedly, for that would have been a subtle betrayal of weakness, but with a regal and ominous steadiness. 'You question my commitment?' he asked darkly.

The daemon's heads twitched briefly from side to side before answering. 'Not I. It is my master, the Changer of the Ways, Weaver of All Fates who questions. He perceives all the swirling colours of your innermost thoughts. You do not fight for the gods, but to avenge wounded pride.'

'And this offends him?'

'My master is content to wait. You will bow before him, ere long. I have seen it.'

'And your prophecies are never wrong.'

'This is no prophecy. It is water already flowed. The river of fate is not altered simply because you have not felt its ripples. Would you have me reveal how your battles end?' Fateweaver continued slyly. 'There are many yet to come, and they do not all unfold according to your wishes.'

'That is the fate of all warriors. I accept it. But you did not truly answer my question: is your master offended by my course?'

'He remains content, though I cannot speak for his brothers.' The daemon's tone became hushed, conspiratorial. 'However, a wise man would strive to keep them entertained.'

'Then entertainment they shall have.' Archaon intoned. 'The hour of deception is past. Now is the time for murder.'

Archaon let loose a mighty cry, ripping the Slayer of Kings free from its scabbard as he did so. The Everchosen took satisfaction from the momentary confusion in Fateweaver's eyes, heard the panicked squawk of alarm.

The Slayer of Kings' jagged edge sliced deep into one of the daemon's twin skulls. Thick, sickly blood sprayed from the wound, and Fateweaver screeched in pain. The screech deepened into a scream of anger, and squealing light began to coalesce around the daemon's hands as he prepared a spell.

The response was too slow, as Archaon had known it would be. His backswing severed the daemon's remaining head. It bounced once on the gore-slicked flagstones, and fell into the pool behind. At once, the blood began to froth and seethe.

Archaon smiled beneath his three-eyed helm and planted the sole of an armoured boot against the headless body tottering in front of him. Then, with a mighty heave, he kicked the remains of Kairos Fateweaver into the blood pool.

The frothing fluid rose to meet the corpse, hissing and spitting like a vile caldera. Fateweaver's body vanished, and thick steam rose up from the bubbling liquid. A shadow, black against scarlet, gathered beneath the pool's surface. It rose quickly, blood streaming from its vast, leathery wings and hunched, slab-muscled hide.

The Bloodthirster stepped from the pool, the chamber's torches guttering as it unfurled its mighty wings. Archaon felt the hot, angry wind of the creature's breath as it loomed over him, felt the undeniable aura of power that it exuded. Yes, he thought, this one would do well indeed.

'The Lord of Skulls is pleased by your sacrifice,' the daemon growled in a voice like thunder. 'Ka'Bandha of the third host serves you. Whom do we slay?'

Archaon did not reply at first, savouring his mastery over the Bloodthirster. This was his hour. He would not be rushed by some thrall of the gods.

'Everyone,' he said at last. 'We will slaughter them all.'





CHAPTER 1

Honour and Death

Spring 2528



Averheim stood alone. Of a once-mighty Empire, it was the only city that remained. True, there were isolated villages as yet unravaged by the tide of Chaos or the predations of skaven, but these were scattered, their inhabitants scarcely able to defend themselves. Amidst the ruins of a nation shattered by war, only Averheim remained defiant.

A lesser fortress would have fallen long ago – indeed, many had – but Averheim was a city forged by war. The settlement itself dated back to before the time of Sigmar. It had endured the intervening centuries with honour, and bore its scars with pride. Though Averheim had been sacked many times, by orcs, undead and worse, the Averburg at its heart had never fallen. Even Gorbad Ironclaw had failed to humble the Averburg, and the pillar of skulls raised in testament to that failure still stood in the centre of the Plenzerplatz. Moreover, with each defeat, the shrewd engineers of Averheim built their walls a little taller, a little stronger. Before the fall of Altdorf, the city had been as impenetrable as the artifice of Sigmar's heirs could make it. Now it was an obstacle many times more fearsome, for it owed as much to dwarf-work as mannish.

The Averburg, the fortress that loomed above the city like a wrathful taskmaster, was more modern than the city it defended. Its foundations had been laid by Siggurd, Averland's first elector count, and it too had been expanded and improved as the centuries flowed by. Now the Averburg was a city unto itself, its battlements bristling with outrigger towers, artillery batteries and fiendishly designed breastworks that channelled attackers into a hail of lead shot and cannon-fire.

These defences had been tested many times in the preceding weeks. Averheim had been besieged for a little more than two moons. A seething tide of ratmen and chanting northlanders ebbed and flowed about its walls, testing the defences at every opportunity, careless of the lives they lost. Once, the walls had been girdled by a series of concentric moats, but no more. Now the ditches were so clogged with rotting dead that not even the sharpest eye could spy their vanished contours.

Most of the crow-pecked dead were skaven. For centuries, they had been the stuff of legend and rumour, their existence seldom believed by the common folk of the Empire, but now the ratmen had risen in force. They attacked almost every day, a rippling and chittering sea that hurled itself across the field of rotting dead. Ramshackle war machines sparked and flared as the swarm advanced, flinging sorcerous lightning and plague-infused shot against the walls as they searched for a weakness that they could exploit.

Day after day, no weakness was found. Handguns coughed and helblasters roared, the fortress of Averheim bellowing defiance at its tormentors. Cannonballs carved bloody furrows in the advancing ranks, shells tossed broken corpses high into the air. Imperial marksmen searched for the lacquered armour and drab palanquins of warlords, the whip-crack of their bullets clear even over the tumult of battle.

Perhaps half of the assaults ended in a skaven retreat long before ratmen even reached the walls, the attackers' bravado broken by the slaughter heaped upon them. At other times, grapnels of rope, chain and knotted skin brought the verminous tide against the ramparts, and bitter melees erupted amongst the bulwarks of pale stone.

Yet those skaven who reached the broad fire steps of the city walls found their situation little improved from the blood-sodden morass below. The ratmen had achieved many victories in the preceding months, had dominated or destroyed lesser realms to the Empire's south and west. Even in the Empire itself they had met with vicious success – until they had come to Averheim, at least.

Averheim's garrison were veterans. Most had marched hundreds of leagues, had fought dozens of battles just to reach the city's tenuous safety. They were not about to yield without a fight. Men of ten provinces fought upon its ramparts, their rivalries and hatreds forgotten out of a desperate need for survival. Stirland huntsmen loosed their shots alongside the famed marksmen of Nuln, militiamen of Talabecland and Ostermark put aside their territorial differences and fought as brothers. But it was not only the men of the Empire who held Averheim: old enemies and older allies battled upon those walls with as much fervour as Sigmar's heirs.

On the north wall, where the battlement was almost as broad as the River Aver, the skaven emerged onto what seemed an empty stretch of wall, until trumpetsong split the air and Duke Jerrod led the surviving knights of Bretonnia into the fray. These knights knew that their homeland was lost, ravaged beyond redemption by plague, treason and rampaging hordes. Nonetheless, they fought on as the lady demanded, determined to make Bretonnia's last strength count for something.

To the east, where the tide of skaven was ever at its thickest, the stark banners of dwarfs hung stiffly alongside those of men. Though the dwarfs spoke little of the fate that had driven them to Averheim's walls, their mannish allies understood that the holds of the Worlds Edge had suffered a great tragedy. Like Duke Jerrod's knights, the dwarfs fought at Averheim more out of defiance than from any hope of restoring their own kingdoms. Most had taken the oath of the slayer, their dyed hair vivid even

through the battle's smoke, and many of them met the glorious deaths they longed for.

Assault by assault, the skaven were hurled from the walls, but never without cost. In ones and twos, dozens and scores, the defenders died. No matter that each was but a mote compared to the heinous losses inflicted upon the foe, for Averheim had little hope of reinforcement, and the besieging horde grew daily. Worse, when the skaven withdrew – indeed, sometimes even before they had done so – the bombardment began once again.

Since the very first, Averheim had been ringed by batteries of hellcannons. Day after day, night after night, they belched tainted fire against the city walls, reducing buildings to rubble, granaries to worthless char and packed garrisons to charnels of scorched meat. White stone blistered and blackened where the unholy shot struck the walls, flesh twisted and writhed. Averheim's cannons duelled with the vile machines, sending roundshot after roundshot thundering towards the city's tormentors, gouging great seeping wounds in the machine-beasts' flanks. Yet few of the siege engines were slain. Brilliant pink fires glowed against the sky as northlander sorcerers fed the monstrosities with magic. Screams erupted as stunted handlers goaded columns of slaves – sometimes ratmen, mostly humans captured from beleaguered Averland – into the hellcannons' gaping maws. Stoked with sorcery and flesh, the daemons' wounds swiftly healed, and before long Averheim's cannoneers were forbidden from wasting shot against them.

Every few days, the hellcannon bombardment brought down a section of Averheim's outer wall, and at these times the city's fate rested on a knife's edge. As the white stones tumbled, the skaven came again, squealing and chittering at the thought of plunder. Worse, the northlanders surged forward in the ratmen's wake. Their warmaster was a shrewd foe. He cared nothing for skaven lives, but he refused to waste his own forces in a doomed assault against an unbreached wall. When Averheim's stones were opened even a chink, however, that was another matter. Before the dust had settled, the grim-armoured warbands of the Chaos Wastes were on the march, their bleak war-songs echoing against the beleaguered walls.

One such attack levelled a great stretch of the city's eastern wall. Hundreds of men and dwarfs perished amidst the tumbling stones. Thousands more shed blood at the resulting breach, driving back the skaven and holding the Chaos horde in abeyance. That had been the closest battle to date, for the Chaos warmaster himself marched in the forefront. He was a brute of a man in brilliant azure armour, his mutated twin-bodied form ever-lit by a flickering flame. This was Vilitch the Curseling, and from the very first he had been determined to seize Averheim as his prize.

Daemonfire flowed from Vilitch's fingers like water from a mountain spring. None could stand before him, and those who tried to do so ended their days in agony as mutation rippled through their blazing bodies. The last surviving Knights of the Everlasting Light perished on that breach, near four-score battle-hardened warriors reduced to mewling and blood-weeping wretches at Vilitch's twisted hand. The dwarfs fared little better, and the banners of Zhufbar flickered into ash as the heavy blades of Vilitch's vanguard hacked through gromril armour. As the black-armoured northlanders crunched over the rubble and into Averheim's streets, three regiments of Talabheimer militia – who until that moment had thought themselves the reserve – came forward with Sigmar's name upon their lips, even knowing they had little chance of victory.



The hour was rescued from disaster only by the arrival of Averheim's greatest champions. The Emperor's coming was heralded by Deathclaw's deafening screech. The griffon dove from the skies at terrifying speed, talons scything through the northlanders' shield wall. Lightning arced from the Emperor's outstretched fingers, a hammer blazing glorious cerulean in his hand as he smote Vilitch's minions. The Emperor's intervention had bought the Talabheimers respite, and they came forward behind him, ignoring their mounting dead.

All knew that Karl Franz had emerged from the ruins of Altdorf a changed man, though few knew the cause or form of his transformation. The defenders of Averheim cared not. They saw only the power of Sigmar mantled upon his shoulders, and with it the answer to their desperate prayers. Left and right he struck, and northlander plate shattered under every blow. Lightning crackled and spat wherever the hammer struck home, each blow a foe's death knell. Before Altdorf's fall, many had thought Karl Franz only a statesman, not a true warrior. They did not think so now.

It was too broad a span for the Emperor to hold alone, but there was no need for him to do so. Ungrim Ironfist, commander of Averheim's dwarf contingent, had marked the assault and moved to counter it. Slayers flooded into the streets, their death songs drowning out the northlanders' harsh chants. Then there were dwarfen axes cleaving Chaos plate, and the defenders began to reclaim lost ground.

Ungrim had endured a transformation not dissimilar to that which had swept over Karl Franz. Months ago, he had laid hands upon the runes carved into the Shrine of Grimnir, and welcomed his ancestor's spirit into his soul. At the same time, he had unknowingly embraced Aqshy – the Wind of Fire – which had anchored itself within those same runes. Ungrim was now a living force of destruction, his blood ever hot for battle. Fire danced across the Axe of Dargo with every disembowelling swing, and his battle cry was a torrent of living flame. Long had Ungrim yearned to be free of his king's oath, that he might embrace the slayer's calling. Karak Kadrin had fallen, but Ungrim was yet bound by duty. The alliance between Empire and dwarfs was an ancient one, and the Slayer King could not put his own desires ahead of an ally's needs. Whilst one corner of the Empire yet stood, Ungrim Ironfist was sworn to defend it. There was glory of a sort in that purpose, but still the ranklement of destiny denied added extra weight to every blow.

Caught between fire and lightning – between the rekindled hope of man and the unbridled rage of the dwarfs – Vilitch's assault crumbled. A few score northlanders fought on, lost in the vicious joy of battle, but most cast aside sword and shield and fled to the brooding safety of the siege camps. Vilitch ran with them. His personal champion, the bearer of the glorious moon-crested standard, had been reduced to a blackened husk by a bolt of lightning, and Vilitch had no desire to share his fate.

As the northlanders retreated, the skaven came forward again. The Verminlord who led them was brazen in the belief that the ratmen could triumph where Vilitch's warriors had failed. Averheim could still have fallen, there and then, were it not for the combined ingenuity of dwarf engineers and wizards of the Light College. As the skaven pressed close, the wizards harnessed the wind Hysh to their service. Guided by canny dwarf eyes, the wizards swept up the fallen stones of the eastern wall, and fused them into a formidable bastion once again. The new wall was not so strong, nor so fiendishly wrought as the one that had stood in its place before, but it served to check the skaven rush – though not before the Axe of Dargo had shivered the Verminlord's monstrous spine.

Thus ended one tale of Averheim's defiance against fearsome odds. Yet there would be many more before the siege was done, each one inked in the defenders' blood.

The battle of the eastern wall was the first time Vilitch had caught sight of the Emperor since his rebirth. In the weeks that followed, the warmaster was careful never to risk himself so recklessly as he had done that day. Mighty though Vilitch was, he recognised that the Emperor and Ungrim now commanded power far superior to his own, and had no intention of losing his life by confronting them directly – not when he had the lives of worthless minions yet to expend.

Daemons were summoned by sacrifice and set loose against the walls, but warrior priests came forth to banish them. The Changeling, who not so very long ago had nearly ended Karl Franz's life, was torn from the Forge of Souls by Vilitch's magic, and directed to infiltrate the city and complete the task. However, the Emperor was keener of sight and wisdom than he had been before. The Changeling's shape-shifting could no longer conceal his purpose, and the daemon was pulped by a blow from the Emperor's hammer mere moments after the Emperor set eyes upon him.

Day by day, week by week, the stalemate continued. Each morn, the Emperor and Deathclaw flew far and wide about Averheim, hoping for sight of allies come to break the siege, but there were none to be seen. No other could have braved those skies, for flocks of daemonic furies constantly soared upon the thermals, searching for prey. The cowardly creatures would have torn other foes to shreds, but they dared not challenge the living lightning, and so left the Emperor and his mount unassailed.

Within Averheim, rations were halved, and halved again in an effort to make the supplies go further. Hunger became a constant companion, though the dwarfs never seemed to want for ale. A score of Middenlanders, driven mad by privation, turned to feasting upon the bodies of their slain comrades. The Emperor ordered the wretches put to death when he learned of it, for he knew that no trace of physical or mental corruption could be tolerated if the city were to endure.

Ammunition was seldom in short supply. Famously mad though Marius Leitdorf may have been, he had learned to place his faith in black powder; the Averburg was nothing less than a single vast magazine of shells and bullets. Indeed, he had often declared that there were sufficient reserves within the Averburg to hold out until the end of the world. That boast had been on many other lips when the siege began, though few repeated it now the end of the world seemed a lot closer than it had before. Nevertheless, each assault was met by hails of shot and shellfire that scarcely dipped into the seemingly bottomless reserves. The dwarfs might have grumbled about the inferior quality of manling powder, and the poor calibre of the cannonballs, but they employed both to wicked effect all the same.

Incredibly, morale within the walls remained high. The men of the Empire took faith that Karl Franz, Sigmar's true heir, fought at their side. It could only be a matter of time, they said, before he led them to victory and vengeance. For their part, the dwarfs battled on with quiet stoicism, each ever ready to weave a tale of worse privations if a comrade complained about his lot. Duke Jerrod and his knights retreated into a spiritual asceticism, eating little and spending the lulls between fighting in fervent prayer. Some amongst the Imperial soldiery mocked their strangeness, but never after witnessing the Bretonnians in battle. They were wholly unlike the flagellants of the Empire, who overcame their foes with rampant zeal. Instead, the knights became ever more focused in battle, a locus of eerie silence amongst the tumult which in no way lessened the tithe of unclean creatures they reaped for their blessed Lady.

Then, one chill spring morning, everything changed. As Karl Franz made his dawn flight into the fury-infested skies, he saw the outriders of a vast army snaking their way down the old dwarf road. For a moment, he entertained the possibility that these might at last be allies, come to rescue Averheim from its plight. But as he drew closer, nothing could disguise the army's true nature. Daemons shuffled and leapt amongst its ranks, sonorous drums boomed in time to the snatches of war-song carried on the breeze, and on every banner and shield was the eight-pointed star of Chaos. Northward the Emperor flew, urging Deathclaw skyward to avoid searching eyes. The oncoming army stretched for leagues along the dwarf road. It was a nation on the march, aimed like a spear against beset Averheim. In the horde's centre, a column of knights rode beneath a many-coloured banner, a gold-helmed warlord at their head. The Emperor knew at once that this was no mere chieftain, but the self-declared Lord of the End Times, of whom rumour had spoken so often.

Thus, on his return to Averheim, the Emperor summoned a council of war, and unveiled a desperate plan. Archaon's horde would be at the walls before the week was out, and Averheim's defences would soon after be swept aside. But, the Emperor told his allies, he had seen no hellcannons amongst oncoming horde. If the defenders could sally forth and destroy the siege engines that yet ringed the city, then there was still a chance that the walls would hold.



THE ARMY OF SIGMAR

Nothing unites the Empire so swiftly as invoking Sigmar's name. Following the fall of Altdorf, the Emperor let it be known that every battle henceforth would be fought beneath Sigmar's stern gaze. No longer was this a war for survival, fought between mortal men, but one where the gods themselves would strive against one another.



THE EMPEROR

Karl Franz had ever been an inspiration to his troops, but never more so than following his near-death at Altdorf. Indeed, many soldiers remarked at how their Emperor was stronger and hardier than he had been before, a warrior fit to unmake the devastation wrought by Chaos. Many a fable told that a Champion of Light arose each time the hordes spilled from the north, and many believed Karl Franz to be that champion. None knew that their Emperor's newfound might stemmed from the Wind of Azyr, released upon the Great Vortex's destruction. They saw only an heir of Sigmar, wielding the heavenly power of the Heldenhammer's birthright.

LUDWIG SCHWARZHELM

Schwarzhelm was an old man by the time Averheim was brought under siege, and he felt much older. The Empire he had known and loved for more than six decades was all but gone, his allies and rivals within the Imperial Court food for the worms. Yet there was strength in the old dog yet, and determination to see this last campaign to its end. Schwarzhelm swore long ago that he would keep the Emperor safe from harm – a duty he accounted himself as having failed at Heffengen, and more recently at Altdorf. As the sortie to Bolgen began, Schwarzhelm was determined to fail no more: he would fight at the Emperor's side until death claimed him.





CAPTAIN MATTHIAS CORBER

Until Kislev fell to the northlanders, Matthias Corber was little more than a brigand, working the Erengrad–Salkalten road. Desperate times make for strange bedfellows, however, and the war drove Corber into the ranks of Valmir von Rauken's outriders, and thence to Averheim, in the service of Karl Franz. Corber has never spoken of what changed his loyalties. However, the survivors of his robber band – all of whom ride to war alongside him – believe that the cataclysm has awoken a nobler side of their leader's nature. Some amongst them respect this; most don't care, so long as the coin and ale still flow.

THE CARROBURG GREATSWORDS

Always a regiment of great renown, the Carroburg Greatswords have proved their reputation time and again since Altdorf's fall. When Carroburg itself came under siege, they hacked their way clear through the encircling beastman hordes. In the weeks that followed, they led the keep's garrison on a long and dangerous march across the skaven-infested provinces of Reikland and Talabecland, until finally arriving at Averheim just days before the siege began. Only half of those who struck out from Carroburg remain, but their determination is now as steely as the blades after which they are named. The legend of Carroburg is far from done.





THE KNIGHTS GRIFFON

The Knights Griffon were founded in the wake of the last Great War against Chaos, a fact that hung heavily on each brother who rode to battle at the Emperor's side. Tasked with defending Sigmar's shrines in the capital, they had singularly failed to do so. Now the knights sought to erase their shame by proving themselves every bit the Reiksguard's equal. This unspoken challenge did not go entirely unnoticed by the knights of the Reiksguard, who saw it merely as an extension of the long-running rivalry between the two orders.



THE GRIFFON LEGION

In addition to the soldiery of Altdorf and the Reikland – all of whom owed him direct loyalty – the Emperor also had a personal bodyguard of several thousand soldiers, paid for out of his own, not inconsiderable, wealth. Though looked down upon as overpaid, gilded mercenaries by the militiamen of Altdorf, the Griffon Legion was as fine a body of soldiery as any to be found in the Imperial states. Though much of the Griffon Legion was destroyed during Altdorf's fall, several regiments of greatswords escaped southwards with the Emperor, to continue the fight from Averheim's walls.

Karl Franz Ascendant

Ludwig Schwarzhelm

Egrig Schuler, Marshal of the Reiksguard
Grand Master

Erich Falstrom, Astromancer to the Court of Luitpold
Wizard Lord

Matthias Corber
Captain

Heinroth Grimm
Captain

Marek Zimm
Witch Hunter

The Reiksguard
One brotherhood of Reiksguard Knights

The Knights Griffon
One brotherhood of Demigryph Knights

The Carroburg Greatswords
One regiment of Greatswords

Corber's Bordermen
One company of Outriders, one company of Pistoliers

The Griffon Legion
One regiment of Greatswords

The Bulls of Salkalten
One company of Halberdiers with two detachments of Handgunners

THE LEGION OF FLAME

Vilitch the Curseling had hoarded his power and influence for many a decade. By the time he brought the city of Averheim to siege, the Twisted Twin commanded a horde almost as vast as the one that had sacked Altdorf. Caution had kept Vilitch from achieving his goals thus far, but with Archaon's imminent arrival the Curseling had grown bolder.

VILITCH THE CURSELING

The sorcerer known as the Twisted Twin was actually two brothers, merged as one. Thomin was muscular and brutish, but mindless since the transformation; Vilitch had all the wits the brothers had once shared, as well as total control of their conjoined form. Always believing himself superior to the other northlanders, Vilitch had twice challenged Archaon, and paid greatly both times. When the End Times had loomed, Vilitch led his horde of Fireborne south, only to suffer a setback in the form of a bullet fired from a Hochland long rifle. Fortunately for the sorcerer, the shot had struck home in Thomin's vacant skull – a small inconvenience at worst.





THE AZURE PRINCES

Most sorcerers are wary of taking on apprentices to their dark arts, lest treachery from their students curtail their lives in spectacular fashion. Not so Vilitch, who deemed that a vast coven of acolytes increased his standing in Tzeentch's eyes. Perhaps that was true, for certainly the Great Sorcerer's servants sent frequent warnings to ensure that Vilitch was never taken entirely unprepared. Though each of the Azure Princes knew but a fraction of the sorcerous lore known to their master, together their power rivalled that of one of the fallen Colleges of Magic. Or, rather, it would have done had Vilitch not spent their lives so carelessly in the months of siege. At Bolgen, only six of the Azure Princes remained alive.

THE FIREBORNE

Vilitch had never been one to inspire loyalty in his followers, but equally he had never been a leader overly concerned with acquiring that precious commodity. Many of the warbands that marched under his banner were enthralled to his command by sorcery, forbidden from deed or action without his leave. None were so tightly bound as the Fireborne, who had been one of the Curseling's first conquests. Years of arcane control had left the Fireborne utterly unable to act for themselves, even when Vilitch wished otherwise. Nevertheless, their skills in battle were still sharp, so their dull-wittedness concerned the Twisted Twin not one jot.





THE CROWFANE HORDE

A tribe of the Kurgan, the Crowfane had initially followed Vilitch to war under the suspect auspices of an ensorcelled chieftain, Eirak Redmane. By the time of Redmane's death during a skirmish across the Helreach, Vilitch's leadership had brought the Crowfane so much plunder that the partnership continued. However, it had not gone entirely unnoticed by the chieftains of the Crowfane that Vilitch's horde was bleeding itself dry against Averheim's stout walls. By the time of the Emperor's sortie, rumours of a challenge were rumbling about the Crowfane Horde's watchfires.



SONS OF STORMDARK

Archaon was many things, but no fool. He knew that Vilitch would attempt to seize his destiny as Everchosen, and knew also that the best way to prevent that occurrence was to have eyes within the Curseling's camp. The Sons of Stormdark were the latest in a long line of such spies. Ordered to obey Vilitch's every command until Archaon's arrival, these plate-armoured brutes were amongst the most efficient killers in the Curseling's horde. When the east wall of Averheim fell, it had been the Sons of Stormdark who fought at Vilitch's side in the breach. They would fight at his side once more at Bolgen, although their true loyalties lay elsewhere.



CRUSHER

The slaughterbrute known as Crusher was slaved to the will of Adroch – one of the surviving Azure Princes. Adroch had secretly been training the brute to resist all manner of sorceries, with the intent of employing Crusher as his method of usurping Vilitch and taking command of the siege. What Adroch didn't know was that Vilitch had spells of command buried even deeper in Crusher's tiny mind. At the first hint of rebellion, Crusher would have pulverised Adroch, and all who stood with him.

Vilitch the Curseling

Adroch, First Amongst the Azure
Chaos Sorcerer Lord

Veredon, Second Amongst the Azure
Chaos Sorcerer

Borath, Third Amongst the Azure
Chaos Sorcerer

Gast, Narak and Tievoth, Aspiring Amongst the Azure
Chaos Sorcerers

The Fireborne
Two warbands of Chaos Warriors, one warband of Chosen

The Crowfane Horde
Three hordes of Chaos Marauders, two hordes of Marauder Horsemen, eight packs of Chaos Hounds

Sons of Stormdark
One grand warband of Chaos Warriors

The Doomblade Knights
Three warbands of Chaos Knights

The Honourcull
Two grand warbands of Chaos Warriors

The Severed Claw
One grand warband of Chaos Warriors

The Tribe of Skulls
One grand horde of Chaos Marauders, one horde of Marauder Horsemen

The Talons of Chaos
One horde of Chaos Marauders, four packs of Chaos Hounds

The Ill-Marked
One horde of Forsaken

Crusher
Slaughterbrute

The Hellfire Roar
Twelve batteries of Hellcannons

THE RUINS OF BOLGEN

The greatest concentration of hellcannons lay on the Aver's far bank, amongst the hillside ruins of Bolgen. Near a dozen batteries of the daemon engines lay concealed amongst the remains of what had once been a prosperous Averland village. Bolgen's inhabitants were all long dead. Their bones were strung up around the siege camp's perimeter, or else dangled as trophies from the northlanders' tents and the unholy totem before the ruined village hall. Even at this hour, the night air was alive with rough song. Every few seconds the arrhythmic screaming of hellcannon fire split the air, occasionally followed by desperate cries as one of the machines slipped its chains and feasted upon its crew.

Some hours after midnight, every hound in the ruins of Bolgen sat up on its haunches and howled. Fur-clad northlander sentries, roused from their fires, swore as they peered out into the night, and wondered what scent had caught the beasts' interest. Many stared across the River Aver and the corpse-strewn killing fields to Averheim's scarred walls, wary of some sortie by the defenders. They saw that the gates were closed, that the watchfires still blazed upon the battlements, and kicked the hounds into silence. Or rather, they tried to. The beasts would not cease their clamour, which grew more raw and desperate with every passing minute.

At the centre of the desolate village, in the heart of the ruined Sigmarite shrine, Vilitch the Curseling hissed orders at his sorcerer cabal. Half were sent to still the sudden racket by whatever means they could; the remainder continued their labours at the eight-pointed ritual circle. Vilitch had scried Archaon's approach many days earlier, and had sworn to take Averheim before the Everchosen arrived. The two were rivals of old, and that rivalry had driven Vilitch to attempt a summoning greater than any he had performed before. Vilitch would summon daemons enough not only to take the defiant city, but also to allow challenge of Archaon – at least, if the howling of the hounds did not so disrupt Vilitch's conjurations that he instead found himself whisked into the Realm of Chaos.

Yet the clamour of the hounds grew ever louder. By now, some of the northlanders – those not heavy with mead and rough ale – had some sense of the beasts' discomfort. The air had a bittersweet taste to it, like the calm before a thunderstorm. The wind, until then a gentle northerly breeze, began to swirl and howl amidst Bolgen's fire-blacked stones. Sparks danced across weapons, crackling from sword point to sword point.

Suddenly, there was a blinding flash and a colossal, sizzling roar. The besiegers' totem exploded, pelting those nearby with fragments of bone, weapons and other foul trophies of conquest. When the light had faded, a shimmering portal of azure light stood amidst the ruins, its edges crackling and indistinct. The northlanders peered in confusion for a moment. Then, cries of warning rippled across Bolgen as a plate-armoured chieftain tried to rally his tribesmen.

The attempt came too late. With a mighty screech, a shadow leapt clear of the portal's depths. With a sweep of its mighty wings, the creature pounced, bowling the chieftain to the ground. The northlander hacked at his assailant, but Deathclaw gouged downward with his savage beak, stabbing clean through his breastplate's rough steel and disembowelling the brute before his axe-blow could land.

As their chieftain's heart pulsed its last, the northlanders found their courage. They pressed close about the griffon with flail and axe, bellowing vile curses to dull their fear. Deathclaw's wings spread wide, sweeping the nearest attackers from their feet, broken and battered by a strength that allowed the griffon to soar upon the breeze.

Other northlanders were flooding into the square, many of them clad in the grim plate of champions. Again Deathclaw pounced, this time bearing a half-dozen northlanders to the ground. Horses screamed as the knights thundered into the square, their lances aimed for Deathclaw's sleek flank. But the griffon did not fight alone. There was a sudden flare upon Deathclaw's shoulders as the Emperor sent lightning coursing into the oncoming knights. Flesh sizzled and armour fused. Horses screamed and spasmed, hurling riders from their saddles before hearts gave out from the strain. The charge was thrown into tumult, momentum utterly spent, yards before it reached the interlopers. Deathclaw was already moving. Before the surviving knights could recover their order, the Emperor's hammer was blazing amongst the confusion. Armour buckled and blood flowed with each strike, and the threat of the knights was ended. But still the northlanders came, pressing close to trap Deathclaw and his master in a prison of flesh and steel.

Mere seconds had passed, but such had been the fury of the Emperor's onslaught that all eyes were upon his rampage, and every blade raised against it. The portal, still shining at the square's heart, was unguarded and unwatched, save for by the fitful glances of the dying. This proved to be a mistake. With a blare of trumpets, the remainder of the Emperor's sortie charged out into ruined Bolgen, eager for recompense against their tormentors of the past gruelling months.

From the moment he had drawn his plans, the Emperor had known that a conventional sortie would have been impossible. The siege camp was simply too far from Averheim's walls, the Aver too wide for a sortie to be safely made. But as the weeks had passed, his command over the magic of the heavens had grown to a point where he had been confident to attempt more than lightning-calling. The bridge of storms had sapped much of the Emperor's strength, but it had served its purpose well. Now an army of his hand-picked soldiers was loose amongst the northlander siege camp, and would remain so whilst the bridge lasted.

The Emperor had chosen only his most disciplined troops for the attack. The zealous, the wavering and the foolhardy had remained behind Averheim's walls, there to be commanded by Ungrim Ironfist if another assault loomed whilst the sortie was underway. No, those who now followed the Emperor into battle were the elite of Sigmar's scions; greatswords from Carroburg, templars of the Reiksguard and the Knights Griffon, veterans forged in the battles for the Ostland–Kislev border, and the surviving regiments of the Griffon Legion, the Emperor's personal guard.

Each of the sortie's formations was led by a captain who knew both his business and his orders. As the knights and outriders emerged from the bridge of storms, they set their spurs back against their steeds' flanks, and galloped hard for one of the hellcannon batteries blazing away on the village edge. Northlanders, at last aware of another danger within their midst, peeled away from the beleaguered Emperor, and hastily formed ranks against the new onslaught. It availed them naught. Lances dipped, pistols blazed, and the horsemen tore through the threadbare line and on towards their targets.

The Emperor's infantry, too slow to keep pace with the knights, took up position about the bridge of storms. Their determination to hold the position was bolstered by the certainty that all would perish if the escape route was cut. However, their true purpose was to cause a distraction, to present an opponent so tempting that no red-blooded warrior of the northlands could resist its lure. Spears were braced and handguns levelled, just as the first snarling hounds threw themselves at the attackers' throats. Only the greatswords of the Griffon Legion did not hold position with the rest. They came forward at Ludwig Schwarzhelm's bellowed command, keen steel flashing in the firelight as they hacked their way to the Emperor's side.

Surprise had carried the Imperial sortie far already, and it would continue to work in their favour for some time to come. In Bolgen's west, Matthias Corber's pistoliers drove a warband of ale-fuddled marauders and stunted crewers from amongst the rubble of the 'Drunken Giant' tavern. As half of Corber's men harried the fleeing northlanders, tongues of flame lit the ruined tavern's timbers as repeated volley of pistols and handguns tore a hellcannon apart. A few streets over, the Knights Griffon tore their way through a thin shield wall, then pressed onward to destroy another of the daemon engines. Two of the knights leant in too close as they thrust their lances home. The dying hellcannon gave a final bellow, and spat a virulent gobbet of daemonfire, reducing the knights and their demigryph steeds to twisted skeletons.

Elsewhere, the hunt did not go so well. Egrig Schuler's Reiksguard crossed the path of one of Vilitch's cabal of sorcerers. Before the knights could react to the dire threat, a blaze of pink fire arced across their leading ranks, slaying Schuler instantly and reducing a half-dozen of his knights to lumps of pitifully squealing and mutating flesh.





Before Schuler's lieutenant could take control, a bellowed war cry came from further uphill as the Doomblade Knights charged home. There was a thunder of hooves, the chime of steel upon steel, and more of the Reiksguard fell dead into the mud.

From his position in the ruined shrine, Vilitch heard the battle unfolding through his brother's ears, and the cries of 'Sigmar!' bellowing through the night. As yet, he could do little about it. The summoning was underway, and could not be interrupted without terrible risk. Better to take a lesser chance, Vilitch deemed, and speed the ritual along to its conclusion. Whatever successes the weaklings of the Empire gained in the meantime would surely be stripped away once the daemons were loosed to battle. Vilitch hunched closer to his twin's immobile form, taking more of Thomin's power into himself. All around the circle, the sorcerers of his coven shuddered and screamed as the wave of unleashed magic swept over them.

In the square, a brief lull had overtaken the battle. Caught between the Emperor and Schwarzhelm's greatswords, the square's defenders had possessed little chance of victory. Deathclaw's flanks were streaked with blood, little of which was his own, and the flagstones could scarcely be seen beneath the ravaged corpses of the northlanders and their hounds. As the last of the northlanders fled, the Emperor formed his once-divided forces anew into a rough square. Already, he could see dark shapes moving in the light of the middle-distant campfires, of banners gathering. It was one thing to defeat disordered and unready northlanders, quite another to withstand a determined assault from the plate-armoured killers of the Chaos Wastes.

The Emperor's warriors did not have to wait long for the next assault. The enemy came from all sides, shields held high and dark oaths thick upon their tongues. Sorcerers sent all-changing fire sweeping ahead of the advancing shields. The flames flickered and died where they reached the Emperor, and again on the square's opposite face where the astromancer Falstrom muttered counterspells into his precious scrying orb. Nonetheless, the fire soon took root elsewhere, and many an Ostlander perished in its embrace, or was otherwise slain by comrades who feared the twisted and mutated creature he had become. In response, the Emperor thrust his hammer forward, shouting in the old tongue of the Unberogens as he did so. Lightning flared from the weapon's glowing head, hurling one of the sorcerers away, slamming him into a pile of stone with a sickening crack.

Handguns flamed as the looming shields drew nearer. It was too dark, the northlanders moving too swift for accurate aim, but the Ostlanders didn't care. Sergeants and captains exhorted their men to aim low and where the attackers were densest. There would be no time to reload, so every bullet was now more precious than gold. Metallic clangs rang out as shots caromed off shields or punched through armour.

The northlander advance barely slowed. The booming war chant swelled and deepened through the acrid powder smoke, the armoured warriors leaping their dead and wounded, or kicking them aside. Then, with a last glorious exultation to Tzeentch, the northlander charge crashed home.

Braced though it was, the Empire square almost crumpled beneath that charge's sheer brute force. Spears shattered as they hit daemon-forged armour, Nuln-wrought swords wasted their force on shields or thick-furred cloaks. In return, the axes and maces of the northlanders cut deep into flesh, battered aside sword and shield to hack and pulp the flesh beyond. Most of the Chaos warriors fought

with little thought to their own defence, casting aside their shields to bring a second blade to bear, or even to strike the foe with a mighty, gauntleted fist. They were disdainful of the weak men of the south, and little wonder, for it took two such men to hold a single northlander at bay, and at least one other to have any chance of slaying the brute.

Whilst Deathclaw still lived, the Emperor knew little danger, even from these new foes. He was ever in the thickest of the fray, smiting with hammer and lightning. Elsewhere, it was only where the greatswords fought that the men of the Empire knew true success. One strike from those artisan-forged zweihanders could split a Chaos warrior in twain, were the wielder allowed sufficient time to land his blow. The quicker-witted of the sergeants quickly realised this. At their order, spears, halberds and shields ceased to be weapons in the truest sense – they were now simply tools by which the foe could be caged, pinioned or blunted long enough for a greatsword to split his skull.

Such tactics could only work whilst the Emperor's forces had the advantage of numbers; for the moment at least, that advantage remained. Yet with each second that passed, the danger grew. All across the camp, chains were struck and cages unlatched as the northlanders sent more of their savage pets down into the square. Rabid hounds and shambling spawn were goaded against the Imperial formation, though in truth few needed much spurring once their senses tasted blood. A slab-muscled and ruddy-skinned slaughterbrute, many times the height of a man, slammed into the Carroburg Greatswords. Ignoring the sword-strokes that scattered from its hide, the creature pounded and stomped its way into the formation's heart, the impact of each armoured limb crushing the valiant men of Carroburg two or three at a time.

Before the beast could tear the greatswords entirely to ruin, Falstrom took command of the winds swirling around the bridge of storms, and drove them full against it. Corpses were flung across the square as the gust grew, but still the armoured monster came on, sweeping aside the remaining greatswords in its path, its hooves smashing through flagstones to seek purchase. Step by step, the creature trudged into the squall, recognising its tormentor by some brutish instinct. Falstrom held his ground, taking not so much as a backward step, for he had glimpsed something that the creature's yellow eyes had not. With a sharp gesture, Falstrom released the winds.

With no wind to fight any longer, the slaughterbrute staggered forward. It was still off-balance when Deathclaw struck its flank an instant later, the force of the impact driving his talons deep into the beast's thick hide. The slaughterbrute slewed away under the momentum of the griffon's strike, one claw clamping around Deathclaw's throat, the other thrust away to brace against the ground. The Emperor's hammer flared once, and the slaughterbrute bellowed in pain as the impact shattered the claws about Deathclaw's throat. Thus freed, the griffon darted forward, and lanced his beak between the armoured plates of the monster's neck. A slew of black blood gushed forth as Deathclaw tore out the slaughterbrute's throat.

A great cheer went up from the men of the Empire as the creature finally fell, a sound that redoubled in volume as Schwarzhelm hoisted the Imperial Standard high. Despite his bravado, the Emperor's Champion was troubled. Time was against them: the sky was growing ever brighter. Certainly, there was dread in the darkness, but it also concealed hopelessness. In dawn's light, too many of the men who had followed the Emperor to war would see the true scope of the odds arrayed against them. Schwarzhelm acknowledged that fear, but refused to succumb to it – his place was at the Emperor's side in all things.

Though none who fought in the square yet knew it, the Emperor's plan was succeeding beyond all hope. Drawn by the flaring lightning and bold Imperial banners, the northlanders had practically trampled one another in their determination to reach the square. The upper reaches of the village, from which vantage points the hellcannons belched daemonfire at Averheim's walls, were thronged only with warriors too sozzled or too slow to join their fellows. Such men were run down with all speed, their death screams lost beneath the far louder clamour that came from further downhill.

By the time of the slaughterbrute's fall, thirteen hellcannons had been destroyed and another half-dozen set loose from their chains to rampage hungrily about the siege camp. Two had even come to blows with one another, a contest that had wreathed the sky over Bolgen in glorious multicoloured flame before one of the daemon engines had emerged wounded, but triumphant.

The cost had been high. Nearly half of the Reiksguard had been slain in their battle with the Doomblade Knights. That they had emerged victorious at all was thanks to a troop of Matthias Corber's pistoliers, who had beset the Chaos knights' flank with shot and sabre, scant moments after Schuler's death. Too many of the Ostlanders had fallen in that clash and in the subsequent running battles with steed-borne marauders, but for now the glory of battle was heavy upon them, and Corber's riders counted only their kills, not their losses. Now, with dawn threatening the sky, the raiders knew it was time to make good their retreat. Hauling upon their steeds' reins, they turned back towards the portal crackling in the centre of the village, and the salvation it offered.

Roiling clouds gathered over Bolgen's Sigmarite shrine as Vilitch at last reached the end of his hastened ritual. As the sorcerer completed the final syllable, his words were repeated by a deeper voice than his own, the harsh words booming through the ruins like thunder. With a dull roar, the centre of the ritual circle fell away into many-coloured darkness, and the daemon horde spilled forth. Seeing the fruits of his labour through Thomin's eyes, Vilitch scowled away his disappointment. The summoning had been concluded without mishap, but the scale was nowhere near as grand as the sorcerer had wished. Hundreds of daemons – not the thousands he had striven for – boiled free from the circle's bindings. Haste had unmade Vilitch's schemes – haste, and the unforeseen sortie from Averheim. Nonetheless, he felt victory could yet be secured.

Thus was the next wave to assault the Emperor's position nearly four times as large as the one that had preceded it. The daemons, wild with excitement, came in a shrieking and capering rush, insane cackles spilling forth from their mouths and tongues of flickering fire bursting from their fingers. When one was slain, it split into two smaller blue abominations, each surlier than its 'parent', but just as determined to squeeze the life out of his foes. Gangling fungoids came behind the capering horrors, flame oozing and spurting from continually shifting orifices. And behind these, but gaining fast: razor-quick screamers, the hunting beasts of the daemonic realm. Swift they were, too swift for bullets, and they swooped low through the Imperial ranks, horns and spines slashing through both armour and flesh.

Behind the daemons at last came Vilitch, with his chosen warriors thick about him. The Fireborne advanced relentlessly, driven on by their master's will. Such sturdy resolve was nowhere to be seen in the dregs that surged forward in the Fireborne's wake. These were the survivors of earlier attacks, and they were wild with the need for vengeance, to unmake the slight upon their manhood that failure had wrought.

The Griffon Legion bore the brunt of that daemon assault, just as they had borne the worst burdens of those long hours. Men quailed as the writhing tide crashed against their line, then found fresh bravery in the sight of the Imperial Standard fluttering overhead. Schwarzhelm himself knew no fear. Or rather, if he did, he buried it so deep that none could guess it from the expression upon his face. The Sword of Justice had already reaped its share of northlanders that night, and now the Emperor's Champion spurred forward to slay daemons. Left and right he hacked, losing count of how many strange and twisting corpses he left in his passing.



To the west, the daemons fared poorly. It was there that the Emperor and Deathclaw fought, and their might alone was sufficient to keep much of the onslaught at bay. Moreover, the daemons seemed to grow turgid and slow in the Emperor's presence, rendering them easy prey to those who fought in the Emperor's shadow. To many of those who fought to the west, this was the final proof that Karl Franz was no longer truly a mortal man, but had been touched by Sigmar's divinity, for surely only the holiest of powers could have weakened the daemons so?

Alas, Schwarzhelm's example and the Emperor's deeds were not enough to rescue a worsening situation. The eastern face of the square, where the slaughterbrute had wrought such destruction, was barely holding firm. Once more, the men of Carroburg proved their worth. They stood their ground spitting and cursing at the horrors come to assail them, but they died all the same. Captain Corber saw the danger from his relatively untouched southern front, and sent Ostlanders to buttress the Carroburgers' fading strength. For a few moments, the eastern front steadied and pushed back their foes. Then pink fire scorched across the corpse-strewn flagstones, and the recaptured ground was lost.

The Emperor was on the brink of ordering the retreat through the bridge of storms, abandoning those he had sent into the dark, when a new war cry sounded. From the northern slopes came a motley warband of knights and pistoliers. They were bloodstained and battle-worn, and there were too many empty saddles amongst their ranks, but the men fighting in the square had seldom seen a sweeter sight.

The newcomers scattered the northlanders milling at Vilitch's rear, and then crashed into the Fireborne's ranks. Pistols flared and men screamed defiance as they thrust sword and lance forward, but the Fireborne line did not break. Indeed, it scarcely shuddered. Fear and pain had no grasp upon their enthralled minds – they heard only the command to fight. And fight they did, with strength and skill undimmed by their thraldom. The Fireborne clove riders from their saddles, severed limbs and skulls with murderous ease. They fought on through wounds that would have left lesser men sobbing, never shying away from a blade if doing so would deny their own killing strike.

The Emperor's steely voice rang out, ordering his men to retreat through the bridge of storms. In that same moment, he urged Deathclaw into the fight against the Fireborne. Though wounded and weary, the griffon launched itself forwards once more.

As Deathclaw slammed into Vilitch's thralls, the men of the Empire

began their fighting withdrawal. The wounded went first, the able-bodied dragging those who could no longer stand; the hale clustering ever tighter against the press of gibbering daemons. Only Schwarzhelm and the Griffon Legion went forward, determined to aid the Emperor in his rescue of the knights.

Vilitch's Fireborne were now pressed close on three fronts, and the sorcerer was growing desperate. He had thrown daemons and spellfire at the southlanders, assailed them with overwhelming numbers and the unstoppable force of his Fireborne. Would they not die? Vilitch twisted Thomin's body towards Schwarzhelm's comrades, and sent fire crackling out from his own twisted hands. He cackled with glee as the heart of the Griffon Legion exploded into choking ash, and the Imperial Standard set ablaze. But still the greatswords came on. Shifting his brother's stance once again, Vilitch hurled bolts of writhing lightning against the roaring Deathclaw, but the seal upon the Emperor's breast flared white and the bolts dissipated like smoke on the breeze. A demigryph slammed into Vilitch, then screeched its last as Thomin's blade hacked into its throat. The knight, thrown from his saddle by the steed's demise, roared once in challenge, then gurgled and died as Thomin's morning star crushed his skull. Vilitch had no time to gloat. Deathclaw's next swooping leap took him to the sorcerer's side. One mighty swipe from the griffon's paw sent Vilitch flying clean across the square to slam into the ruins of an old militia barracks.

Vilitch regained his senses to see Schwarzhelm and the last of the Griffon Legion retreating into the bridge of storms. Deathclaw and the Emperor guarded their retreat, lightning rippling and crackling across the daemonic horde. Hissing with frustration, Vilitch goaded Thomin to his feet and set him charging towards the portal, barging daemons and marauders aside in his determination to avenge indignities. He was too late. With a final sweep of his wings, Deathclaw buffeted the daemons away and sprang into the portal.

Blinded by rage and humiliation, Vilitch entered the bridge of storms at a run, changing flame flickering from his outstretched fingers. It was only when the sorcerer had crossed the threshold that he realised that the egress, wherever it had lain, had closed with the Emperor's passage. He turned back the way he had came, in time only to see the shimmering gate to Bolgen drown in encroaching darkness. The Emperor had escaped, and he was trapped.

Vilitch had no idea how long he had wandered in the darkness. Failure rankled at him, and the darkness brought unease. He would have given much for the ability to summon flame, but he had not felt the winds of magic since the portal had closed. Now he goaded his brother's meaty form through the inky black, ever-searching for a means of escape.

It had been Thomin's fault that he had become trapped, of that the sorcerer was sure. His conjoined brother had been too slow, and the enemy had escaped as a direct result.

'Stupid oaf,' Vilitch hissed, as he had many times since Bolgen. 'What use is brawn if it cannot function when required? You were turgid, clumsy. I curse the fate that shackled me to you.'

Thomin remained silent, as he had in the face of every whispered insult since the twins had first been fused. Instead, he trudged tirelessly into the darkness. His heavy footfalls thudded across unseen footing, their rhythmic pounding unbroken by Vilitch's constant stream of invective.

By and by, Thomin could walk no more. Not for lack of strength, for his enthralled body was as unwearied as ever. Rather, Vilitch's path was blocked by a smooth expanse of rock that would not shatter, no matter how hard Thomin's fists pummelled it. Worse, when Vilitch turned about, he discovered a similar obstacle behind, though how it had come there, he could not say.

Panic rose in the sorcerer's gullet, but faded as he made a new discovery. There was magic in that place, magic he could use.

Flame burst from Vilitch's staff. In its light, the sorcerer saw through Thomin's eyes that what he had taken for stone was in fact shining crystal. Their images reflected on and on, doubling and redoubling in the chamber's fractal splendour.

'Where am I?' the sorcerer hissed aloud.

'In the domain of the Great Sorcerer,' came the response, whispered by a thousand mirthful voices. 'He has heard your prayer, loyal champion, and is pleased to fulfil it.'

'What prayer?' Vilitch demanded of the voices. 'I made no supplication.'

'But I did,' said Thomin, his voice dry and parched from decades of silence. 'It is my turn now.'

***No!* thought Vilitch. He struggled to speak, but found he could no longer recall any words. Cantrips and spells, the studies and schemes of a lifetime, faded from his mind like spent candleflame. Vilitch did not miss them. Indeed, in moments, he had forgotten that they had ever existed; he had even forgotten his own name.**

By the time the crystal labyrinth shifted again, and Thomin strode out beneath the Realm of Chaos' violent skies, the thing that had been Vilitch the Curseling hung mute from his shoulder, eagerly awaiting his brother's wise instruction.













For glorious days after the battle in the ruins of Bolgen, the bombardment of Averheim all but ceased. For the first time in long months, hope was reborn.

On the northern wall, engineers used spyglasses to peer across the Aver, to the remains of Vilitch's siege camp. The plunder-thirsty skaven, never the most reliable of allies, had stripped the siege camp's remains bare. That betrayal left the northern portion of the siegeworks badly weakened, and the Emperor would have considered a breakout, had he not known that Archaon's horde would sweep through those same lands.

The Emperor did not speak of this new danger to any save his council. Thus, as far as Averheim's beleaguered defenders were concerned, Karl Franz had delivered their first serious victory – the first of many more to come, for it seemed that the tide of the war had turned. Many celebrated, but a few looked upon the ragged survivors of the night's sortie, and realised that triumph had come with a terrible price. Nonetheless, whispers spread through the squalid barracks and tenements that help would come soon. The Empire was not so broken as had previously been thought. Armies were converging on Averheim, the rumours said, armies that would break the siege once and for all. Yet these rumours were lies. That they were lies born of hope made them all the crueller. A favourite tale was of how Valten, herald of Sigmar, was yet free in the north, and was gathering to him all men who had the strength and will to fight. Only the Emperor knew that Valten was dead. In a dream too vivid to be mere fantasy, he had felt the blow that had taken the lad's head. Valten was not coming. No one was coming.

Though wearied by his burdens, the Emperor did not rest. Indeed, he hardly slept at all any longer. Together with Ungrim and Jerrod, he oversaw what preparations could be made for Archaon's arrival. In between the increasingly intermittent attacks, engineers and light wizards laboured to buttress the battered walls. Black powder mines were set amongst the rubble and fitted with cunning dwarfen fuses that could not be set alight by chance. Where the walls were weakest, barricades were dragged into the streets beyond, huge mounds of rubble and timber that could funnel the attackers into carefully prepared ambuscades.

The Emperor had heard the rumours of friendly armies on the march. He recognised the need they spoke to, even if he knew them to be untrue. The Empire had no other armies, just the battered and doomed host within Averheim's walls. However, as the hours ticked by, and Archaon's horde drew nearer, the Emperor at last admitted there was yet an army within the Empire's bounds, and a mighty one at that. He had not wanted to call upon their aid, for some allies were scarcely less horrific than the enemy at the gates. It no longer mattered. Averheim needed aid if it were to survive, regardless of whence the aid came.

That night, Karl Franz led another sortie from Averheim's walls, borne into the skies by Deathclaw's mighty wings. Behind him came a dozen of Jerrod's knights, each astride a swift pegasus. The swirling furies parted as the Emperor's lightning hammered through the clouds. Screeching with dismay, the daemons banked clear of the crackling bolts, then swooped back around to assail the lesser prey that followed in the Emperor's wake. It availed them naught. Though the knights of Bretonnia had eaten meagre rations since the siege began, their steeds had wanted for little. Few daemons of the immortal realms could match a pegasus for swiftness, in moments of need. Though the knights felt the lure of combat, the desire to strike the daemon-crows from the skies, duty won out over pride. Even

as a second torrent of lightning split the swarm of furies apart once more, the knights were already a league to the east, drawing further from Averheim with each passing moment. In the panniers of their leader, Aubric of Bastonne, nestled a scroll bearing the Imperial seal.

Thus did the Emperor propose a military alliance with the Great Necromancer, Nagash. Common purpose with the undead was not entirely unheard of. During the Glottkin invasion, the vampire Vlad von Carstein had drawn swords alongside the living, had even been made an elector count in exchange for his oath to stand ready in the Empire's defence.



Ungrim and Jerrod had both argued against the Emperor's chosen course. It was one thing to make an accord with a von Carstein, quite another to treat with his undying master. But the Emperor had brooked no argument. Aid could come from no other quarter. Ulthuan was gone. Those dwarfs not already within Averheim's walls had sealed themselves away so deep that messengers could not reach them. Allies of old were in short supply, and the only respite lay with an ancient enemy. Neither the dwarf nor the Bretonnian had much liked the Emperor's logic, but they had acceded nonetheless. All knew that Nagash would attempt to twist any victory to his own dark purposes, but that battle could be fought when and if any survived the coming weeks.

Aubric's knights were taken captive soon after they broached night-shrouded Sylvania, seized by Mannfred von Carstein's vampiric minions. The self-styled Lord of Sylvania had fallen in Nagash's sight of late, condemned through his own double-dealing and a feud with the vampiress Neferata. The Queen of Mysteries had only ever served Nagash under sufferance. With the Great Necromancer seldom stirring from the Black Pyramid, she had taken the opportunity to retreat to her fortress at the Silver Pinnacle, where she would not have to endure the company of creatures such as the Mortarch of Night.

Sensible of his waning fortunes, Mannfred did not put the knights to death himself, but delivered them – largely intact – to the Black Pyramid. There, Aubric was permitted to deliver his message, but was then put to death without ever receiving a reply.

There was one fatal miscalculation in the Emperor's plan: it all hinged on Nagash's willingness to accept an alliance, and the Great Necromancer saw no reason why he should do so. In the time since he had returned to Sylvania, Nagash had lain recumbent within the Black Pyramid, drawing the death magic of Sylvania into his own undead form. When complete, Nagash was certain he would have power enough to challenge the Chaos Gods themselves. As yet, the process was but half-finished. Nagash had no desire to draw the attention of the Chaos Gods until he was ready, and none at all to risk his grand plan to save a relative handful of mortals who would serve him better dead than they would alive.

But the proposed alliance was not forgotten by all. Alone of Nagash's surviving Mortarchs, Vlad von Carstein yet felt a passing loyalty to the Empire. Moreover, he recognised the Great Necromancer's deluded arrogance. Vlad knew that Averheim's fate would soon be Sylvania's also if action were not taken, and resolved to defy his master.

'Fools! All of them, fools!

Vlad von Carstein's voice drowned out the sound of the door slamming behind him. Balthasar Gelt was careful to keep his gaze on one of the wax-encrusted chandeliers.

'Have you nothing to say?' Vlad demanded 'Have...' He broke off in a fit of coughing that spattered drops of stinking, green-red fluid across the polished wooden floor. The sores and lesions had faded, but Otto Glott's 'gift' still raged within him. Gelt did not know the seriousness of his master's plight. Vlad von Carstein was not one to admit weakness.

'What is it?' Gelt asked.

Vlad wiped his lips clean. 'Karl Franz has at last asked for aid, but Nagash has refused. My peers haven't the courage to defy him. They do not realise what is at stake.'

Defiance kindled in Gelt's soul. 'Then all this has been for nothing. I should never have listened to you.'

Vlad gave a sharp smile – his first since entering the ballroom. 'You still blame me for what you have become?'

'It is an unholy power.'

'You brought this fate upon yourself,' Vlad said airily. 'I merely ensured that your 'fall' counted for something.'

'I'll never believe that.'

Vlad staggered as a coughing fit wracked his body. 'Then believe this,' he said at last. 'You and I shall go to Averheim, even if no other in this land will. Nagash promised to restore Isabella to me, and has not done so. I owe him nothing in return.' He paused, thoughtful. 'And then there is the matter of my oath.'

'It means that much to you?' asked Gelt, wary of some trap.

'It shouldn't,' Vlad conceded. 'Though perhaps it is not you alone who has been changed by our partnership.'



Vlad departed Sylvania in secrecy, with only Gelt and a bodyguard of Drakenhof Templars. He doubted that Nagash had attention to spare for trivial surveillance, but the same could not be said of his fellow Mortarchs. Of the original nine, only four others remained at Nagash's side, and Vlad trusted none of them. Arkhan and Krell scarcely existed as beings in their own right any longer, so closely tied were they to their dread master. Luthor Harkon was mad, and Mannfred... Mannfred was the most treacherous of all, always reaching for a prize ever out of his reach, and far beyond anything that he had earned. Mannfred would have betrayed Vlad to Nagash in a moment, and so Vlad gathered his bodyguard away from prying eyes.

They rode with all speed, urged by all the dark magic at Vlad's command, but still Gelt deemed their progress too slow. The decision made, he longed to return to his people, even if all he achieved was to die at their side. With each passing hour, he felt more his old self, more like the Gelt of years ago, before Vlad had tempted him onto the path of necromancy. His thoughts were clearer, his purpose sharper. Vlad's influence was falling away, though whether this was the vampire's own choice, or some side effect of the Glottkin poison, Gelt could not be sure. He certainly made no attempt to speak of it with Vlad.

Instead, Gelt spent long hours ranging ahead of the templars' march, and put from his mind the spells and incantations he had learnt as Vlad's pupil. This was no easy task, and temptation ever whispered through Gelt's mind, but the wizard was determined to become the man he had once been, in thought as well as deed. He held out no hope that he would ever be welcomed by his fellow men – his fall had done much to bring about the Empire's current cataclysmic state – but hope of personal redemption still lingered. If Vlad knew what was at play within his acolyte's mind, he gave no sign, and certainly made no effort to prevent Gelt from roaming.

Meanwhile, far to the west, the vanguard of Archaon's army at last reached Averheim. They spilled from the Old Dwarf Road into the village of Bolgen, driving out the skaven who had squatted in the ruins since Vilitch's defeat. By the time dusk fell, the northern skyline was choked with black banners, with more streaming in at every moment. The following morning, the land between Bolgen and the Aver was thick with tents and campfires, yet still more northlanders came. They spread east and west along the riverbanks, displacing warbands and tribes who had been part of the siege from the very start.

Even from the distance of Averheim's walls, it was plain that the newcomers were of a different mettle to those they replaced. Their banner poles were hung with naked skulls, their armour was the colour of spilt blood, and their war songs little more than discordant shrieking. Where they marched, the skies shone a wrathful and brooding red, and the waters of the Aver ran thick with gore. These were the tribes of the Skaramor, and amongst their number marched the skullreapers, murderous champions of the Blood God.

Up until that point, the skullreapers had been the stuff of bleak rumour. Seldom had their warbands crossed into the Empire. The skullreapers deemed the men of the south to be weaklings, their severed heads poor trophies of battles that had never been in doubt. Instead, they had roamed the northern wastes, preying upon the territory of mighty warriors: the Kurgan, the Hung, the Kvelligs and a dozen more. Now, with the weaklings at last purged from the Empire at other hands, the Skaramor came south in their thousands and tens of thousands to slay the survivors. Their lords had pledged allegiance to Archaon's war, but in truth they served only the Blood God. They would drown Averheim in its defenders' gore, and pile the skulls high in testament to their wrathful patron. This they would do at Archaon's direction, but only because Khorne had decreed it.

There were many warlords amongst the Skaramor, but one bore Khorne's favour more visibly than most. Skarr Bloodwrath had roamed the wastes for centuries. He had slaughtered enemies beyond counting, and been laid low himself on many occasions, only to be reborn from the blood of those he had slain. Skarr was a champion well on the way to daemonhood – at least, insofar as such things could ever be certain – and he was a terror to his own followers as much as he was a blight upon the foe.

Amongst all the warriors of the Skaramor, only the Gorequeen Valkia dared oppose Skarr. She too was held high in Khorne's regard, and the Blood God's blessings had redoubled following her slaughter of the Naggarothi. The survivors of that campaign marched to Averheim beneath Valkia's skull-laden banner. They were fewer in number than Skarr's followers, but had a war-honed savagery that more than made up for their relative lack of warriors.

Both Skarr and Valkia had grown mighty with Khorne's favour, but there was one amongst the host whose mind and body had buckled beneath divine gifts. Scyla Anfingrimm had been one of the Skaramor since he had joined them in obliterating his old tribe. Scyla had once been a great champion, a terror upon the coastlines of the world, but he was a leader no longer; he was no longer even a man. His mind was that of a raging beast, his only desire to kill and destroy. Nevertheless, Scyla's instinct for slaughter was undimmed. Many amongst the Skaramor believed him high in Khorne's favour even now, and that to follow him into battle

was to court the Blood God's favour. Where the ground shook to Scyla's monstrous stride, the Skaramor were close behind.

Clashes broke out amongst the besiegers that night as the Skaramor bloodily seized control. Battle cries and the clash of steel upon steel rolled across the wide Aver valley as a new hierarchy was forged. Chieftains who would not pledge loyalty to the newcomers were decapitated, and thrown into the river. Many of those who did swear allegiance to Valkia or Skarr were slain also, their blood dedicated to the Lord of Skulls, their heads added to the grim totems set just beyond the range of cannon-fire.

The last of the skaven scurried away that night, having no desire to continue the siege alongside such allies. Their absence was scarcely missed. The defenders had eyes only for the blood-mad horde newly come to their lands, and the Skaramor cared not that the callow, treacherous vermin had departed.

Still the Skaramor flooded into the Aver valley. They made no move to assault the walls, content to war amongst themselves as they awaited the arrival of he who had set them to the march. Thousands amongst the horde perished as axes grew restless, but thousands more arrived under the red and angry sun. At night, Averheim shook to drumbeat and war-song, its defenders' fevered dreams disturbed by the chant and death-bellow of blood sacrifice.

At last, days after the first of the Skaramor set foot in the Aver valley, Archaon came to Averheim. He rode at the head of his Swords of Chaos, and Ka'Bandha's great winged shadow loomed close behind. All at once, thick black clouds began to swirl overhead, and red lightning split the sky. The chanting Skaramor fell silent for a moment, but then their song began again, wilder and more wrathful than before.

'What is your will, Everchosen?' Ka'Bandha rumbled from behind Archaon.

The Everchosen marked the daemon's impatience, and swept his gaze across fire-scorched ground and the circle of kneeling champions. Amongst the Everchosen's warlords, only Ka'Bandha stood tall; only Ka'Bandha chafed at servitude. The mortals were no better than dogs, desperate to please the Lord of Skulls and, by extension, his emissary. So long as blood flowed, they would obey, but Ka'Bandha wished to be more than simply a tool of slaughter.

Archaon did not answer straight away, but stared silently out across the Aver valley, towards the last Imperial fortress. The Imperials hid behind walls, never learning that to do so was to declare your cause already lost.

One last battle, and the Empire would be erased from history. It was a journey of centuries almost done. A lesser man might feel exultation or apprehension at a life's work so nearly complete, but the Everchosen felt nothing in the yawning abyss that was his soul.

'What is your will?' the Bloodthirster growled again, each word laden with threat.

Archaon knew that the daemon would kill him the moment he lost Khorne's favour, but not before. Pathetic. The Bloodthirster possessed might enough to crush a small army, but was reluctant to hack down his mortal liege, lest it offend his divine master. Fortunately, the Blood God was easiest of the four Dark Brothers to keep amused. Ka'Bandha would wait forever.

Turning his back on Averheim, Archaon at last addressed his champions. 'They have fought well. We shall grant them the gift of a glorious death. But remember, Karl Franz is mine.'



The defenders of Averheim had expected the new-come horde to spend several days reinforcing their siege lines. The city's walls still stood tall, and the skaven had proven time and again that assault by escalade led to little other than the slaughter of the attackers. A breach would be needed to carry Archaon's forces beyond the city walls, and breaches took time to carve in thick stone. Averheim had days of bombardment to endure before steel clashed upon steel. So did the defenders believe.

They were wrong.

The assault along the northern wall began scant hours after Archaon's banner had crested the skyline. The Skaramor came under dark clouds and blood-red skies, howling like madmen and chanting in harsh tongues. At first, the watchmen on the northern wall held their fire, fearing that the attack was intended to lure the defenders into betraying their positions with weapons fire. Then they counted the number of torches blazing in the crimson dark, and knew that this was no mere test of the defences. Orders rang out across the battlement, linstocks were pressed to touch-holes, and the first cannons unleashed their fury.

For a brief, glorious moment, the roar and scream of roundshot drowned out the bellowing of the Skaramor. That moment passed all too soon, and the cries of the dying were quickly masked by the renewed war-fervour of those below. Explosions shook the rotting boneyard that was Averheim's northern approach, the brief flames revealing tattooed bodies flung aside and mangled corpses hurled skywards in pieces. Aiming was almost impossible in that light, but it was of little consequence. The Skaramor were as thick as beetles upon the approach, and it was an unlucky shell indeed that missed its mark entirely.

The horde swept closer, the chanting became more ragged as all attempt at formation was abandoned. Oil-soaked bundles of straw were set alight and heaved from the ramparts, their dirty yellow flames illuminating the closest attackers clear enough for proper aim. Handguns blazed across the rampart, the dirty cough of Imperial arms punctuated by the deeper, sharper report of the rifled dwarfen guns. Skaramor fell by the score, the dead and wounded trampled by those who came behind. Handguns flamed for a second time. Across the wall's foot, chains fell from lifeless hands, but plenty of brass grapnels bit home upon the wall. Within moments, each chain was heavy with straining Skaramor, hauling themselves hand over hand toward the battlement.

Cannons and mortars continued to pound the Skaramor flooding to the base of the wall, but the handgunners now targeted the foes ascending the outer face. Bullets cracked and whined, ricocheting from dark plate and thudding into flesh. Dozens of northlanders plummeted from their chains, bones smashed or muscles torn beyond use. Others were hauled clear by the unwounded who came behind, no longer willing to be delayed by a comrade's dying flesh.

As gunners continued to fire, other defenders hacked at the grapnels. Their slim swords could not split the chains, so dwarfs brought up hammers and axes. They battered at the brass until the tortured metal gave way, and even smote the parapet's facing stones until the attackers' own weight tore them loose. But for every grapnel dislodged in this manner, another three found purchase upon the walls.

So it raged for hours. The approach to the walls became choked with the newly slain, as the Skaramor were hurled from the stones by arrow, bolt and bullet. Yet still the northlanders came. As midnight approached, the wind died. Stinking powder smoke hung lifeless about the walls, concealing the bellowing mass below. Still the defenders loaded and fired, loaded and fired, trusting that the horde was so vast that no shot would be wasted.

Thousands of Skaramor perished before reaching the walls, hundreds more fell wounded and were trampled by their own kind, but the defenders felt no triumph. All were desperately thirsty from the bitter powder smoke that lingered thickly about the walls. All were weary, for those without bows or handguns had busied themselves by heaving rocks – and even their own dead – over the walls, relying on the plunge to add lethal force to the improvised missiles.

And dead there were upon the walls, too many dead by far. Throughout the assault, Skaramor hurled axes, dirks and other crude blades at the ramparts. Most were cheated by the stone, but enough found their mark. Marksmen died mid-shot as the blades thudded home, coarse insults fell ashen on troll slayers' tongues. Each body that toppled from the ramparts or slid back from the parapet was greeted with a chorus of jeers from the horde below. The northlanders did not care that their losses were a thousandfold those of their foes. Their assault culled the weak, and made an offering of slaughter to the Blood God.

In the early hours of the morning, the assault thickened. Grapnels were hurled against the eastern and western walls. Rain-sodden troops who had been sent to reinforce Duke Jerrod's northern garrison were hurriedly recalled to give battle on other quarters. Ungrim Ironfist led the defence of the east. Again and again, the fire in his blood boiled loose to scour the Skaramor from the wall's foot, but each time unwounded northlanders surged over the blackened dead. It was little better to the west. There, the Emperor's lightning reduced scores of

northlanders to charred and stinking flesh, but still the Skaramor hurled themselves on.

To make matters worse, the remaining hellcannons – silent for long days at Archaon's order – now recommenced their bombardment. As the sky brightened, the air was full of trailing fire, screaming towards Averheim. The barrage was thinner than in previous weeks, but far more tightly targeted. Every shot slammed home against the ancient masonry of the north gate, each impact shuddering the battlements and showering the Skaramor with fragments of pulverised stone.

It was not just the Skaramor who died in the shadow of the north gate. Archaon had loosed his army's behemoths against the battered steel and timber portal, intending them to pry the ancient gates apart. Two giants and a slaughterbrute lay unmoving between the great stone arches, their guts shot away by helblaster volley guns cunningly concealed within the walls. But the Everchosen had such brutes to spare, and he sent them unhesitatingly into the killing ground.

Dawn came, and the heavens burst, thunder rumbling about Averheim's walls like the booming laughter of a cruel god. Heavy rain swept across the Aver valley, transforming the already muddy ground into a bloody quagmire. Defenders who had moments before prayed for water to quench the acrid powder stench in their throats, now shuddered as their garb grew heavy with water, and the chill of the rain crept into their bones. Still they loaded and fired, loaded and fired, glad for the wan daylight that aided their aim.

There was a brief and unexpected lull in the fighting, as the next wave of Skaramor dragged their way through the valley's sucking morass. But the light brought despair as well as hope. As the defenders peered out through the rain and across the Aver valley, they saw that they had done their work too well. The dead of the northern assault had lain where they had fallen, each new wave of attackers trampling down the fallen who had come before. In many places along the northern wall, the mound of the dead was so high that its crest lay but feet below the crenelations. It would be a steep climb, and a macabre one, but the compacted dead offered a route to the battlements as sure as any siege tower. The attackers had seen it too. When they began anew, the northlanders hurled themselves up the mounds of their own dead, scrabbling and clawing at the still warm flesh in their desperation to reach the summit.

At the north gate, the situation was far worse. The hellcannon bombardment had shattered the arched bastions that stood guard over the gate, and had unseated many of the helblasters and cannons that had so far kept Archaon's monstrous host at bay. Now the roar of smoke and flame was reduced to mere pinpricks of light and fury, drowned out by the crude battle-oaths of the giants who battered at the gate with boulders and meaty fists.

Helstorm rockets were stripped from their launchers by frantic defenders. Fuses were lit, and the blazing missiles tossed into the space before the gate. The flash and roar of the explosions rocked the gateway. One giant toppled over, his chest blown apart by a rogue rocket's strike. Another roared in pain, his eyes burnt out by the fires rippling across his body, but continued to pummel the gate until life left him.

A short distance to the east, Skarr Bloodwrath was first on the rampart, his chained axes whirling through the downpour. Already, a dozen bodies lay at his feet, the bold colours of Ostland and Talabecland glistening with fresh blood. An Ostlander captain bellowed a challenge, his greatsword already swinging before the words were fully uttered. Skarr's next strike split the tempered steel as if it were a twig, and the backswing clove the captain's head from his body. Roaring with triumph, Skarr heaved the ruined corpse to one side and stepped into the newly created space. Behind him, bellowing Skaramor warriors hauled their way onto the wall.

Oaths to Sigmar, Grimnir and the blessed Lady rang out across the wall as the defenders strove to clear the rampart, but the enemy were too many. Now it was the turn of the northlanders to wreak slaughter, for few amongst the defenders could match a skullreaper's battle-fury. Only where the dwarfish slayers and Jerrod's knights fought did the onslaught even slow. With each moment that passed, however, more of the northern wall fell into the northlanders' grasp. The trickle of Skaramor upon the walls became a flood. Duke Jerrod, his sword already slick with the invaders' blood, cursed at his ill fate, and ordered the retreat from the walls.

Ungrim and the Emperor needed no warning of Jerrod's plight. For long minutes now, routed defenders had been fleeing east and west, desperate to escape the doom that waited to the north. These were peasants of Bretonnia and militiamen of the Imperial provinces – men who had fought well against terrible odds, but whose courage had at last deserted them. Nary a dwarf fled with them. Valaya's children died without turning their backs upon the foe.

The Emperor urged Deathclaw into the air, to better judge the plight of the northern wall. At once he saw Jerrod's men boiling down the broad ramps and into the Plenzerplatz beyond. He saw also that no amount of reinforcement could alter the situation, even had he any to give. Then came a dark flash from the northern gatehouse, and the Emperor knew that the city was lost.

Archaon urged Dorghar towards the north gates, uncaring of the shots whining around him and rebounding off his armour. This was his hour of destiny – no peasant's bullet could prevent that.

Behind Archaon rode the Swords of Chaos. Ahead of him, the gates' wooden facings loomed high. They were torn and dented, the steel core showing through in many places. The Everchosen gave a small grunt of surprise. He had not believed the gates would have lasted so long against the creatures he had loosed against them. Yet still the gates stood, battered but unbroken whilst their assailants were nought but scraps of flesh and bone scattered at their feet.

'U'zuhl, come forth!' the Everchosen commanded, holding the Slayer of Kings high. 'Lend me your strength!'

In response, dark light rippled along the outstretched blade, and Archaon felt the haft grow cold. The daemon within the cursed steel had obeyed – this time, at least.

Archaon brought the Slayer of Kings about in a single, smooth motion, the tip of the blade striking the centre of the gates. There was a flash of ashen light as a deafening explosion ripped the mighty gates from their archway, and hurled the blasted remains deep into the city beyond.

Beneath his three-eyed helm, Archaon smiled. The city of Averheim was in his grasp. Karl Franz would be next.

Weary and bloodied though Averheim's defenders might have been, they were not yet done. Contingencies for the city's fall were almost as old as the siege itself, and were now put into desperate effect. Cannons and helblasters were abandoned on the walls, too cumbersome to be salvaged. The injured were loaded onto gun limbers, or hauled away by their comrades.

As the Emperor marshalled his sodden knights to reinforce the retreat from the north wall, the west wall's defenders fell back through Averheim's streets in good order. At every crossway, captains and thanes brought their soldiers to a halt and fired volleys through the deluge, clearing the attackers from the streets behind. It was slow and steady work, but the regiments kept their nerve, no matter what howling horrors threw themselves into their path.

To the east there would be no withdrawal. There, the Skaramor had burst swiftly through the rout, cutting Ungrim Ironfist's line of retreat. Deeming the burning streets a poor place to make his final stand, the Slayer King had instead marshalled his dwarfs about the bastions of the eastern wall. Fire licked the eastern sky, marking where Ungrim stood and, as the wind shifted, the death-songs of the slayer host billowed across the beleaguered city. Whatever followed, the scions of Karak Kadrin would face it alone.

From the south wall, the runesmith Gotri Hammerson witnessed the blood-mad horde flow about Ungrim's position. Ordering the dwarfs of Zhufbar to abandon defences that would soon be overcome, he hurried north along the ramparts. The steel of Zhufbar would fight alongside the fire of Karak Kadrin.

Flames blossomed through Averheim's northern quarter as the invaders sacked and pillaged everything in their path. Screams echoed through the rain as fleeing defenders were cut off from safety. Khornate axes hacked down, severed heads were piled amongst the ruins, and the northlanders pressed on, eager for more victims.



The Steilstrasse – the main route between the north gate and the Plenzerplatz – was kept clear, and this only because it was the roadway by which the Emperor and Duke Jerrod made their withdrawal. Infantry double-timed towards the Plenzerplatz, and the safety of the Averburg beyond, their retreat shielded by the knights of two realms. This rearguard repeatedly harried the northlanders, holding the horde back with steel and lightning. Each charge cost them dear. Knights were dragged from their saddles and hacked apart. Jerrod was unhorsed twice, saved once by the sacrifice of his old comrade, Taurin the Wanderer, and a second time when Deathclaw's talons raked through a warband of skull-helmed knights. Little by little, the shrinking band inched back towards the Plenzerplatz, knowing that to give in to panic was to invite death.

Further south, officers barked orders at the troops flooding into the Plenzerplatz, bringing order to the retreat. Behind them, a smoothly arching roadway led up to the Averburg, the open gates beckoning the defenders to safety. The first regiments were heading towards the causeway when a vast shadow swooped overhead, circled once, and alighted atop the pillar of skulls raised in commemoration of Gorbad Ironclaw's long-ago invasion.

Handguns sparked and arrows whistled through the air as the assembled troops sought to fell the monster in their midst. Ka'Bandha bellowed brief laughter as the arrowheads and bullets nicked at his flesh. Then the grim sound abruptly ceased, replaced by a thunderous intonation of harsh and writhing words. Black blood spilled across

Ka'Bandha's limbs, running in rivulets down the pillar of skulls. The fluid gathered in eye sockets and the hollows of brainpans, then spilled over the calcified ridges to gather at the pillar's base.

The soldiers in the square below redoubled their efforts, some noting in horror that there was too much blood, far more than could have spilled from the daemon's veins. Still Ka'Bandha chanted, and the pool of blood expanded across the cobbles, lapping at feet and ankles.



The first screams broke out moments later. Wiry arms lunged out of the blood, their dark talons latching onto thighs and arms. Soldiers were yanked from their feet, dragged beneath the surface of a pool that could not possibly be deep enough to conceal their bodies. Panic reigned as the militiamen backed desperately away. A warrior priest shouted castigations, and struck at fleeing soldiers with the butt of his hammer. As he railed at the fleeing men, a horned daemon, hunched and wiry, burst clear of the pool. Springing to the priest's side, the bloodletter beheaded the luckless mortal with a single blow, then bounded to find another victim. As the priest's headless body fell into the spreading pool, hundreds more daemons breached the surface. With one last guttural syllable, Ka'Bandha spread his wings once more, and swooped to join the slaughter.

There was no halting the rout from the Plenzerplatz. The men of the Empire had given their all in the siege of Averheim. They had endured daemonfire, had held firm against warriors who marched into death without flinching, but the emergence of daemons at the heart of the city had finally broken their will. The dwarfs alone held their ground, forming crude shield walls and rally squares in the heart of the rout. Ragged militia streamed and swirled past, bloodletters howling in pursuit. Then the militiamen were gone, or fled up the roadway to the Averburg. The dwarfs were alone, islands in the daemonic tide. For a time, axes hacked and pistols blazed across the Plenzerplatz but, one by one, the shield walls were breached and the dwarfs overwhelmed.

Even with all that had happened, the Averburg could still have held. Alas, its gates, opened to admit the retreating defenders, were too slow. Before the heavy barricades could close, Ka'Bandha was between them, a mighty claw braced against each. For a dozen heartbeats, daemonic brawn fought the steam-powered dwarfen mechanisms that drove the gate. With each passing moment, more bloodletters streamed beneath the greater daemon's outstretched arms and into the Averburg's courtyard. Helblasters flamed, and the leading daemons vanished, torn apart by the hail of shot. More bloodletters flooded in behind, hacking down the gunnery crews before they could reload. Worse yet for the Averburg's defenders, a series of clanging booms sounded somewhere in the walls as piston-seals blew and scalding steam vented into the gatehouse. The gates gave one last shudder and went still. With a bellow of victory, Ka'Bandha passed beneath the crest of Siggurd, and into the last remaining fortress of the Empire.

By the time the Emperor's weary rearguard reached the Plenzerplatz, they found it strewn with dead. The pool about the pillar of skulls hissed and bubbled. High above, the Averburg's walls ran with blood, and the screams of the garrison danced like daemons upon the air. There was to be no refuge.

Jerrod looked out across the ruin of the Plenzerplatz and swore softly. All around him, Averheim burned. Defeat had come so quickly, so completely.

Jerrod sensed motion to his left, and turned in his saddle to see Deathclaw land beside him. Karl Franz's face was no less stricken than his own, but then Averheim had been his city, and the last bastion of his people.

'Your knights fought well,' said the Emperor, at last. 'We couldn't have held as long as we did without them.'

'For all the good it has done.'

'Every day of defiance was a victory,' the Emperor corrected. 'And my defiance, at least, is not yet done.'

He flung out an arm in the direction of the Steilstrasse, where black banners and a golden helm could be seen through the shifting smoke.

'At the head of this horde rides the one they name the Everchosen. He is the Dark Gods' chief emissary upon this world. Kill him, and we may yet thwart their purpose. We will at least make an ending worthy of the telling.' He paused. 'I would reckon our chances better if a few good knights of Bretonnia rode with us. Perhaps your Lady will see fit to bless our cause?'

'Is Sigmar's blessing not enough?' Jerrod asked, his spirits peculiarly lifted by the Emperor's words.

'He will ride with us, sure enough,' the Emperor replied. 'But in these dark days I will take the aid of any god who will offer it.'

Neither man said anything for a moment. In the middle-distance, the black banners drew steadily nearer.

'One last charge, then?' Jerrod asked at last.

'One last charge,' the Emperor agreed. 'Let us make an end they will remember.'

THE LADY'S CHOSEN

The Emperor's knights did not ride into battle alone. Those sons of Bretonnia who yet remained had sworn their strength would defend the realm of their ancient rivals, and they steered true to that course, even in that final hour.



JERROD, LANDLESS DUKE OF BRETONNIA

Though Jerrod had not realised it at the time, he had borne witness to the opening battles of the End Times, when Bretonnia was plunged into civil war. Since then, the former Duke of Quenelles had fought on many battlefields – even in defence of an Empire he always held to be an upstart foe. With Bretonnia a plague-ravaged wasteland, and his king long dead, Jerrod fought on only because he believed it his duty to do so. Faith in the Lady was all that sustained him, but it granted him purpose enough to confront the blood-mad horrors of Archaon's horde.



THE COMPANIONS OF QUENELLES

At Jerrod's side fought the same knights who had shared his every battlefield since the earliest days of the Bretonnian civil war – or rather, those who had survived those battlefields. Gioffre of Anglaron had died beneath Krell's axe at La Maisontaal, Raynor and Hernald during the desperate battle for Altdorf. All told, scarce three-score knights survived from a company that had once numbered in the hundreds. However, they were the cream of what Bretonnia had once offered, driven by duty and their Lady to stand against evil wherever it was found – even in the defence of the Empire. They would forge fresh legends before the battle was done.



THE MOB

Jerrod's knights might have fought for such concepts as honour and duty, but the peasants who had followed them to Averheim battled on purely for survival. Even more ragged than was the norm, the commoners bore a motley collection of heraldry, for they had come from every province within despoiled Bretonnia. Most were masterless, but had rightly judged that they stood a better chance of survival by following in Jerrod's wake, than by striking out for themselves into the beastman-haunted landscape. Many a Chaos worshipper had underestimated these peasants, thinking them weak and cowardly. Both of these judgements were true, but the warriors of the mob were also desperate, which counted for more than strength or valour in those terrible times.

Duke Jerrod
Bretonnian Lord

Charise of the Shining Stars
Damsel of the Lady

The Dawnstars
One lance of Pegasus Knights

The Companions of Quenelles
Three lances of Knights of the Realm

The Mob
Five levies of Men-at-arms, three levies of Peasant Bowmen

THE THRONG OF DOOM

As the Emperor loosed his final charge against the forces of Chaos, the dwarfs held firm upon the eastern wall. They had chosen their killing ground, and would fight to the death in its defence – so swore the deeping kin of the mountains.



UNGRIM IRONFIST

The crown of Karak Kadrin lay heavy on Ungrim's brow, for it was a reminder of those he had failed. With each day that passed, the king's need to fulfil his slayer's oath grew. Only in glorious death would his honour, and that of his line, be restored. This fatalism did not go unmarked by the other dwarfs in Averheim. By the time of Archaon's assault, some looked to the leadership of the runesmith Gotri Hammerson, rather than Ungrim Ironfist. Some, but far from all. Such had been the losses inflicted upon the dwarf realms, that those who had taken the slayer oath outnumbered those who had not.

GOTRI HAMMERSON

Few of Zhufbar's runesmiths escaped the hold's fall, and Gotri Hammerson was the eldest of those who remained. Like Ungrim, he was determined that dwarfs and men would fight together against the hordes of Chaos, and felt only deep shame that more of his kin did not agree. Nonetheless, there were enough dwarfs amongst the dispossessed Zhufbarak who believed as Hammerson did. Thus did the runesmith bring a respectable-sized throng to Averheim's walls.





THE SONS OF KAZAKRENDUM

Slayers were a common sight in Averheim during those final days. Believing the fire-imbued Ungrim to be none other than Grimnir reborn, they had flocked to his side, certain that the king would lead them to honourable deaths. Many had found exactly such a demise, and the rest were certain their own absolution could not be far off. For those who had taken the slayer oath, those days were undoubtedly the Kazakrendum – the Days of Warring Doom. Not one amongst them wished to meet the end without an axe in his hand and a bellyful of ale (preferably Bugman's XXXXXX).

THE FIREBORN WAR-THRONG

Ungrim, Incarnate of Fire

Argunn One-Eye
Daemon Slayer

Greki the Mad
Dragon Slayer

The Sons of Kazakrendum
Six throngs of Slayers and Giant Slayers

THE ZHUFBARAK

Gotri Hammerson
Runelord

The Zhufbar Firebores
Three throngs of Thunderers, one of Dwarf Warriors, two batteries of Cannons and one of Organ Guns

The Ironclads
One throng of Ironbreakers, one throng of Irondrakes

The Holzengard
One throng of Hammerers

The Blackwater Squadron
One squadron of Gyrocopters

THE BERSERKER ONSLAUGHT

During his attack on Averheim, Archaon placed his faith in the followers of Khorne. Nurgle's children had so nearly failed to crush Altdorf, Vilitch's Tzeentchian host had battered upon the city's walls to no avail, and most of Slaanesh's decadent followers lay far to the west, pursuing a different war.



ARCHAON EVERCHOSEN, THE THREE-EYED KING, LORD OF THE END TIMES

Archaon had pledged to bring about the End Times, but first he pursued a more personal cause. He had long hated the Empire, deeming it built upon the lies of a false god. Thus, his every deed for many years had been bent towards crushing the kingdom of Sigmar, proving once and for all the fallacy of its inception. It had become his all-consuming goal, and he cared little for the world-breaking acts he would be called upon to perform if Averheim fell. The Everchosen's ash-black armour concealed a pride so monstrous that even pale Slaanesh admired it.

SKARR BLOODWRATH

An archetypal champion of Khorne, Skarr Bloodwrath lived only to reap skulls for his master. He had no flair for strategy, no desire for anything save the thudding of his daemon-axes into the flesh of his foes, and the spray of warm blood upon his skin. Skarr had been slain many times before Averheim, but each time, Khorne breathed new life into him before his corpse had cooled. Such was Skarr's unbridled battle rage that no warlord save Archaon could hope to control him. Even Skarr's gore-clouded mind sensed the Everchosen's glory, and he knelt – if unwillingly – at the feet of the Three-Eyed King.





VALKIA THE BLOODY

The Gorequeen had no lesser desire than to become Khorne's regal consort. In her mind, every skull she took was but the most infinitesimal part of a dowry offered to the Blood God. Like Ka'Bandha, she saw in Archaon's quest a chance to earn Khorne's fluxsome favour. However, she despised the Bloodthirster, and even her battle-hardened Skaramor. To her, they were all brutes unworthy of Khorne's largesse. Their devotions were born of self-interest rather than dedication, whilst hers sprung from a desire to please her wrathful liege.

THE SWORDS OF CHAOS

The survivors of Archaon's old warband, the Swords of Chaos were legend in the north. Unusually for their kind, the Swords made no attempt to earn the favour of the gods – they fought for Archaon's glory. In return, they shared in the Everchosen's rewards – the further Archaon rose, the mightier the Swords became. Such loyalty had a price. All but the most driven of the Swords were steadily subsumed by Archaon's personality. By the time of the siege of Averheim, all save the Everchosen's chief lieutenants were little more than extensions of his fearsome will. Thus were they truly the Swords of Chaos: weapons to be unsheathed and wielded at Archaon's pleasure.





THE SKULLRAGE

The oldest records of the Empire recall a warband bearing this name, whose helms were crowned with Khorne's skull rune. The tales told that the Skullrage fought alongside Morkar, the first Everchosen, and for once the tales were true. In the long centuries since, the brutal knights had continued Morkar's battle, refusing to bend their knee to any of the pretenders who came in their master's wake. Only when Archaon arose did the knights of the Skullrage pledge themselves to another's cause, having seen the glory that the thirteenth Everchosen would bring.



THE GOREMONGERS

Thousands of skullreapers had hurled themselves at Averheim, driven by the fervent need to prove themselves in Khorne's eyes. The Goremongers made up the bulk of these elite warriors, veterans of Valkia's wars in Naggaroth. There, they had fought blood-mad witch elves, had beaten aside the cruel draichs of the executioners. Walls had not saved the Naggarothi, and the Goremongers had no fear of the stone fortress that sheltered the last true army of the Empire.

Archaon Everchosen

The Swords of Chaos
Three dark brotherhoods of Chaos Knights, four regiments of Chaos Warriors, two regiments of Chosen

Skarr Bloodwrath

Valkia the Bloody

Scyla Anfingrimm

The Goremongers
Three vast warbands of Skullreapers

The Red Tide
Six warbands of Skullreapers

The Skullrage
Three regiments of Skullcrushers

The Swords of Slaughter
Two regiments of Skullcrushers

The Endbringers
Two regiments of Chaos Knights

The Axes of Khorne
One regiment of Chosen

Doomhost
Three warbands of Chaos Warriors

The Bloody Sword
Two warbands of Chaos Warriors

The Slaughtergard
Four warbands of Chaos Warriors

The Bloodwake
Three warbands of Wrathmongers

The Wrathkin
Three warbands of Wrathmongers

The Sons of Karamox
Three warbands of Skullreapers

Brokk
Chaos Giant

Valgrokk
Chaos Giant

ONE LAST CHARGE

No trumpet sounded the Emperor's final charge, no strident notes beneath the rain-lashed sky. There was just a bellowed prayer beneath the glorious colours of the Imperial Standard, a plea to the heavens that Sigmar and the blessed Lady might look favourably upon this last sacrifice. And perhaps it worked. Every man who rode alongside the Emperor that day knew a portion of Sigmar's strength. As Jerrod's knights set their spurs, a ghostly figure was silhouetted against the weeping clouds, her arms spread in shelter about the bold knights of the sunward realm. Then the prayer faded, drowned by the thunder of hooves upon cobbles. Lances were lowered, swords were drawn, and the killing began.

The Skaramor were little more than a wild mob by the time they reached the end of the Steilstrasse. Drunk on slaughter, and caked in the foul offal of those they had slain, they gave no thought to the fact that some defiance might yet remain amongst Averheim's ruins. This blind arrogance cost the Khornate tribesmen dear.

The leading warbands met their fate where the Steilstrasse and the Plenzerplatz met. Unformed and unready, the northlanders broke apart as the lances tore into their flesh, and battered swords clove down through their helms. Survivors reeled away, mangled stumps and ragged wounds gushing blood onto a roadway already slick with gore.

The ground shook as a bellowing northlander champion, his steed a thing of cursed metal and daemonic fury, barrelled forward to meet the knightly charge. His rune-axe swung in a great arc, beheading one Reiksguard and striking another from his saddle. Then there was a piercing screech, and the axe-wielder vanished beneath a mass of blood-matted feathers. The Emperor's hammer struck once, staving in the champion's helm. In the same heartbeat, Deathclaw tore the juggernaut apart, and flung the ichor-flecked fragments into the disordered mass.

On the Emperor's knights drove, on towards the grim blazon of Archaon's banner. They made no attempt to slay all who stood their path. It was enough to drive the Skaramor aside, to use the impetus of that reckless, near-impossible charge to clear a path. Had the knights halted, or even slowed, it would have seen them overwhelmed. Besides, the slaughter of those left behind could be trusted to other hands.

What little infantry remained to the Emperor charged home behind the knights. Most were the veterans of the assault on Vilitch's siege camp, and the memory of their unlikely victory amongst Bolgen's ruins now stirred them to glory. Thus, the northlanders fortunate enough to have survived the initial charge now found themselves assailed for a second time. Greatswords hewed northland plate, halberds hacked down, blood flowed in rivers, and then the roadway was cleared. The soldiery of the Empire, tasting their first victory in days, ran on through the rain, eager for more.

Jerrod lost all track of the lives he took in those wild minutes. No matter how many warbands of northlanders were scattered by the headlong charge, there was always another between the knights and their foe. Worse, the deeper into the Steilstrasse the knights rode, the more alleyways and side streets opened up to their flanks – arteries of the dying city that now spurted wild foes onto the Steilstrasse's broad stones.

Ahead and to his right, Jerrod saw a monstrous spawn – all flailing tentacles and gnashing teeth – come reeling out of one such crossway. Fortunately, the beast was too slow, its uneven gait leaving it easy prey for the lances that converged upon its leathery hide. At the same moment, smoke billowed from a burning alleyway on Jerrod's left, a savage war-cry echoing close behind.

Crimson-armoured northlanders thundered out of the darkness, their lances and the sheer brute force of the daemonic steeds' impact spilling Bretonnian knights from their saddles. Jerrod hauled on his reins with one hand, yanking his horse clear even as he brought his sword around in a shining arc. The blessed blade shone white as it bit down through a skull-runed shield, then blazed with fire as the duke leaned forward in his saddle to drive the point deep into the armoured warrior beyond. The rider bellowed once, and then slid sideways from his saddle, but his daemon-steed came on, snarling and goring at Jerrod's horse.

Staccato coughs sounded to Duke Jerrod's left as Matthias Corber's bordermen joined the fight. Lacking heavy swords and lances, they had ridden in the knights' wake, guns primed for firing, and wrapped up tight to protect the black powder from the torrential rain. Corber's first volley was likely his last – there could have been no chance to reload in that deluge – but he had timed it to perfection all the same.

Flame lanced across the alleyway's mouth, and bullets thudded and clanged into the skullcrushers. A dozen shots struck the juggernaut to Jerrod's front. Most were deflected, cheated by the beast's brass hide, but enough hammered through the plates and into its barrel chest. The juggernaut reared up, steaming blood pulsing from its wounds, then slammed down onto the roadway with enough force to shatter the cobblestones. Caught between the

fury of Imperial gunnery and stalwart Bretonnian steel, the remainder of the knights fared no better. Before the limp smoke had cleared, Jerrod was spurring onward through the rain.

High above, Balthasar Gelt had at last come to Averheim, and what he saw made him sick to his very stomach. The rain hid much, but it could not conceal the fact that the city had fallen. Northlanders surged about the walls and through the streets. They were as multitudinous and as implacable as a swarm of ants, the red and black of their armour sinister in the midday gloom.

The wizard deftly guided Quicksilver down through the plumes of choking smoke, his eyes frantically searching for survivors, or any sign that battle yet raged. Too late, he saw the flock of furies swooping down upon him, their harsh voices screeching hungrily at the prospect of a feast.

Gelt's instinct was to reach for the necromantic magics he had relied on of late. With an effort, he crushed the urge, immersing himself instead in the half-forgotten alchemical spells he had once relied upon. Casting his hands wide, the wizard sent beams of searing golden light into the ruddy-winged flock. The spell was fitful at first, the energies hissing and sparking through the rain, but grew in strength as Gelt's confidence grew. The wizard realised that Chamon, the Wind of Metal, was gusting stronger across Averheim with every passing moment. He did not know why, nor at that moment did he particularly care. Golden light sizzled and spat as it touched daemonic flesh, burning a dozen furies to ash in an eye-blink, and sending the rest to flight.

For a long moment thereafter, Gelt gave Quicksilver no orders, but circled silent amongst the smoke and the rain. He was breathing hard, but felt more like himself than he had for many long months. He could feel a darkness caged at the back of his mind, begging to be unleashed. For now, however, the wizard knew he had the strength to resist. With a sharp word of command, he urged Quicksilver down towards Averheim.

On the east wall, many of Ungrim's slayers met the deaths they had desired for so long. They had done so gloriously, felling wave after wave of maddened Skaramor, with a skill that even the most battle-hardened of the northlanders would never have possessed. The dwarfs fought upon the rampart of the Magnusspitze. Their ring of axes had begun ten deep, but now was a mere three or four at its thickest point. Crimson-clad corpses lay scattered across the Magnusspitze's stones, proof that the fallen slayers had died well, but they lay never so thick as where Ungrim Ironfist's ancestral axe swung its wicked arcs.

Long had the dwarfs held out, but now it seemed that their doom was at last come. Scyla Anfingrimm had followed his slaughterer's instinct to the Magnusspitze, and the truest savages of Archaon's host had come in his wake. There were axe-wielding warriors neither fully man nor wholly beast; mutated giants, who sought to silence their own eternal agonies in the death-screams of their foes; forsaken warriors, cast adrift from the gods' shifting gaze and onto the path of spawndom. And there were scores of mindless spawn, come leaping, slithering, running and crawling across Averheim's stones, drawn to Scyla by some unknown instinct.

While the Skaramor had been held upon the Magnusspitze's stairs and fought a few dozen at a time, there was no way to contain Scyla's howling host. With gangling limbs and snapping maws, the wretches hauled their way up the tower's flanks, bursting onto the ramparts. The Sons of Kazakrendum fought back-to-back, death-songs swelling into low and beautiful harmony as the brutes came on.





Axes hacked down into twisted flesh and were wrenched free. Even so, the slayers died, crushed beneath the dying monsters, or torn apart by talons and snapping maws.

Ungrim Ironfist held his ground at the top of the Magnusspitze's stairway. The Slayer King's arms were weary, and the Axe of Dargo notched in many places. Yet still Ungrim fought on, his inviolate will buttressed by a power he did not truly understand. The fury of Aqshy, the Wind of Fire, bubbled and raged in Ungrim's flesh. Flame spun around him like a living cloak, burning unclean beasts to ash, but leaving nearby slayers unmarked. Fire burst from his lips with every battle cry, flooding down the worn steps to sweep them clean of the brutes who gathered there.

A giant lurched out of the flames, flesh crackling and ablaze. Its club, a gnarled tree trunk, smashed down towards the Slayer King's helm. Ungrim dove aside, the strike intended to crush him flat instead pulverising the stones upon which he had stood. The Axe of Dargo swept out, fire rippling along its blade, and the giant fell forward, hamstrung and roaring in pain. A moment later, the brute fell silent, for Ungrim's second strike had buried the axe-blade in the giant's brain.

It was then that Scyla struck. The monstrous spawn came bounding up the Magnusspitze's stair on all fours, knuckling the ground with every leap. His scaled shoulders barged through the knot of mutated warriors gathered at the stairway's head, uncaring that the impact sent his allies tumbling to their deaths far below. Ungrim saw the danger, tried to wrench his axe-blade free of the giant's skull, but the steel was caught fast in a prison of dead flesh.

Scyla was on top of the Slayer King a heartbeat later. Flames licked at the spawn's black-furred arms, but he forged on, insensate to the pain. One massive knuckled fist slammed full into the Slayer King's face, buckling his gromril helm and pulverising his oft-broken nose. The other closed about the cloak of ruddy dragon scales that hung from Ungrim's shoulders. The dwarf was yanked from his feet, the Axe of Dargo slipping from his fingers. Once, twice, three times, Scyla brandished the king as an improvised flail, scattering slayers left and right with each swing. On the third swing, Ungrim's straining fingers closed upon the haft of a runic axe. As Scyla drew back his arm for a fourth time, the king let fly.

Flames trailed behind the axe as it travelled the short distance to its target. Ungrim had aimed for the centre of Scyla's forehead, but his corkscrewing motion made his aim less than steady. Scyla's sudden howl of pain echoed across the Magnusspitze as the axe-blade bit deep into the brow above the spawn's right eye, shattering the bone and pulping the beady orb beneath. Clapping a massive hand to his face, Scyla instinctively released Ungrim from his grasp.

The Slayer King bounced twice, then landed heavily alongside the corpse of the giant he had slain. Half-blind and wild with fury, Scyla leapt towards Ungrim once more. Rising to his full height, Ungrim twisted the smouldering Axe of Dargo free from the giant's corpse. As a clubbing fist came about to strike the king's head from his shoulders, Ungrim ducked low under the brute's swing and back-cut his axe across the spawn's muscled belly. Thick blood spilled from the sudden wound, drenching Ungrim's right side. Scyla gave a second anguished howl. His hindquarters scrabbled uselessly upon the bloody stones, but could not halt the momentum of his charge. The spawn struck the edge of the Magnusspitze's parapet with a sickening crunch, then plunged over the edge into the smoked-wreathed sky beyond.

Ungrim could not know whether his foe had survived the plunge, but he saw plainly that the tide of aberrations had slackened. Peering through the rain and the smoke to the east wall below, he saw why. Even through the murk, he could see tight gromril-clad ranks marching along the rampart, the dull blaze of drakeguns hissing through the rain and the thunder of gyrocopter blades in the skies above. The Zhufbarak had come, and Ungrim's fulfilment of the slayer's oath would have to wait.

Far across the city, the Emperor's company were losing momentum, but their goal was in sight. Perhaps half the knights who had begun the charge still rode beneath the Imperial Standard – the rest were dead, or had fallen behind to battle the Skaramor who still poured from the alleys along the Steilstrasse. Their weapons were dulled with use, their arms heavy with exhaustion, but not one amongst them considered flight.

Jerrod's arms ached, and his skull pounded, his body beset by the weariness of battling without rest. Each sword-blow came harder and harder, driven home as much by determination as by physical might alone. The duke was amazed at how Karl Franz seemingly felt no weariness. He found himself praying that whatever power sustained the Emperor would not expend itself before the battle was done and the gold-helmed Everchosen slain.

Ahead of Jerrod, Ludwig Schwarzhelm felt no such weariness, but could not tell whether his strength sprang from desperation, or because Sigmar's blessing was truly upon him. A jagged lance lunged for Schwarzhelm's belly. He struck the point aside with the Imperial Standard, then swung the Sword of Justice to open his attacker's throat to the bone. Through the driving rain, he could see black-clad knights waiting in attendance around their gold-helmed king, and wondered why they did not join the battle.

More northlanders charged into the press of combat, and their axes threw two Reiksguard from their saddles. For a moment, Schwarzhelm was alone amidst a knot of enemies, his sword battering against grotesque shields. A lance point, too swift to parry, took him high in the shoulder, thrusting clean through the pauldron and driving deep into the flesh behind. Biting back a shout of pain, the Emperor's Champion twisted off the blade, then thrust his own through his opponent's visor. There was a brief roar, then the weight upon his sword vanished, and the knight collapsed onto the cobbles.

A chorus of screeches sounded as the Knights Griffon pounced into the battle alongside Schwarzhelm, their mounts biting and clawing. Moments later, the Emperor was alongside, his lightning arcing across the packed ranks. Never had Schwarzhelm felt less of a bodyguard. Whatever transformation the Emperor had undergone amidst the ruins of Altdorf, it had left him stronger and hardier than any warrior Schwarzhelm had ever known. *Was that why the Everchosen did not join the battle?* he wondered. *Was Karl Franz now so mighty that even the famed Lord of the End Times feared to meet him without first taking his measure?* If that were so, then seemingly the Everchosen had waited enough, for at that moment a baleful horn sounded and the Swords of Chaos spurred into the fray.

The Chaos knights struck with all the force of a landslide, their impact spilling Reiksguard and Knights Griffon bloodily to the cobbles. Archaon rode in the first rank, his dark blade gleaming as it clove armour and flesh asunder. In that same moment, blood-mad howls sounded from the alleyways to either side. Skaramor flooded into the Steilstrasse, in numbers greater than any since the charge had begun. Schwarzhelm realised that the Everchosen had not been taking Karl Franz's measure at all, but had been waiting for other forces to converge before he launched his own attack. Despite the sudden ill turn in fortunes, the Emperor's Champion felt his spirits soar. If the Everchosen still believed he could be defeated, then by Sigmar's will perhaps he could.

The defenders' chances of victory had never been great, but now they began to slide further into ruin. Even well-rested, it would have taken three Reiksguard to match a single one of Archaon's knights, and the warriors of the Empire were weary beyond words. The Swords of Chaos' counter-charge had robbed all momentum from the Emperor's assault. What had been a spear of righteous vengeance, aimed at the Everchosen's head, was now a stymied and shrinking ring of desperate soldiers.

Skarr Bloodwrath led the charge from the Steilstrasse's north side. He had already claimed many skulls for Khorne that day, but thirsted for greater glory. He found it at once, his warband's blades falling first upon a lance of Jerrod's knights. The champion's axes bit down, cleaving sons of vanished Bretonnia from their saddles, and then the Skaramor were streaming past him, searching for their own skull-trophies in the chaos of the Steilstrasse.

Jerrod saw his brothers fall, and spurred his steed towards their murderers. Bretonnians rode to his side, and Reiksguard too, lances and swords levelled. The distance was too short and the blood-slicked cobbles too treacherous for the charge to gain its full crushing momentum, but Jerrod's knights made it count all the same. Lances punched through breastplates, skulls shattered beneath blessed steel, and Skaramor were ground beneath purebred hooves. Jerrod hacked down at Skarr's head, the blade of his sword a silver flame in the crimson dark. The strike bit deep into an axe-haft, and then the charge's momentum carried Jerrod further along the road.

Skarr bellowed with laughter at the duke's sudden curse, then flung his axes into the press of knights. The daemon-wrought metal arced wide, then reversed direction as the champion yanked hard upon the chains. One axe-blade sliced through gorget and spine, beheading a knight at the charge's rear. The other's chain snagged upon an upright lance. It whirled once around the wielder, the chain biting tight. Before the knight could spur away, Skarr hauled hard on the chain. The struggling victim was dragged from his saddle, across the stones to the Skarr's feet. Before the knight could roll clear, the champion's first axe smacked back into his meaty palm, then hissed down to cleave the Bretonnian's head from his shoulders.

Throwing back his head, Skarr bellowed his offering to the Lord of Skulls. The harsh cry choked off as Jerrod, closing on the champion from behind, hacked down through Skarr's armoured shoulder. The blessed blade sliced through the champion's knotted sinews, and deep into his ribcage. Bloodwrath was dead before he hit the ground.

Corber's bordermen fought alongside the knights now, and paid for their temerity in blood. Skullcrushers hacked apart the Carroburg Greatswords' left flank, only to be driven back themselves as Schwarzhelm led a charge of Knights Griffon into the fray. With every passing moment, the last defenders of Averheim grew fewer, and the Skaramor grew more numerous.

Schwarzhelm was riding back to the Emperor's side when Valkia attacked. Archaon might have prior claim on the weakling Emperor, but there were other trophies to be had in Averheim that day. Valkia sought to claim the Imperial Standard – and the skull of he who bore it – as tokens to lay at Khorne's feet. Schwarzhelm was still turning to face the Gorequeen when the spear Slaupnir lunged towards his ribs. He brought up his sword to parry the thrust, but weariness and the surprise of Valkia's assault worked against him. The spear-tip scraped across his breastplate, then shivered a thick splinter from the Imperial Standard's banner pole.

Hissing at her thwarted strike, Valkia took wing. Swooping down on Schwarzhelm, she stabbed her spear towards his open helm. The Emperor's Champion was ready for the attack, and the Sword of Justice struck Slaupnir's spear-tip halfway along its length, deflecting the Gorequeen's thrust wide of his helm. With a deftness that few others in the Empire could match, Schwarzhelm's parry turned into an effortless riposte. The point of his blade tore through Valkia's steel-clad forearm, tracing a bloody line halfway to her elbow.

The Gorequeen shrieked and soared away, hooves lashing out wildly. One struck the side of Schwarzhelm's head, the other tore the Sword of Justice from his hand. The steel spun across the roadway, lost in the melee between the Reiksguard and the Swords of Chaos, and Schwarzhelm was defenceless.

Valkia swooped again, her spear swinging round in a two-handed grip. Schwarzhelm's armour held under the impact, but he was thrown sideways from the saddle, the Imperial Standard still clasped tight in his gauntleted hands. Over and over he rolled, hooves thudding all around as the Swords of Chaos vied with the bold knights of the Reiksguard. Planting the jagged tip of his banner against the cobbles, Schwarzhelm heaved himself upright, then went sprawling once more as a black-barded steed slammed into his back. The Chaos knight rode on, sword swinging to split a Bretonnian's skull.

Before Schwarzhelm could right himself a second time, Valkia was on him once more. She came with a blood-curdling scream, wings furling and unfurling as she flew above and around the battling knights. Slaupnir was cradled like a lance against her unwounded arm, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. She knew that her prey would not escape her a third time. What was more, Schwarzhelm knew it also.

With a last burst of strength, the Emperor's Champion grasped tight upon the Imperial Standard with both hands, bringing the splintered end of the banner pole up like a spear. Slaupnir's tip tore through Schwarzhelm's breastplate, piercing his valiant heart and killing him instantly. He did not die alone. Valkia's momentum drove her onto the Emperor's Champion's impromptu spear, the heartwood shaft punching through her armour and shattering her spine. For a long moment, the two corpses were frozen in a grisly tableau, the dead locked in battle amongst the living. Then a skullcrusher's juggernaut thundered over the pair, its brass hooves trampling their ruined flesh into the muddy ground.

In the same moment that Schwarzhelm fell, the tides of battle at last brought the Emperor before the Lord of the End Times. A strange silence fell upon the battlefield as Archaon's eyes locked with those of his foe. The sense of destiny defied was electric in the air, the sense of fate sheering loose of the path set for it. Then the Everchosen swept the Slayer of Kings forward, and the moment was lost.

Archaon did not ride to face the Emperor at once. Rather, his sword-stroke had been a signal to the knights who rode at his side. Closing their heavy visors, they spurred towards Deathclaw, lances braced and axes ready in their hands. Not one of the Swords of Chaos reached their target. Those who were not reduced to cinders by the Emperor's lightning were torn from their steeds by the griffon's talons.

Archaon remained motionless as his knights were slaughtered. Only when the brief battle was done did he offer the Emperor a small nod, which could have been the barest of salutes, or could equally have been satisfied foresight of the contest to come. Then the Everchosen barked a harsh command, and Dorghar surged across the offal-strewn cobbles.

The bloody brawl in the Steilstrasse might have been sliding towards disaster for the Empire, but the contest for the Magnusspitze was another matter. Whilst Ungrim's forces were still heavily beset, the arrival of the Zhufbarak had shifted the battle from a losing proposition to a grinding stalemate.

The slayers' rune-axes had flared into fresh life with Gotri Hammerson's arrival, their ancient magic waking at the runesmith's command. Moreover, the cunning mechanisms of the dwarfen guns had yielded little to the rain, and their clockwork volleys had done much to keep the Skaramor at bay. Yet the warriors of Chaos still recklessly hurled themselves into the teeth of the leaden gale, uncaring of the lives lost in the striving. Even the unrelenting fury of a pair of organ guns, hauled nearly a mile along battered and crumbling battlements, had done little to demoralise the blood-crazed attackers. Axe-work was still the currency of survival on the Magnusspitze.

It was into this slaughter that Quicksilver bore his master. The surviving furies had managed to regain their courage, and harried Gelt during his descent. Dozens of the winged daemons had paid dearly for their pursuit, seared from the sky by burning light or transmuted into harmless golden statues that had plunged to the ground far below. But hunger held the survivors in its merciless grip, and the feast at the end of the chase loomed far larger in their tiny minds than the danger that lay in-between.

All but blinded by the hissing rain, Gelt urged Quicksilver downwards. Dead ahead, a Zhufbarak gun line loomed out of the murk, their barrels aimed directly at Gelt's approach. An Imperial company might have been startled into firing by the wizard's sudden arrival, but not the stoic warriors of Zhufbar. A deep voice bellowed at the thunderers to hold, giving Gelt time to bank clear of the firing zone. As Quicksilver's hooves cleared the runic banner-top, the elder's voice split the air again, closely followed by the rippling report of two-score handguns. The furies, their minds still bent upon the hunt, had no time to get clear. Lead shot hammered through the air, ripping the daemons to shreds.



Gelt found Ungrim and Hammerson shortly thereafter, and learned from them the full horror of Averheim's fall. Reviled though the alchemist's name might have become in the Empire, no word of his slide into damnation had reached the dwarfs. Gelt found some relief in this, but knew that it merely deferred the debt he had yet to repay.

Peering out to the west, the wizard saw lightning streaming from the clouds – proof, to his mind at least, that the Emperor still lived. He urged the dwarfs to march west, to aid his beleaguered countrymen, but met with stark refusal. It wasn't that the mountain folk were unwilling. Indeed, their ancient oaths of alliance practically insisted they do as much. But even Ungrim, his spirit filled with Grimnir's fire, could see no purpose in marching from the Magnusspitze to perish in the streets without ever gaining sight of the Emperor.

As another Skaramor attack crashed against the fortified summit, Gelt took his place in the battle line. The whole of his conscious mind was taken up by need for redemption. Had he come so far only to fail at the last? The old cantrips and conjurations flowed back into his mind like water reclaiming a dusty riverbed. His spells became instinctive, his harnessing of Chamon unthinking reflex. The Wind of Metal was thick about him, singing to him, urging him to seize control and wield its power. Even so, Gelt resisted. So soon freed from one glamour, he did not wish to risk abandoning his spirit to another. Instead, he drew slivers of power from the wind's trailing edge, fashioning them into gleaming spears and scalding vapours.

As the blood of northlanders and dwarfs mingled on the stones, Gelt cast about for another solution to the Emperor's plight. If the dwarfs could not march, another way would have to be found. Unbidden, his mind drifted back to the pale girl in the shadowed tavern, back before he had fallen into damnation. *Magic is rising,* she had said. *Much is now possible that was not before*. Somehow he had forgotten those words, had blamed them for his descent into the forbidden, but there was truth there nonetheless. He remembered the books of lore from the college vaults, recalled one spell – the Crucible – whose power was so great that no wizard had been able to harness it since the founding of the college. But Gelt could feel Chamon thick about him, begging to be harnessed to great works. Much was now possible that was not before.

When the next Skaramor assault broke apart, Gelt spoke hurriedly of his intention to Ungrim and Hammerson. The dwarfs were suspicious, but willing. Neither of them had any desire to perish battling the horde's leavings whilst the real fight lay elsewhere, and if the manling could deliver them to another fate, then so be it.

As gunfire again rocked the Magnusspitze, Gelt took wing to the tower's centre and thrust the Staff of Volans deep between its stones. Closing his eyes, the wizard flung out his arms, opening his spirit wide to Chamon. And the Wind of Metal, which had searched for a mortal vessel since the Great Vortex had been unmade, rushed to embrace him. There was a blinding flash, and a pulse of heat swept over the remustering Skaramor. All across the Magnusspitze's summit, molten gold flowed into the cracks in the stonework. Of Gelt and the dwarfs, there was no sign.

Battle still raged along the Steilstrasse. Pockets of Imperial soldiers fought back-to-back as skullreapers hacked through their ranks. The men of Carroburg and Quenelles, of Ostland and Altdorf felt despair rise up like bile. Yet each time hopelessness threatened to overwhelm them, they recalled friends and comrades lost, families slaughtered by the northlander horde, and these memories held them firm. Better to fight on as long as possible, to make the foe labour and bleed for victory. They dug deep into reserves of strength and courage never before known, spat and clawed at the northlanders even as death took them. At no time in the Empire's glorious history had so many fought so bravely with so little hope of victory, and that their deaths would go unremembered only added to the tragedy.

In the centre of the street, where the statue of Heinrich Leitdorf had once stood, Emperor and Everchosen fought a private battle. The Swords of Chaos formed a ring of swords, a wall of blades to prevent the Reiksguard – or indeed any other – from interfering in the Everchosen's duel.

The power of Azyr made the Emperor Archaon's physical equal, and the desperation of the moment spurred him to match the Everchosen blow for blow. Metallic clamour rang out as U'zuhl and the hammer of light clashed, daemonfire and lightning sparking with every blow. As their masters strove, Deathclaw and Dorghar clawed and bit, red wounds opening up on the griffon's flanks, and steaming blood welling up through the daemon-steed's thick hide.



The Emperor called lightning from the skies, the bolts breaking apart and crackling across Archaon's black armour. The Everchosen countered with sorceries of his own, sending multicoloured fire to embrace his foe. Each time the flames licked close, the seal upon the Emperor's armour glowed white, and the fires shimmered into harmless smoke. Back and forth the magics strove, their light and fury counterpoint to the clash of sword and hammer.

Again and again the blows rang out, weaving a dance so swift and perfect that it seemed rehearsed. All around, northlanders and Imperials collapsed amongst the rain-sodden dead as their skill failed them, but still Everchosen and Emperor fought. Daemonfire rained down amongst the duelling circle, setting light to the dead trampled underfoot, but still the battle raged.

At last, the hammer of light bashed Archaon's shield aside. The next blow struck home against the Everchosen's armour with a dull clang, the sound almost muffled by Archaon's bellow of pain. But that small victory had left the Emperor's own defences dangerously weakened, and the Slayer of Kings flashed out to take advantage of the opening.

Deathclaw saw the blow coming before his master did. The griffon reared away from the attack, but too slow. Instead of the blade striking the Emperor's neck, as Archaon had intended, it slammed home against Deathclaw's skull. Had that blow found its intended mark, it would have sent the Emperor's head tumbling from his shoulders. As it was, the griffon slumped sideways with a muffled screech, blood oozing from a deep wound in his scalp, senses struck clean away by force of the impact. Deathclaw might live, if any survived that day, but the Emperor had lost his firmest ally upon that bloody field.

Thrown from his saddle by Deathclaw's collapse, the Emperor rode the momentum of his fall and rolled first to his knees, and then rose to his feet just as Dorghar crashed home. The Slayer of Kings arced down as the daemon-steed hurtled past, tearing a bloody rent through the Emperor's armoured back. The hammer of light swung out in exchange, but the Emperor was tiring, and Dorghar too fast. The blow missed, and Archaon laughed at a foe so nearly humbled.

The Everchosen did not urge Dorghar to the charge for a second time. Instead, he walked his steed to the Emperor's side. As the Swords of Chaos pressed closer, shrinking the duelling-ground, Archaon readied his blade to strike the look of defiance from the other's brow.

'For years, I have heard tell of Karl Franz, greatest Emperor since Sigmar himself.'

Archaon hacked down, the Slayer of Kings blazing with fire. The Emperor's hammer came up. There was a clang of metal upon metal. The hammer shuddered, but held. Archaon ripped the blade back, and swung again.

'The power mantled upon your shoulders is not your own. I will strip it from you, and return it to its true master, the Changer of Ways.'

Again the Slayer of Kings swept out, and again the Emperor's hammer of light came about to block the blow. This time, however, there was no metallic chime. Instead, there was a brittle sound, as of glass shattering beneath a boot heel, and the hammer of light exploded into fragments.

At once, lightning coursed from the sky. This time, it did not arc out towards Archaon, but struck the Emperor with its full fury. He stood defiant beneath the onslaught for a heartbeat, then bent double, and at last fell to his knees. In the skies above, the flow of lightning suddenly reversed, running back into the roiling clouds like water somehow drawn up into a faucet.

To Archaon's surprise, the Emperor was on his feet before the last of the lightning had faded, gauntleted fist swinging. The Everchosen laughed and swung his shield wide. The heavy steel caught the Emperor across the face and chest, knocking him to the ground once more, blood streaming from his face.

Archaon advanced a pace, his blade ready in his hand. 'Pathetic. The lightning has fled, and you are scarcely worth the effort of killing. You have no army, no Empire. No god favours you. No god cares if you live or die.'

'Perhaps,' the Emperor said, 'but I possess something that you will never have.'

Archaon snorted with amusement. 'Really? Enlighten me. What could you possibly have that I lack?'

Too late, he detected the build-up of magic, and knew that Karl Franz had somehow sensed it first.

The Emperor wiped blood from his broken mouth, and smiled. 'Hope.'

The golden glow that suddenly flared across the Steilstrasse could be seen all across Averheim. Before the flash had faded, molten gold came running up through the cracks in the cobblestones. It rose over the dead and wounded, reforming into hundreds of statues that stood silent amongst the raging battle. A second flash followed a heartbeat later, and the statues were statues no more, but dwarfs ready and eager for battle.

This was the magic of the Crucible: the ability to turn living flesh to biddable metal, and back again without harm. Gelt had toyed with such magics for decades, but the results had never been less than fatal. Only that day, with Chamon's voice sharp and clear in his mind, and its power streaming through his blood, could the wizard have achieved such a feat – much less been able to have the transmuted ore flow like a river through the bedrock. Even so, the casting had been imperfect, and not all the transmuted had been restored. Scores of dwarfs would never fight again, would last until the end of the world in their new, auric forms, but counting the cost would have to wait. For now, there was a battle to fight.

Under Hammerson's steady gaze, the Zhufbarak fought to relieve the embattled humans. They hacked the Skaramor apart even as the northlanders attempted to do the same to those who remained from the Emperor's charge. Ungrim Ironfist was moving before the golden light had fully faded from his body, the Axe of Dargo cleaving true through a Skaramor chieftain. The slayerkin came behind their king, a blur of axes, foreheads and fists that swept over the northlanders.

Without a word, Archaon's warband shifted to face the new danger. The ring of swords was abandoned as thick shields clanged together. They need not have bothered. Ungrim Ironfist had fought in more shield walls than he could remember, and could spot their weaknesses as plain as gromril ore in worthless rock. The Slayer King's axe came down. It clove apart two shields that were a fraction less steady than those to either side, and left one of Archaon's warriors in two meaty halves upon the ground. Another northlander waited beyond, swinging for Ungrim's head, but the blade glanced off his crown, and its owner fell lifeless a moment after.

Slayers burst in through the gap their king had made, and the shield wall began to collapse from the inside. Ahead of them, Ungrim reached Archaon just as the Everchosen brought his sword around to end the Emperor's life. The axe blade bit into the Slayer of King's daemon-steel inches above its guard, throwing the killing strike wide and sending Archaon staggering back. Ungrim pressed on, fire trailing in his wake, but the Everchosen's shield stood as a bulwark against every attack.

Balthasar Gelt stood amidst a widening circle of dwarfen shields. Even with Chamon bound within his blood, the Crucible had taken much out of the wizard. For a time, he had been vulnerable, unable to defend even himself, but now his strength was returning. He saw the Zhufbarak had made good on their attempt to rescue the survivors of the Emperor's charge, and also that Ungrim's slayerkin held the Swords of Chaos in abeyance. And yet he also saw that his allies were still outnumbered into infinity. Time had to be bought if there were to be any chance of survival. Gelt called out the magic shackled to his soul, and again it responded.





All across the Steilstrasse, the weapons and armour of the dead answered Gelt's call. At first, the metal shifted and writhed. Then it flowed in streams and rivulets across the Steilstrasse, rippling past the battle's outer edge. There, urged by Gelt's will, it surged skyward, hardening and thickening as more of the molten ore reached the chosen perimeter. Inch by inch, a towering wall of steel grew to surround the heart of the street, severing those who fought at Archaon's side from the teeming horde in the city beyond.

No longer surrounded by the foe, the men of the Empire and of Bretonnia found their last dregs of strength. They sounded no battle cries, for they had no breath with which to offer them, but came forward all the same, trapping the frothing northlanders between their blades and the axes of the Zhufbarak.

Only to the north, where Everchosen and Ironfist clashed, was Gelt's wall slow to form. Neither Archaon nor his foe had eyes for the miracle working all about them. Each knew that to tear his gaze from the other was to invite death. Archaon's black armour was battered and dented in many places, whilst Ungrim's dragon cloak hung in tatters, but neither had yet truly gained mastery of the other, and nor would they at that hour. As Archaon drew back his sword for another mighty blow, Gelt's molten wall flowed silently up between the Slayer King and the Everchosen, separating them. Ungrim's roar of frustration was echoed from the other side of the barricade – Archaon was no less sanguine about a battle denied than was his foe.

For a span, silence reigned within the metal wall, a deep breath before the plunge. Then the sound of chiming metal carried clear through the rain as the northlanders battered at Gelt's barricade. Knowing that the wall would not hold for long, the wizard hastened to his fallen Emperor's side.

The Emperor was still on one knee as Gelt approached. The wizard slid from Quicksilver's saddle, and offered a hand to his liege.

'You found your way home?' the Emperor asked, and Gelt knew he wasn't talking about the journey from Sylvania to Averheim.

'Eventually,' the wizard replied, grunting with effort as he hauled the other to his feet. 'I will atone, if you will allow it.'

'Today was a good start, I think.' The Emperor's face was inscrutable, but Gelt felt a part of his burden slip away. 'Whether any of us will see another dawn, however...'

Across the refuge, wounded moaned. Able-bodied men and dwarfs walked amongst them, tending what harms they could, and ending the misery of those who were beyond salvation. To the north, the slayerkin, denied battle by the wall of steel, slaughtered the northlanders **cornered on their side of the wall. Then, they brought forth whetstones and honed their axes. They knew, as Gelt did, that the battle was not yet ended.**

The Emperor walked the four paces to where Schwarzhelm's mangled body lay, recognisable only because of the tattered yellows of the Imperial Standard. Gelt saw his lips move, but heard none of the words. This was partly because they were so softly spoken, but mostly because the greater part of his concentration was given over to keeping his wall of steel hale under the northlanders' blows. Time was running out.

'What did you do that for, lad?' Ungrim's angry voice cut across Gelt's thoughts. 'I was about to cleave his gilded helm from his shoulders.'

'You were not, Lord King,' the Emperor corrected, looking up at last from Schwarzhelm's body. 'I thought as you did, but the gods have lavished their power upon him. He has grown too mighty. None of us can match him alone.'

'Then we'll face him together, you and I!' Ungrim growled.

Gelt saw Karl Franz shake his head. 'My power is lost to me. We can die, or we can flee.' The Emperor shifted his gaze to Gelt. 'Assuming the option of flight is open to us.'

Gelt looked around the refuge he had created, trying to ignore the pounding in his head whose timing matched precisely with the sword- and axe-blows on the wall of steel.

'I cannot take us all,' he said at last, 'and I cannot take us far.'

'Then leave me and mine behind,' Ungrim commanded. 'The Sons of Kazakrendum will make these dufkrak regret they came to Averheim.'

'Out of the question,' said the Emperor. 'We will not abandon you.'

A deafening bellow sounded from the south-east, drawing Gelt's gaze, and the gaze of every warrior yet alive within the refuge. High above and far distant, a Bloodthirster's monstrous form was silhouetted upon the Averburg's outer wall. Harsh horn-cries and thousands of cruel voices rose up from the fortress in answer, and the clanging against the refuge wall grew louder.

Ungrim took a step forward, his voice low. 'Listen lad, we're dealt what we're dealt: either some of us die, or all of us do. Take your manlings, take the lads from Zhufbar, and go.'

The Emperor hesitated, then gave a slow nod. Away to the south, a second bellow announced that the Bloodthirster had left his eyrie.

Gelt wasted no more time, but reached into Chamon once again, savouring the strange metallic taste that came with it. His vision swam beneath golden light as the magic took over. His last glimpse before the transmutation was of Karl Franz offering Ungrim an old dwarfen salute, and the last sound he heard was the Slayer King addressing the Sons of Kazakrendum one last time.

'Axes up, lads. We'll give these krinkaz a fight they'll not soon forget!'

Away to the east, Vlad von Carstein rode to within sight of Averheim, and knew that he had come too late. The rain had eased, and the vampire could plainly see the baying horde loose upon the walls, and the smoke rising from the ruined buildings within. He could sense the slaughter on the wind, smell the proof that the last of the Empire's great cities had not fallen without a fight. But fallen it had, all the same.

With Averheim's destruction, Vlad's oath was spent. His failure to uphold the promise chafed at him. Indeed, a lesser creature might have been tempted to make one last pointless stand, to reclaim something of the lost honour, but Vlad saw little point in such futile gestures. Sylvania would need him, if it were to endure. As shafts of sunlight at last pierced the clouds, Vlad saw a flash of gold upon the hills to the west. Gelt at least had reached Averheim, or so the vampire deemed. Briefly, he wondered at the wizard's fate, but then dismissed it as an irrelevance.

Vlad ordered the Drakenhof Templars eastward once more, but could not resist one final look at Averheim's corpse. As he was about to turn away, a curious thing occurred. In the city's north-west corner a column of fire sprung up, the fury of its birth deafening even at that distance. The orange flames rose up like a fountain, brilliant tongues flickering skyward.

For a moment, Vlad thought he saw a shape amongst the fire, a bearded face, mouth bellowing a challenge. There was a presence in the flames, Vlad could tell, a valiant soul striking one last blow before it passed into oblivion. Another vampire might have sought to snare that essence, shackle it to his will, but Vlad merely watched as the features dissolved amongst the thermals, and the flames smashed down upon the city below.

Roaring, black-wreathed flames tore hungrily through the streets. The buildings in their path collapsed like trees before a hurricane, their fall casting up clouds of dust and soot. This choking mass welled up over the city walls and spilled across the Aver valley, leaving the suffocated dead in its wake. Then the fires were gone, the soul scattered to the winds, and silence reigned across the valley. Turning his steed, Vlad began the long ride home.







CHAPTER 2

The Land of Night

Spring 2528 – Summer 2528

Long ago, Mannfred von Carstein had wrought a veil of darkness and apostasy over Sylvania that had kept the sunlight dimmed, and the faith of outsiders muted. Skilled though the vampire lord had been in the dark arts, his works had been but the fumblings of an apprentice compared to the darkness that now smothered that land, and they had been weakened near to unmaking on too many occasions. It was not so now.

Nagash, the Great Necromancer of old, had made Sylvania his new lair, and had rebuilt Mannfred's enchantments with a deftness and audacity that had impressed even their proud creator. Nagash's Black Pyramid now rested in the very centre of Sylvania, upon the ragged island where the ritual circle of the Nine Daemons had once stood. A lake of death magic lapped upon the isle's shores, its level slowly receding as Nagash absorbed the energies of Shyish and harnessed them to his own selfish purposes.

Hour by hour – for day and night no longer had any meaning in that forsaken place – the violet hues of forbidden magic washed out across the desolate shoreline, both courier and enforcer of the Great Necromancer's will. Now, Sylvania was truly a land of the undead. It was a realm of stillness and shadow, of absolute order, protected by armies numerous beyond counting.

Everything that moved beneath Sylvania's hollow trees was granted life only by Nagash's magics, and everything that did not was bound to his will. In the early days of Archaon's invasion – before Middenheim had fallen to the horde – northlander chieftains, desperate for glory, had led their warriors over the walls of bone and into the silent forests and empty fields. None had returned. The dead of Sylvania were buried in numbers beyond counting, and each one of those corpses was a dagger in the hand of the Great Necromancer. Those who had come to Sylvania to earn their gods' favour found only unwilling servitude in death.

There were still those in Sylvania who possessed their own vigour and drive, but most made sure not to draw their new monarch's attention. Nagash's rule chafed upon the vampires most of all. At first, they had rejoiced at his arrival, for the sweet magics of death that hung about him left the parasites stronger than ever before. Yet the vampires were also well-used to suiting their own pleasures, not obeying the dictates of another. They had quickly come to resent Nagash's presence, their godless spirits welling up with bitterness and envy. But not one amongst them dared defy the Great Necromancer in any but the smallest of ways, for they had marked well the fate of those who had.



Even Mannfred, who hated Nagash for the effortless theft of his kingdom, made no overt challenge. Proud Mannfred may have been, but he was also fiercely clever. From the very first, he could conceive of no scenario in which he confronted Nagash and survived, and had thus chosen to serve as the right hand of darkness, rather than be scattered to the winds as a handful of unremembered dust. So had he resolved for now, at least.

Thus it was Mannfred who had marked Vlad's departure for Averheim, and he too who brought word of his sire's defiance to Nagash's ear. He did not speak directly to the Great Necromancer, who spent much of those days convalescing in the Black Pyramid, preparing for the inevitable confrontation with the Dark Gods. Rather, his words of betrayal were whispered to Arkhan the Black, Nagash's voice in all things. Mannfred had promised himself that he would see the ancient liche scattered and broken one day soon, in payment for past deceptions. But the opportunity to dethrone Vlad as head of his cursed family took precedence over all other ambitions. Arkhan would be Mannfred's weapon against Vlad. Then, his usefulness spent, the liche would be destroyed, and Mannfred would enjoy Nagash's full favour.

Mannfred had expected orders to pursue his errant 'father', to drag Vlad back by his heels in order that he might suffer Nagash's wrath. In this, he was disappointed. Arkhan simply conveyed Nagash's orders that Mannfred was to assume Vlad's command of the northern borders. The forces of Chaos would not settle for the destruction of the Empire alone – especially if their jealous gods had predicted Nagash's strategy. An attack was anticipated, and now it was Mannfred – rather than Vlad – who was expected to repulse it.

Though disappointed with the fruits of his betrayal, Mannfred drew solace from the fact that he had displaced Vlad, even if he had not completely done away with him. It never for a moment occurred to him that Nagash would favour the sire over the bastard child, but this was in fact the case. Vlad's stubbornness and peculiar sense of honour made him far more trustworthy to Nagash than Mannfred would ever be. Nagash deemed that Vlad lived for something greater than himself, even if the elder vampire did not truly understand what it was he strove for. The Great Necromancer believed that Vlad would one day serve willingly, if only he could be convinced – or broken. Mannfred, on the other hand, existed only to slake his own needs and ambitions, and always would. Distil Mannfred down to his merest essence, flay every scrap of flesh and intellect from his carcass, and still his serpent's instinct would remain whole.

Archaon had cared nothing for Sylvania, his obsession lying only with the Empire, but there were those amongst the Chaos host who saw the threat Nagash posed. Indeed, mighty Nurgle himself, so often distracted by his creative urges, had taken particular offence at a land where his blights found little purchase, and had thus set plans in motion.

So it was that Sylvania found itself assailed by a daemonic host, dispatched at the Plaguefather's own order. It was a shambling and rotting cavalcade, all seeping sores and gangling limbs, hidden beneath a thrumming, buzzing cloud of flies that stretched for leagues. This host was nothing less than a walking blight. Where it travelled, fields and forests collapsed into decay, animals sickened and died. And always, the air about was filled with the monotonous, grinding drone of daemonic tallymen taking measure of the horrors they had wrought.

Two beings led this host, but neither was entirely what they seemed. The veiled countess spoke little, but it was her will that gave the host its purpose – or rather, it was the will of the daemon Bolorog, who great Nurgle had shackled to her soul. She was dressed in the faded finery of palaces long since destroyed, her pale beauty a stark contrast to the suppurating ranks in which she marched.

The countess was the Plaguefather's most recent and greatest weapon against the undead, a vessel of entropy and renewal whose touch spurred the stale dead into twisted life. Where she trod, the graves and charnel pits of Sylvania bloomed with strange plants, the inert bones decaying into fluids teeming with microscopic forms of life. The Plaguefather had ever been a creature of fulsome humour, and saw great mirth in choosing one of the undead to transform barren Sylvania into a teeming garden.

The countess' spirit had been drawn willingly from the void of death, restored to vigour by Nurgle's almighty will, but she did not serve altogether without question. At the turning of the day, when one bleak night flowed into another and her strength was at its height, she could be heard arguing in two voices. In these debates, the countess' spirit ever strove to slip its shackles, and the daemon fought desperately to maintain its grip upon her mind and body. Each time thus far, the daemon had won, but a new battle followed soon enough.

The woman was a strange counterpoint indeed to the rotting host, but her companion was more incongruous by far. His was the shaven pate and firm brow of a Sigmarite warrior priest, his two-handed hammer an echo of mighty Ghal Maraz. Little wonder, then, that the hapless Luthor Huss was even less a master of his own destiny than she whom he served.

The mind at work behind the warrior priest's eyes was not his own, but that of a spirit who had served as one of Nagash's Mortarchs. The Nameless had possessed no love for the Great Necromancer, and had served only for the promise of having his identity restored. He had helped Vlad von Carstein defend the Empire's northern border for a time, but when that defence had broken apart he had taken to amusing himself with whomsoever crossed his path. The spirit was a powerful and malicious thing, given to cruelty and torment, and had slaked those appetites well before Luthor Huss had crossed his path. To his credit, the warrior priest had hurt the Nameless more deeply than had any for many an age of the world. The priest's punishment for that effrontery was to serve ever after as the vessel by which the spirit indulged his cruelties.



The Plaguefather had won the spirit to his cause by the simplest of methods. Like Vlad, the Nameless resented Nagash's failure to keep his side of the bargain; unlike Vlad, he had been prepared to change allegiance in order to repay that affront. The Nameless doubted that Nurgle had any intention of granting the knowledge he sought, but the Plaguefather had at least bestowed sufficient power upon him to make a formless and pastless existence more tolerable. None of this was known to Luthor Huss, whose mind was locked tight in a prison of the Nameless' making, the power of his faith bent to an unholy will.

Mannfred sensed his opponents as soon as they breached the walls of bone that bordered the River Stir. He was aware, at once, that one of his fellow Mortarchs was amongst the daemon host, but it was hardly a surprise. Others had turned against Nagash before, and doubtless others would do so in future – the Great Necromancer had a peculiar talent for fanning the flames of resentment in those who served him. Mannfred also recognised the woman as familiar, although her identity danced maddeningly across his senses without resolution. It mattered little. Mannfred von Carstein reluctantly admitted that Nagash was his superior, for the moment at least. He had nothing to fear from any other.

Mannfred made no attempt to defend the fortifications along the River Stir, nor the crumbling fortress at Eisigfurt. At either place, the vampire could easily have found himself in a trap of his own making, had the battle gone ill. Defeat would have surely followed; defeat, or the unbearable indignity of rescue by another of his fellow Mortarchs. Instead, the vampire chose to harry his opponents as they marched south, their course arrow-straight for the Nine Daemons and the Black Pyramid.

Early clashes filled Mannfred with confidence. Though he had not taken to the battlefield himself, his thralls reported that the daemonic column was a slow and ponderous thing, scarcely able to react to the wolves and spirits that assailed their flanks. Moreover, so supreme was Nagash's power, that even Nurgle's magics of rot and ruin could find little root in the bleak soil of Sylvania. By the time the invaders had reached the town of Templehof, Mannfred believed he had taken their measure, and resolved to crush them in a single overwhelming display of force.

Slowly but surely, Mannfred built up his forces on the edge of Grim Moor. He reanimated the worm-eaten dead of that bleak expanse, buttressing their numbers with wights from Drakenhof, Templestadt and Vorengheist, each regiment lead by vampiric thralls loyal only to him. Beneath Nachtrecht, ghouls struck open stone coffins, dragging the enchained vampire-kin within to Mannfred's presence. The unquiet spirits of moor and fen were summoned and bound, lesser vampires rousted from their bloody lairs. Tattered banners grew thick along the moorland, and still the daemonic host trudged south, the drone of their counting the only herald to their coming.

So fixed was Mannfred's attention on the army drawing nigh that he entirely missed Vlad's return to Sylvania. The elder von Carstein had ridden day and night since he had observed the fall of Averheim. He had clung to shadows where he could, and endured the harsh light of the sun where concealment was impossible. Such was the pace he had set that many of his templars had fallen behind, abandoned at the roadside as bloodthirst or sunlight brought them to weakness.

'Do you ride so swiftly to your death?'

The girl's voice was scarcely audible over the nightmare's thundering hooves, but Vlad heard it all the same, and hauled hard on his reins.

She stood in the lee of a black oak, a pace or so back from the roadway. The hem of her white dress was stained with mud, an open parasol resting carelessly on her right shoulder. She was a picture of innocence in a dark realm, seemingly possessing as much life expectancy as a candle at the bottom of the sea. Nevertheless, Vlad would have known better, even had he not known her face.

'I have no time for your games,' said the von Carstein, 'or those of your mistress. Speak your piece, and leave me be.'

'I have no mistress,' the girl retorted, her accent thickening with irritation. 'I carry this message because I choose to, not because she compels me.'

'Then deliver it, and begone. My patience is not what it once was.'

The girl's eyes narrowed. 'The Queen of Mysteries has been graced by a vision. Both death and heart's desire await you at the end of this road. She did not wish for them to find you unprepared.'

'Why?' Vlad demanded, suspicious of some deceit.

The girl shrugged. 'Perhaps she feels fondly towards you, even now. I neither know, nor care. As I told you, I am simply the messenger.'

'Will you not ride with me, so you can report my fate?'

'I think not. I have no desire to encounter what lies ahead of you.' She offered a sad smile. 'My time in this world is coming to an end, just as yours is, and I think I would rather meet it in my homeland.'

The girl offered Vlad a curtsy then slipped back through the trees, leaving the vampire with much to think upon.

Vlad had little idea of what would await him in Sylvania, but he had sense enough to know that his realm was threatened. Moreover, he knew that the greatest threat came not from without, from the sorceries and blades that Chaos could muster, but from the colossal hubris of the realm's rulers. That Neferata had already fled was proof enough. She and Vlad had been many things to one another across the millennia, but the Sylvanian count had never known the Queen of Mysteries to long endure allegiance to the losing side. What Chaos did not destroy, Mannfred, Arkhan and Nagash would deliver unto them through blind arrogance. In his cold, still heart, Vlad did not truly know what he could do to alter the situation – indeed, he was no longer certain Sylvania was a prize worth defending – but he had pride enough to not relinquish his old realm without a fight.



Atop Grim Moor, Mannfred von Carstein's gathering host had grown larger still, though the reason was little to his liking. Luthor Harkon, the vampire reaver lately of the Lustrian coast, had learned of the looming battle. Never one to avoid a fight if one was in the offing, he had brought his own zombie hordes down from their haunts in Sylvania's eastern marches, and now joined them to Mannfred's army with neither welcome nor permission.

Mannfred held only contempt for his fellow Mortarch, whose grasp on sanity was seldom anything other than tenuous. However, he consoled himself that the coming battle would surely provide ample opportunities for Harkon to meet with his long-overdue oblivion – and if somehow none arose by themselves, Mannfred would gladly fashion one that would not fail. Moreover, what Harkon's hordes lacked in vigour, they more than compensated for through sheer, unassailable numbers.

As the droning, buzzing procession drew closer along the Eisigfurt road, Mannfred assembled his minions for battle. Harkon's shambling hordes lay a short distance away upon the southern hills. A long-abandoned coaching inn, the Dead and Buried – a relic of Sylvania's Imperial past – marked the southern extent of the pirate's line, whilst the charred ruins of a Sigmarite shrine served as the northern boundary.

Mannfred would neither rely on Harkon's troops for his victory, nor entirely ignore their presence. The Lord of Sylvania was confident that his will was stronger than his rival's, and would not hesitate to wrench command of the pirate's hordes from Harkon if need arose. Mannfred's own zombies would head the attack, driven quickly onto the foe by the necromancers whose carrion carts were spread throughout the unbreathing mass. Only when the daemons were pinned beneath the rotting dead would Mannfred unleash his true thrust: his wights and the coffin-mad vampires.

When the foe at last shambled into sight, it was all Mannfred could do not to laugh at the paucity of the forces arrayed against him. It was almost insulting – there were thousands of daemons, but the vampire had tens of thousands of undead at his command, and could muster even more at a whim. The battle was as good as won.

The Nameless looked out upon the moor through Luthor Huss' borrowed eyes. The crest of the far hill was blotted out by rotting bodies and tattered banners, but the Nameless felt no concern. Indeed, it was gratifying that his enemies still feared him enough to assemble such a force. More puppets to dance to his tune, if only he could find the strings.

'Are you prepared?' asked the nearby countess, guttural tones running through her soft voice.

The Nameless could not tell if it was truly she who spoke, or the daemon wedded to her soul. It hardly mattered for the moment, but he had promised himself that he would unpick their binding, when the time came. The daemon was of no interest – he had bested hundreds of such creatures in the past. But the countess? She stank of self-hatred and desire, of vengeance and regret. She would make for a delicious toy.

For a moment, Huss' face twisted into a most uncharacteristic leer as the Nameless considered pleasures to come. He entertained thoughts of teasing apart his companion's contradictions, of weaving them into new and interesting patterns. Her tortured spirit would be his first new familiar, he decided, her torments the music that would accompany every victory to come.

'I asked if you were prepared?' The countess' voice, more guttural now than soft, brought the Nameless out of his reverie.

The leer faded from Huss' face as the Nameless fought to contain his wrath. Patience, he chided himself. His current body was able to contain only of portion of his full might. He would need another, stronger vessel, and soon. Perhaps one of the vampires arrayed against him? The Nameless loathed inhabiting dead flesh, but he hated subservience even more.

'Indeed, countess,' the spirit replied. 'Let us begin.'



No battle cry marked the daemons' advance, just a whispered command from the lips of their veiled commander. The plaguebearers' world-weary trudge became perhaps a touch quicker, that was all. They lurched from the road with the general air of beings who would rather be doing something – anything – else, then formed a line of battle that sought to match the one arrayed against them.

With discipline heavily at odds with their gangrenous appearance, plaguebearers shuffled into formation beneath bell-hung banners, nurglings chittering and chortling underfoot. The buzzing swarm parted as vast flies climbed skyward. And everywhere upon the flanks, betentacled beasts bounded and lolloped excitedly, impatiently covering the same ground many times over as they waited for their masters to keep pace. Deep within the host, three corpulent Great Unclean Ones chivvied and chided the other daemons on, the burble of their orders strangely peaceable and soothing.

Mannfred sent his zombies to meet the daemons as they crossed the line of black gorse that was Grim Moor's boundary. The walking dead paid no heed to the thorns that tore their rotting flesh, but hacked and cudgelled the suppurating hellspawn with rusted blades and mattocks. Fresh welts opened up on the plaguebearers' waxy skin, stinking brown blood and wriggling maggots oozing from the wounds. Plagueswords hacked down, and flies burrowed into the zombies' flesh, glad to feast upon something more palatable than daemonic gristle. Corpses spilled into the tangled scrub, jagged, greenish wounds already frothing with unspeakable fluids.

Silently, the zombies ground on, driven onto the daemons' blades by a will not their own. Scores lay lifeless and broken already, the tally of the fallen heavily in the plaguebearers' favour. Yet it did not remain so.

Mannfred von Carstein's mind was already set to the replenishment of his losses. Calling upon the death magic that permeated Sylvania's every mote, the vampire breathed fresh life into his fallen slaves, driving them into the fray once more.

Of the daemons' commanders, Mannfred could see only the Nameless' host body. There were heralds and harbingers amongst the host, sure enough, and the wallowing silhouettes of the three Great Unclean Ones, but the vampire quickly dismissed these as mere lackeys, unworthy of his attention. The Nameless was another matter. Huss' armour shone even in the darkness, its wearer sat proudly on horseback, defiant and mocking. Mannfred recognised the spirit at once, was grimly pleased that he had taken command of Huss' body, for it would make the slaying of that flesh doubly sweet. But even Mannfred's keen eyes could not spy the countess hidden amongst the plaguebearers' ranks.

Even so, Mannfred should have been wary that something was afoot. Though the pock-marked heralds amongst the daemon host called upon all manner of magics to rain corrosive filth and rot down upon the zombie horde, the Nameless made no attempt to wield his own formidable power, and was content to merely contest Mannfred's enchantments.

Away to the south, Harkon's horde pressed onto the daemons' flank. Already heavily engaged to their front, the plaguebearers could spare few blades for this secondary threat, but still the pirate's forces fared far less well than Mannfred's. Harkon had never been a true adept of the necromancer's art, and his conjurings were sparse and fragile, easily disrupted by the two seeming mortals at the heart of the daemonic host.

The zombie pirates' lines were not so tightly packed as Mannfred's. This weakness was soon – if unwittingly –

exploited by the beasts of Nurgle, who bounded through the gaps looking for fresh playmates. Never so spry as they thought, the creatures all too often slammed into knots of zombies. The beasts' confusion was quickly swamped by a desire to play with as many zombies as possible. Their affectionate flailing ripped the heart from many a formation, and Harkon's attack began to stall.

Mannfred had attention enough to spare that he took note of his fellow Mortarch's plight, but he paid it no mind. Where his forces fought, the daemons were held at bay – nothing else mattered. Once the plague drones in the skies committed themselves to the battle, it would be time to unleash the wights who waited patiently, witlessly, at his side. The vampire wanted the battle done, for it was thus far most unworthy of his presence. He found the ceaseless drone of counting tedious, the buzzing of the daemon-flies supremely distracting.

Away to the south, Mannfred saw a frustrated Harkon draw his bone-hilted sabre and join the next charge. The sight brought a thin smile to the Lord of Sylvania's face. With a muttered cantrip, he weakened the magics binding the pirate's vanguard together. His interference was rewarded almost at once. A pair of slavering beasts burst through the crumbling ranks and pounced joyfully on the pirate, bearing him to the ground. Mannfred's smile grew broader. The daemons wouldn't be enough to kill him, but the indignity of their embrace was amusing.

A clangour of bells from darkened skies signalled that the plague drones had at last joined the battle. A swarm of blades and stingers took Mannfred's zombies in their flank, jagged proboscises groping blindly for mouldering brains. Mannfred had been prepared for the attack, had gathered magics ready to reinvigorate his witless minions, but the losses were horrendous, even so. Zombies were gored by gleaming stingers, cloven by rusting swords or simply crushed by the creatures' impact. Yet there was no joy to be seen on the riders' faces, no cheer upon their sore-laden lips. There was only the crushing burden of unending ennui, and the muttered tally of the slain.

At Mannfred's wordless command, the wights at last came forward. There were five columns in all, each led by a half-dozen vampiric lieutenants. Cursed steel was ready in their hands, the tramp of their deathless feet in perfect step. Few of the plaguebearers noticed, so enrapt were they in the fight. Ancient glaives sliced through daemonic flesh and shattered gnarled bone. Lances tore through ribcages and spines, spilling pestilent offal across the moor. Bestial vampire-kin came behind the wights, their howls fit to freeze any mortal's blood, their talons savage and unrelenting.

Mannfred rode at the fore, his dread abyssal growling with hunger as it pounced. The black banners of Sylvania streamed at the vampire's back, and the caress of his enchanted sword was deadly to all who felt it. With a dozen viper-quick strokes, he cut down a bloated greater daemon before it could bring its flail to bear. Mannfred's next swing split the skull of a plaguebearer, the seething black matter inside distasteful even to him.

The momentum of Mannfred's charge carried him far past the tidemark of corpses that marked where zombies had held the plaguebearers. His columns of silent dead were like five great claws, slicing into a mass of daemonic flesh and tearing it apart. Already the heart of the plaguebearer's formation was thinning before him, unable to stand before the discipline of his wights and the fury of his vargheists. All of a sudden, there was a space before him, a gap in the rotting ranks. The plaguebearers made no move to block Mannfred as he spurred forward, but enemies awaited him all the same.

Mannfred saw the Nameless grin from behind Huss' blank eyes, but it was not the puppeteered priest that seized his attention. That honour, dubious as it was, went to the shrouded vampiress who stood at Huss's side. Mannfred knew her identity even before she tore the lace aside.

'What grieves you so, that you have no kind words for your family?' asked Isabella von Carstein, cruel laughter rippling beneath the words. For the first time in many long years, Mannfred was overcome by surprise, the battle raging around him all but forgotten. He had even less regard for Isabella than for Vlad, would have cut her down in a heartbeat, had he not found himself momentarily bereft of speech and action. He could sense the power radiating off Isabella as an almost physical force, a potency that defied his memories of a being he had always dismissed as Vlad's mistress. At once, Mannfred knew that he had erred badly, and unaccustomed self-doubt overtook him.

Not so the three vargheists who followed in Mannfred's wake. With a blur of wings and claws they barrelled past their master, rapturous at the prospect of tasting flesh not already gone to the rot. They were swift, but Isabella was swifter still. Her sword swept out, and one vargheist fell headless amongst the gorse. The second screeched into death a moment later as Isabella whipped her blade around and buried it hilt-deep in the creature's chest. The third, seeing his prey's weapon trapped, roared in triumph and pounced. Isabella made no attempt to free her blade, but instead side-stepped the lunge with courtly grace, her slender fingers brushing lightly against the vargheist's pale flank as she did so. Mannfred had recovered from his fugue by this time and hurriedly urged Ashigaroth forward, but he halted just as the remaining vargheist suddenly emitted an agonised screech.

Mannfred hauled Ashigaroth back. His eyes flicked from Isabella's thin smile, to the open mockery on the Nameless' borrowed face, and at last to the vargheist. The creature was writhing uncontrollably, the grinding and cracking of bones clearly audible as its wiry muscles spasmed. The black lines left by Isabella's touch widened and spread as the taint took hold, skin, muscle and bone decomposing into a sickly slime. With a final gurgling screech, the vargheist liquefied entirely, its once-mighty flesh falling like rain upon the gorse. Where the stinking droplets landed, the black thorns twisted into new shapes, strange daemonic growths bursting from root and stem. The whole, horrible process had taken mere seconds.

Isabella at last ripped her sword free of the second vargheist's corpse. All around, the plaguebearers pressed in, sore-laden hands grasping at Ashigaroth's limbs, pinning the dread abyssal in place. Mannfred hacked down, severing arms and fingers, but more came forward to take their place. Isabella smiled, and took a step towards Mannfred, opening her arms wide in the precursor to an embrace. Twin-throated laughter echoed across the moor as the countess and the daemon within her exulted at the vampire's plight.

Still struggling against his captors, Mannfred sent his will upon the winds, urging all undead upon the moor to come to his aide. There was a buzzing in his mind, as if the Wind of Death itself had become infested by Nurgle's pestilent swarms. Nevertheless, Mannfred refused to be beaten, and pushed his fierce will on past the droning sound.

As one, the zombies and wights lurched towards their master, their previous orders overridden by sudden need. The numberless hordes of the dead and the remaining four talons of Mannfred's assault converged upon their beleaguered lord.

Isabella was speaking now, her mocking tone shifting between her own and Bolorog's as she delivered Nurgle's long list of grievances against the undead. Mannfred scarcely heard the words, so intent on escape was he. The nearer Isabella drew, the louder the buzzing became, and the vampire knew that her touch would be the end of him. All about Mannfred, zombies and wights tore and hacked at daemons. The vampire felt the press about him slacken as the daemons were forced to defend themselves against the undead converging upon his location.



Mannfred swept the tip of his blade across a herald's bulging stomach, foul-smelling fluid spraying in an arc behind the steel. At last the press about him slackened, as relentless undead overwhelmed unyielding daemons. Overcoming the droning in his mind, the vampire sent pulses of withering light bursting from his bladed staff. Daemons crumbled all about him, and Ashigaroth at last wrenched free.

Escape was now a tempting option, and Mannfred would have embraced it unhesitatingly had his pride allowed it. But he could not bear for it to be known that he, Mannfred von Carstein, had been driven to flight by Isabella, whatever patronage she now enjoyed. For her part, the vampiress marked the change that had come over her foe, and gave the slightest of nods. At her side, the thing that had once been Luthor Huss smiled.

The Nameless lacked the sweeping breadth of Mannfred's sorcerous knowledge, but in his own field of obsession there were few who could have matched his will. Ever had the spirit sought control over those around him, be they living, daemon or undead, and in that he surrendered expertise to no one. The Nameless reached out from his mortal vessel, his spirit surging and roiling as it sought new hosts. He could not touch the wights in Mannfred's army. They possessed enough rudimentary awareness of their own to raise a challenge, however pitiful. The Nameless could have won one such contest without effort, his own dark will easily crushing the speck of black that was a wight's. To win the hundreds and thousands of such struggles required would have stretched the Nameless thin. He had no appetite for that risk, not when there were better options. Zombies had no will of their own, and any contest there would be fought purely between the Nameless and Mannfred von Carstein.

Unsettled and distracted as he was by Isabella's presence upon the Winds of Magic, Mannfred did not feel the Nameless' intrusion until it was too late: ten thousand dark sparks bursting across his consciousness as control of the zombie horde was wrenched from him. Mannfred fought back, but the black cloud of the Nameless' will was dense and suffocating, growing stronger with each body he dominated.

Submit. The ragged whisper echoed across the moor, croaked from ten thousand ragged throats at the direction of a single terrible mind.

Submit. Not satisfied with stealing Mannfred's minions, the Nameless swept on, extinguishing Harkon's mad will, and seizing control of the pirate's forces also.

Submit. Mannfred clutched at his skull as the Nameless, gorged with success, chanced his will against the vampire's. Flies swarmed about Mannfred, drawn to a feast to come.

Submit. Grasping fingers tore at the wights' armour. Verdigrised plates were wrenched away from ancient bones, and then the bones were ripped free in turn. Banners fell as zombies and daemons ground mercilessly through the undying ranks, the tallymen's drone swelling as the count grew higher.

Submit. Vargheists, too lost to beasthood to properly resist the Nameless' will, reeled and roared as his mind pressed against theirs. Disoriented and agonised, the creatures were easy prey for the Plagueswords that came to claim their undead lives.

Submit. Across the moor, Mannfred's lieutenants struggled to hack their way clear of the turncoat undead. Most were dragged down by the horde and torn apart, hacking wildly and desperately as mindless fingers tore open their bellies and throats. However, some succeeded, breaking southwards to the Eisigfurt road to the deceptive shelter of the Dead and Buried. Luthor Harkon escaped with them, his pirate finery slicked with daemon blood and pestilent fluid, daemons trudging after him in disinterested pursuit.

Submit. This time the voice was Isabella's, slender and precise where the others were raucous. The zombies and plaguebearers parted before her as she strode across a field of shattered bone and mangled armour, the gorse mutating and writhing with her passing.

Submit. The countess stepped closer, her outstretched fingers reaching for Mannfred's undead flesh. Thunderous laughter shook the sky as Nurgle looked down upon the mortal world, well-pleased by his emissary's work.

Summoning his last reserves, Mannfred drove the Nameless from his mind, the effort almost more than he could bear. As the pressure vanished from his thoughts, Mannfred veered away from Isabella's grasp, her fingers instead brushing against one of Ashigaroth's forelimbs. Withering light blazed once more from Mannfred's staff. The nearby daemons were snatched to dust and Mannfred, at last, realised that his arrogance had cost him the battle.

Before the backwash of his spell had faded, Mannfred had urged Ashigaroth into the sky. Far below, he heard Isabella's frustrated snarl, and took some small pleasure in it. However, the spark of satisfaction quickly faded. Ashigaroth was a creature of myth as much as necromancy. This heritage slowed Isabella's entropic touch, but that was all – Mannfred knew soon it would meet with the vargheist's fate.

Kinship with a servant was wholly alien to Mannfred's nature, but survival wasn't. Already, Isabella's plague drones were thrumming in pursuit. The vampire knew that they were sure to overtake him if he journeyed on foot, and he was too weakened from the Nameless' assault to attempt a sorcerous escape. Shelter was needed whilst he undid Isabella's necrotic poisons. Shelter, and others to sacrifice in his stead.

Ashigaroth made it to the Dead and Buried's walled courtyard before Isabella's curse took its toll. The dread abyssal's forelegs and part of its ribcage disintegrated into slime as it touched down, spilling half-digested souls across the compacted dirt, and an undignified Mannfred von Carstein from its back.

Regaining his composure and his footing, Mannfred turned back to face his stricken steed. The curse was unravelling it faster now; there were but moments to save the beast. With a gesture, the vampire bound the spill of souls and then tore them apart, using their dying essence to halt Ashigaroth's affliction. The curse slowed, but did not stop, and Mannfred swore at length in seldom-used Reikspiel. More would be needed, but from where?

'Come to see where your treachery has landed us?'

A scarred vampire – one of Harkon's captains, Mannfred recalled – had emerged from the inn's ruined doorway. Mannfred made no rejoinder. Instead, he took three brisk steps to the vampire's side, slammed his skull against the wall with one hand, and tore his heart clean from his ribcage with the other.

That was better, thought Mannfred, as the vampire's dying spirit gave up its power. Shredding his challenger's soul as he had the others, the Lord of Sylvania fed the scraps to Ashigaroth. This time, the influx of magic was enough to set the curse into remission. It would be a while yet before the dread abyssal could fly, but it would do.

'That the only answer you have, bilge-slime?' Luthor Harkon, always quicker than his appearance suggested, had slipped silently from the inn's interior, and had his blade at Mannfred's throat before he could react. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't tear out your heart, and throw it to that she-devil.'

Mannfred had no chance to reply, save by means of a disdainful look. There was a clatter of hooves as a band of Drakenhof Templars rode into the courtyard, daemon-ichor slicked on their armour and a midnight banner at their head.

'Leave the worm be, Harkon. He'll serve well enough if his own interests are at stake, won't you?'

Mannfred's mood soured further. He knew that voice as well as he did his own, and hated it like no other.

'I see you've made a mess of things, Mannfred,' said Vlad. 'Let's see what's to be done about it, shall we?'

DEFENDERS OF THE DEAD AND BURIED

The defenders of the Dead and Buried had little love for one another, but a desperate time made for a desperate alliance. Fewer than a score of vampires against a horde of foes, including one who had proven that he could wrest command of the undead from them, did not make for hopeful odds. However, there was no other option save to stand and fight.



VLAD VON CARSTEIN

Vlad had arrived at the Dead and Buried just in time to see Mannfred's army fall under the Nameless' sway. He had marked Isabella's presence amongst the daemonic host, and the sight hurt him more than any physical wound ever could have. Nevertheless, Vlad kept his dismay closely guarded. He trusted neither Mannfred nor Harkon to have the clarity of thought and purpose that would be required to see them survive what was coming, and wished to display no weakness that might have led to his authority being challenged. Isabella's salvation, if it were possible at all, would have to wait.



MANNFRED VON CARSTEIN

Humiliated, defeated and once more subordinate to his hated sire, Mannfred saw great opportunity in the coming battle. He didn't anticipate victory, as Isabella had already proven herself a dangerous foe. Rather, it had not escaped his attention that many of his rivals and enemies – for the separation between the two was very slender in Mannfred's mind – were now close at hand.
If he were to meet his death at last at the Dead and Buried, Mannfred was determined that Vlad, Harkon, Isabella or the Nameless would precede him into oblivion. Preferably, all of them, and loudly begging for mercy as they died.



LUTHOR HARKON

Harkon had great respect for Vlad as a leader, but little faith as to his true allegiance. Too often, Vlad had shown greater attachment to the living than to his own kind, and in Harkon's eyes that made the elder von Carstein but a sliver better than the mortals whose favour he courted. Nonetheless, Harkon was glad that Vlad was now left with the burden of keeping Mannfred in order. Despite his bluster, Harkon had no desire to test his might against the Lord of Sylvania. He had seen too many make the attempt before, and fail in the striving.



CAPTAIN DREKLA

Drekla was Harkon's right hand, which was somewhat ironic as he had lost his own left hand following the vampire admiral into battle. He was also the only other vampire in Harkon's fleet who had been present at the battle of Grim Moor and survived to reach the Dead and Buried. None of this mattered to Drekla, whose ironclad loyalty was inversely proportional to his wits. Where Harkon went, Drekla followed – no matter how hopeless the fight.



THE DRAKENHOF TEMPLARS

A once-great order of knights, the Drakenhof Templars' numbers had been greatly thinned since Nagash's return. Loyal to all vampires of the von Carstein line, they had many times been pressed into battle by Vlad and Mannfred, and they were given the most dangerous and difficult missions simply because no other body of troops could be trusted to see them through. All in all, this had taken a heavy toll on the knights of Drakenhof. The handful of templars who had arrived at the Dead and Buried with Vlad were the largest formation that remained.



THE NOSANTRA, MANNFRED'S LIEUTENANTS

Mannfred had selected most of his lieutenants out of desire that they should, on no account, prove a danger to him. As a result, very few had enough in the way of wits to escape the disastrous battle on Grim Moor. Those who remained possessed either the raw brute strength to fight their way clear, or more good sense than Mannfred had suspected. Mannfred had marked the latter group upon his arrival, and had resolved not to underestimate them in the future – if any in the Dead and Buried survived to see one.

Vlad von Carstein,
Mortarch of Shadow

Mannfred von Carstein,
Mortarch of Night

Luthor Harkon,
Mortarch of the Abyss
Vampire Lord

Captain Drekla
Vampire

Karkanoth of the Nosantra
Strigoi Ghoul King

Brachanasta of the Nosantra
Varghulf

Zaphaniah of the Nosantra
Vampire

Igorin of the Nosantra
Vampire

Bastarno of the Nosantra
Vampire

Marja of the Nosantra
Vampire

The Drakenhof Templars
Two brotherhoods of
Blood Knights

THE STOLEN AND THE ROTTEN

With their forces buttressed by thousands of zombies, Isabella and the Nameless saw no reason to delay their campaign. Sending the majority of their daemonic legion further south, they prepared to assault the Dead and Buried with a tide of stolen dead, and those plaguebearers that remained.



ISABELLA THE ACCURSED

It was impossible for any to tell whether Isabella von Carstein's actions and words were truly her own, or Bolorog's. The daemon had stoked the cruellest memories of her past life, feeding the countess half-truths to fan forgotten hatreds. Isabella loved and loathed Vlad in equal measure, for she could no longer recall if she had truly been his equal, or merely a dominated thrall. No confusion existed as regarded the other vampires, however – these, Isabella had always hated. Too many of Sylvania's get had treated her with disdain, offering deference only in Vlad's presence. It was this hate that empowered Isabella's curse, for it pleased Nurgle that the unfebrile dead would be undone by their own pettiness.

THE NAMELESS

The Nameless was delighted at the turn of events. An army of the dead was at his command, and three of Nagash's five remaining Mortarchs were his for the taking. The Nameless had visions of challenging Nagash, once the power of three Mortarchs was added to his own. The spirit had all but forgotten about Luthor Huss, thinking the warrior priest's mind completely smothered beneath his own dark will. However, Huss was a meal that had lost its flavour, and the Nameless wanted the battle done so he could seek out another living host. Glory awaited, of that he was sure.





FESTERHEART

Festerheart was chief amongst the heralds who marched against the Dead and Buried. He was a long-suffering daemon who had risen and fallen in his legion's ranks many times, and did not relish the prospect of another demotion as a result of failure. There is little in the mortal and immortal realms more implacable than a determined herald of Nurgle, as Festerheart would prove before the battle was done.



THE LEGION OF SOULBLIGHT

On paper, the Legion of Soulblight seemed a most ungenerous gift. To despatch but a single census legion into Sylvania, when other campaigns had boasted as many as three, could have seemed an insult at best, and folly at worst. However, the Legion of Soulblight was by far the largest of Nurgle's census legions, easily outmatching any two of the Plaguelord's other formations combined. Only a fraction of the legion fought at the Dead and Buried – the rest continued southwards towards the Nine Daemons under the command of the Great Unclean One Scrofulox.



Isabella the Accursed

Luthor Huss (The Nameless)

Pusregnant the Glorious
Great Unclean One

Festerheart
Herald of Nurgle

The Legion of Soulblight
Five tallybands of Plaguebearers, one tallyband of Plague Drones, one pack of Beasts of Nurgle

The Bickermites
Eight swarms of Nurglings

The Dominated Dead
One vast horde of Zombies

PUSREGNANT THE GLORIOUS

Three Great Unclean Ones had commanded the census legion that Nurgle had assigned to Isabella's command, three rotting brothers from the Realm of Chaos. The eldest – Torporgath – had been slain by Mannfred on Grim Moor, his filthy essence now trapped in the Forge of Souls. The remaining brothers, Pusregnant and Scrofulox, had sworn to avenge that indignity, and perhaps even offer up Mannfred's tarnished essence in exchange for that of their lost brother. With Scrofulox gone further south, it fell to Pusregnant to discharge that duty.



THE DOMINATED DEAD

Originally raised from rotting slumber by Mannfred von Carstein or Luthor Harkon, this horde now answered only to the Nameless' will. The zombies numbered many thousands, each pair of worm-eaten limbs but an extension of the cruel spirit's own drive. It was through their throats that the Nameless uttered his battle cry, 'submit'. So sonorous was that unified intonation that a mortal foe would have been set to flight. The vampires, however, merely tasted the implacable will behind the words, and knew that the battle to come would be of the mind as much as of the body.

DEAD AND BURIED

The first attack against the inn came shortly after Vlad's arrival. The horde of zombies to the east began the long, slow shuffle up the eastern slope, their feet churning through the mud. The 'survivors' of Grim Moor, they had missing limbs and chunks of torn flesh to show for their striving. This advance was the signal to the zombies milling on the Dead and Buried's other fronts. With a breathless hiss, the cage of dead flesh began to close.

Vlad had prepared the inn for the onslaught as best he could, though there was little enough he could do. The courtyard walls to the east offered the strongest defence, but were also closest to the body of the horde. He had nevertheless chosen to make his stand there, along with a handful of his Drakenhof Templars. Bastarno – one of the coven of Mannfred's lieutenants known as the Nosantra – had chosen to take his place beside them. Vlad suspected that he had been sent as an assassin, but had no fear of a vampire who had settled for an existence in Mannfred's thin shadow.

The inn itself was empty, for the roof was on the brink of collapsing, but the southern watchtower was still relatively strong. Zaphaniah – another of Mannfred's lieutenants – had elected to serve as lookout from atop the moss-encrusted stones. Already, he had reported that the majority of the daemon host had continued marching south, a message that had filled Vlad with mixed feelings. It irked him greatly that invaders would have such freedom within Sylvania. On the other hand, he was well aware that the fewer the foes that came to assail the Dead and Buried, the better the chances of any of the defenders surviving. Whatever befell, Vlad was glad that Zaphaniah had chosen high ground. He was brittle and cadaverous, having spent too many hours in pursuit of sorcerous knowledge, rather than strength. Better that he remain out of reach.

The western courtyard of the Dead and Buried was little more than churned mud. It was bounded by wooden fences which would serve as only brief obstacles to the horde.

Vlad, Mannfred and Luthor had agreed on very little since their ascension to the rank of Mortarch, but had swiftly concurred that their strongest fighters would be required to hold that filthy yard.

Thus, the remainder of the vampires had taken up position behind the fences. Not all had done so willingly. The varghulf, Brachanasta, was used to being a predator, not prey. Similarly, the ghoul king Karkanoth had lived long on the flesh of those he had trapped in his dank network of caves – he did not relish waiting in a trap to be devoured. However, neither had dared defy Mannfred, and had subsided readily enough before his cold gaze.

Luthor Harkon and Captain Drekla had supposedly elected to help Mannfred hold the western courtyard, but neither had any real desire to fight at the Lord of Sylvania's side. Accordingly, they stood ready on the courtyard's north edge, as far from Mannfred as possible. Of the Nosantra, only Igorin seemed



unaware of the hostility between Mannfred and the pirates, but Luthor knew a dull-witted brute when he saw one, and was hardly surprised at his lack of perception.

Vlad's courtyard came under attack first. The zombies reached the wall, fingers searching for purchase amongst the cracks and worn mortar. Vlad stood atop the stones, slashing Blood Drinker down to mulch rotting flesh and scatter dry bones. Grasping hands reached upwards, clawing at Vlad's feet, but the vampire was swifter than the eye could follow, always moving away before the straining fingers could find purchase. Vlad could feel Otto Glott's poison wracking his system with each exertion, but he bit back the unsteadiness, tried to ignore the boiling in his blood, and fought on.

The Drakenhof Templars were just as efficient, if considerably less prone to displays of bravado. They remained mounted, using the height of their steeds to reach across the wall's uneven coping stones and thrust down at the horde. As for Bastarno, he forsook the wall's defences altogether. Instead, he hauled zombies into the courtyard in ones and twos, before hacking them apart with his paired, dragon-hilted swords. Little by little, a wall of unmoving flesh began to form alongside the stone bulwark, but there were always more zombies to take the place of the fallen.

The slaughter was even more pronounced in the western courtyard. Ashigaroth might not have been recovered enough to fly, but the beast was more than capable of shredding the Nameless' unthinking thralls. Wherever the horde threatened to break through, the dread abyssal's claws raked across the fence-top, rending zombies by the score. The varghulf, Brachanasta, gave a blood-curdling roar and leapt across the fence to fight on the slope below. He pounced from one cluster of zombies to the next, seemingly insensate to the impact of rusty blades upon his hide, bellowing challenges that reverberated in the bones of his foe.

Still the zombies came on, mindless puppets hurled into oblivion by an uncaring master. Luthor Harkon's madness had returned as soon as the battle had been joined. He strutted along the north wall, bellowing orders to followers he did not have, his cutlass scabbarded more often than it swung free. He would have perished many times over had not loyal Drekla been ever in his wake, hacking apart those zombies who came too close to the Pirate King.

The zombies were too many. Four Drakenhof Templars perished as the battle went on, dragged from their steeds and trampled beneath the horde. Igorin attempted to match Brachanasta's efforts on the western slope, but a hulking zombie wrestled his sword from his grip, and he too vanished beneath the surging tide of dead. Karkanoth had crested the wall, wiry muscles propelling him towards where Igorin had vanished, but reversed his course at Mannfred's barked command. The Lord of Sylvania had already lost much to arrogance that day – he was ill-inclined to see the mistakes of Grim Moor repeated. Yet no amount of shouting could draw Brachanasta from the hill below. The varghulf was lost in his element, to which the mound of mangled flesh and bone upon which he fought could attest.

To the south, the defenders were in danger of being overrun. The zombies were scaling the watchtower as a heaving mass of bodies, and though Zaphaniah's crackling sorceries sent scores tumbling broken to the ground below, there were always more to replace them. Vlad marked the danger, and moved to assist the Nosantra. He ran to the tower's nearest flank, hauling himself up hand over hand, shouldering zombies aside until he reached the platform from which Zaphaniah fought.

Blood Drinker flashed out, sweeping the grasping dead from the watchtower. Vlad cursed silently. The world before him had taken on a crimson hue – blood was welling up through the vampire's eye sockets as the Glott's plague gained a greater foothold in his body. He thrust again, running through three zombies with a single stroke, but Vlad marked the slight tremor in his arm, the echo of weariness heavy in his undead flesh. For the merest of moments, Vlad von Carstein knew uncertainty – he did not doubt that the unnatural plague would run its course only with his death. Then Vlad's resolve returned, his brief despair locked behind the iron cage of his will, and he joined the fight once more.

Vlad's intercession had bought Zaphaniah a reprieve, and now the withered vampire used it well. A howling spectral wind built up around Zaphaniah's outstretched claws, the spirits trapped within screeching and swooping as he fed more power into his conjuration. Zombies were swept up by the gusting winds, or plunged from the tower as stones split away from the wall. The watchtower rocked to its foundations as the wind built up in speed, but still Zaphaniah chanted. The tower's entire southern face collapsed, the windswept rubble bludgeoning the mass of zombies caught in its path.

At last, Zaphaniah released his sorcerous wind, the cyclone ripping southwards through the mustering horde. Those caught directly before it were torn apart, their limbs and organs falling like rain across the Dead and Buried. Others were hurled end over end from the cyclone's path, slamming into other members of the horde with sickening force. When Zaphaniah's conjuration at last gusted itself out some distance away, the southern approach was little more than a tangle of churned body parts. But more zombies lurked in the dark beyond, and now they came forward over their comrades' mangled forms.

It was all too much for the watchtower, which shuddered one last time and then collapsed. Vlad heard the mournful shifting and creaking of the stones and hurled himself clear, landing heavily – but largely upright – upon the inn's roof. He slid down the eastern slope, cracked tiles scattering around him to smash on the ground below, then leapt a second time to land in the walled courtyard. Zaphaniah was not so swift. With a thin wail, he vanished amongst the rumbling cascade of stone – the tower upon which he had fought becoming his burial cairn.

Mannfred felt the Wind of Death's magical backdraught, heard the rumble of the collapsing watchtower. Wrenching round on Ashigaroth's back, he saw Vlad's ignominious descent across the inn's roof, and smiled. Then Mannfred realised something that should have occurred to him long before: the Nameless was yet distant from the fight, his grasp on the horde far weaker that it had been on Grim Moor.

With a broader smile, Mannfred reached out across the hillside, and began to wrest back control of what was rightfully his. The zombies resisted at first, the Nameless' residual influence too strong, but Mannfred was in no mood to suffer opposition. Gathering death magic around him like a cloak, the Lord of Sylvania burrowed through the enchantments of his foe.

Instantly, the zombies nearest the Dead and Buried ceased their advance, arms falling slackly to their sides as Mannfred took control. Even then, the Nameless' will refused to loose its grasp. Dozens of the dead were torn away from Mannfred, but the vampire cared little. Perhaps half of the zombies around the Dead and Buried were now within the Lord of Sylvania's control, and he gleefully set them loose upon the other half. To both the east and west, the pressure on the vampires' defences slackened as the zombie horde began to tear itself apart. Of the defenders, only Brachanasta did not take advantage of the change in fortunes. The varghulf was capable of recognising little through his bloodlust, and so continued to rip, gore and tear with savage abandon.



In the eastern courtyard, Vlad took the opportunity to regather his fading strength. The Glottkin plague was growing stronger with every moment, called to wakefulness by one of the daemonkin lurking in the dark. The elder von Carstein's pores were seeping blood, his pale skin reddened by lesions. Thus, as Mannfred channelled death magic to take control of the horde, Vlad employed it to rebind his own undead flesh. Gradually, the lesions faded, but the fire in the vampire's veins remained no matter what he did. For the first time, Vlad realised the depth of his predicament, that exertion only encouraged the plague to spread. He knew that he would soon perish if victory did not come swiftly.

Unfortunately for the defenders of the Dead and Buried, victory was at best a distant proposition. Neither the Nameless nor Isabella had wished to leave the battle to other hands, and had come to the besieged inn whilst the bulk of their army continued south. With them came the Great Unclean One, Pusregnant. The daemon was determined to repay his brother's banishment on Grim Moor, and had brought a great tithe of plaguebearers and their minions to ensure that the debt could be claimed.

Mannfred lost his grip upon the horde once again as the Nameless drew near, the bleak and hateful will effortlessly shattering the vampire's control. Mannfred flinched as if struck, but swiftly regained his composure, aware that several of the Drakenhof Templars were watching him closely. All around the Dead and Buried, the horde regained its unity of purpose and lumbered forward.

Submit. The Nameless' voice, breathed through his minions' ruined throats carried clearly though the limp air. It was meant to bring despair, but the reminder of his defeat on Grim Moor just made Mannfred all the angrier.

Zombies poured over the ruins of the watchtower, threatening to spill into both courtyards. Vlad and Mannfred moved to fill the gap, enmity forgotten in the face of mutual need. No words passed between the von Carsteins as they fought. Ashigaroth was a coiled spring beneath Mannfred as the two vampires fought side by side. Rivals though they were, each vampire knew the other almost as well as he knew himself, and the same instincts that each had often used to stymie the other were now harnessed to ensure their mutual survival.

Not all of the vampires were so capable. One of the Drakenhof Templars in the western courtyard was dragged from his steed by unfeeling hands. Pinned beneath a suffocating mass of dead flesh, his gurgling body was torn apart, organ by organ, the wet chunks strewn across the hillside.

To the north, plaguebearers at last reached the Dead and Buried. Harkon's cutlass hacked down the first, the daemon collapsing with an accusatory look in its eye, but dozens more came behind, thick black flies swarming all around.

A beast of Nurgle, boisterous in its approach, smashed through the eastern wall. Bastarno tried to dive

clear, but too slowly, and was pinned beneath the creature's slobbering bulk. The vampire stabbed at his assailant with short, efficitent jabs, but the daemon paid the wounds no heed. Instead, it looked fondly down at the struggling vampire, dipped its head and ran a rough and slimy tongue across Bastarno's head and upper torso. Where it passed, the vampire's face and armour bubbled and blistered, his screams of agony as excruciating as they were brief. Feeling his playmate go still, the beast looked down in momentary confusion, then bounced away in search of another friend.

Nurglings burst out of the Dead and Buried's septic pipes and into the western courtyard. Karkanoth hissed as the swarm flooded beneath the legs of the zombies he was fighting, and stamped down hard whenever a grinning midget head presented itself. Each footfall was greeted by a soggy crunch and an indignant squeak. After a dozen such protests, the nurglings fled in a bickering swarm to the shadow of an upturned cart, and began pelting Karkanoth with their own frothing dung.

A corpulent shadow loomed on the western hill as Pusregnant led tallybands of plaguebearers up the slope. Brachanasta, tiring of the poor sport offered by the zombies, was on the greater daemon in moments. A swipe of the varghulf's claws tore open the Great Unclean One's foetid guts. The daemon simply laughed, and swung his sword in a blow that pulverised Brachanasta's monstrous left arm. The wizened face at the tip of Pusregnant's tongue chortled in laughter as the varghulf roared in pain and anger, then fell silent as Brachanasta's ruined muscles quickly reknitted themselves around the splintered bone. The varghulf's bestial lips twisted into a wolfish grin, and he leapt at Pusregnant once more, his huge fangs bared.

Plaguebearers pushed through the toppled wall, and across Bastarno's liquefying corpse. Drakenhof Templars charged to repulse them, thrusting their lances forward into daemonic flesh. Handfuls of Plaguebearers fell, thick black fluid bubbling from their wounds. Others glanced morosely at the lances trapped in their distended flesh, then swung their plagueswords regardless to strike the offending vampires from their saddles.

A huge herald, his status marked by his magnificent horns, lurched through the splintered fence. His sword was crusted with filth, but no less deadly for all that. Shrugging off a templar's sword-blow, the herald's return strike hacked the vampire in half. Then he lurched on, his thrust gouging a deep wound in Karkanoth's belly. Hissing with pain, the ghoul king sprang and bore the herald to the ground, his long talons fastening tight about the daemon's skull. With a snarl, Karkanoth ripped the herald's head clear of his body, and hurled the remains back across the fence.

The buzzing over the eastern courtyard rose in pitch and volume as a swarm of plague drones swooped low enough for the flies' legs to scrape the Dead and Buried's ruined roof. The riders' plagueswords crunched effortlessly through the Drakenhof Templars' helms, while distended proboscises latched around Karkanoth's shoulders, hauling him into the skies, never to be seen again.



To the south, Vlad at last beheld the armoured form of Luthor Huss on the slope, and saw also the vile spirit who held the warrior priest in his sway. The vampire's gaze flared with dark energies. Withering bolts leapt from his eyes and blasted a dozen zombies to dust, opening a path deeper into the horde. Ignoring the burning in his blood, Vlad leapt into the space, widening the gap with short, methodical strokes. He knew that if the Nameless was destroyed, half the battle would be ended. Hoping that his unspoken pact with Mannfred would endure until that goal could be achieved, Vlad hacked deeper into the enemy ranks.

Huss' lips twitched into an empty smile. As one, the zombies in the south turned their attention from Mannfred and closed in on Vlad. Blood Drinker stabbed and cut, sending limbs and rotting guts spilling to the ground, but the ring of dead flesh grew tighter and tighter.

Mannfred saw Vlad vanish from sight beneath the zombies' flailing arms, and was torn by choice. On the one hand, it warmed his cold heart to see Vlad so ignominiously slain. On the other, he knew his own chances of survival were greatly diminished without his sire's aid. Coming to a decision, he held Huss' gaze long enough to sneer, then urged Ashigaroth back up the slope, and into the battle raging in the western courtyard. Vlad was abandoned.

Further to the west, Brachanasta's claws and fangs had shredded Pusregnant's warty skin in a dozen places. The varghulf pounced again, too swift for the daemon's lumbering sword, heavy claws latching onto the daemon's shoulders as his fangs lunged to tear out Pusregnant's throat. Unfortunately for the varghulf, the daemon's flaccid jowls made locating his throat a very chancy proposition indeed, and his teeth succeeded only in tearing away a gobbet of festering fat.

Brachanasta spat the vile mouthful away, then drew back in preparation for another bite. As he did so, the Great Unclean One opened his mouth wide. Heaving once, Pusregnant vomited a stream of maggots, bile and seething corruption out over rotting teeth and into the vampire's face and mouth. Blinded, Brachanasta tore his talons free from the daemon's flesh and reeled away, his maddened swipes scattering zombies and plaguebearers from his path. He could already feel his innards dissolving, as the rapacious organisms teeming in Pusregnant's bile multiplied within his flesh. The varghulf tried to roar in defiance, but no sound issued from his open mouth, only a spill of thick, brownish slime. As Brachanasta collapsed onto one knee, the brackish fluid dripping from between his fangs, Pusregnant brought his notched and rusted sword about and struck the varghulf's head from his body.

Mannfred reached the western courtyard to see that he had abandoned one impossible situation to join another. In the centre, Harkon and Drekla fought alongside the last of the Drakenhof Templars, a shrinking ring of defiance that Mannfred knew would scarcely last. Zombies and plaguebearers pressed close all about, the former echoing the Nameless' whispered chant, the latter droning their never-ending count.

Harkon's insanity had grown deeper as the battle had raged. He hurled nautical insults with every thrust, the tangle of words so obscure as to be unintelligible. Drekla, by contrast, fought without speaking, his heavy cutlass rising and falling like an executioner's axe, ichor and slime spattering his barnacle-encrusted coat. The captain used his hook to pinion his foes in place, trapping them beneath the brutal impact of his blade. From time to time he had to forgo this tactic in order to latch hold of Harkon's crossbelt, to stop his master's madness carrying him deeper into the horde.

A sudden buzzing from above drew Mannfred's attention, and he rolled sideways in the saddle just quickly enough to avoid a plague drone's grasping proboscis. With a snarl, the vampire thrust his staff high, withering bolts blazing from its tip. The grasping daemon burst into dust, as did the two either side of it, and those who remained veered away, buzzing suddenly angry. A beast of Nurgle bounced towards Mannfred, eager tongue lolling. Ashigaroth's talons lashed out, tearing the daemon apart in mid air. The two halves landed beneath the dread abyssal's feet with a wet thud, the creature's eyes staring skyward in puzzlement.



With a booming laugh that shook the Dead and Buried's timbers, Pusregnant charged through the splintered fence and into the western courtyard. Three plaguebearers and two Drakenhof Templars were crushed beneath the greater daemon's massive bulk, but the impediment barely slowed Pusregnant. He whirled his massive rusty blade in a slow but implacable arc, scything down a dozen zombies and the last of the midnight-armoured warriors.

Harkon saw the beast approach. Spitting an oath that would have made the hoariest of merchantmen blush, he hurled himself at Pusregnant. Roaring with mirth, the Great Unclean One swung his flail, the linked skulls

chattering as they hurtled through the air. The impact would have pulped Harkon's flesh to ruin had they struck, but once again Drekla hauled his master clear. This time, however, the captain did so at the cost of his own miserable existence. The cluster of laughing skulls missed their intended target, but struck Drekla across the chest and tore him apart.

For a vital second, Pusregnant's attention was fixed on the chunks of meat that had once been Drekla. It was in that moment that Mannfred struck, goading Ashigaroth into a leap that carried them high over the zombies and daemons that milled in-between. Pusregnant bellowed in fury as Ashigaroth's talons sank into the putrid skin of his back, and again as withering bolts of magic stripped his left shoulder to the bone. Sinew unravelled, and the flail fell from the daemon's grasp, but Pusregnant was blessed with flesh in abundance, and would not fall so easily.

The daemon heaved and twisted, trying to dislodge the dread abyssal from his back. As he did so, Harkon lunged forward, his cutlass spearing deep into the Great Unclean One's seeping guts. Stinking fluid splashed across Harkon's sword arm, and crowing nurglings tumbled forth from Pusregnant's bowels, scratching and biting at the vampire who had disturbed their slumber. Harkon ignored them, and ripped his blade free of the daemon's guts with a sound like tearing cloth.

Pusregnant bellowed again, his heavy sword plunging down to split the vampire admiral in twain. At that very moment, Mannfred lunged down with all his strength, the tip of Gheistvor piercing the folds of flesh about the Great Unclean One's skull, and then splitting the thick, crusted ridge of bone beneath.

Pusregnant's dying roar cut off as Gheistvor's steel passed through the base of his festering brain and into his warped spine. Ashigaroth leapt clear as the Great Unclean One's corpse slumped forward, almost crushing Harkon beneath its bulk.

Mannfred felt the daemon's vile spirit rise out of the dead heap of flesh, and moved quickly to snare its power as his own. Much of it escaped, streaming past the vampire and into the Realm of Chaos. Nevertheless, the greater daemon's essence was many times more potent than any other being upon the battlefield, and even the scraps Gheistvor stole were sufficient to heal the last of Ashigaroth's pestilent wounds.

So absorbed was he in capitalising upon Pusregnant's destruction that it took the von Carstein a moment to realise that everything around him had gone suddenly still. Plaguebearers stood in serried lines around him, glaring resentfully from beneath beetled brows, but making no move to draw closer. Even the swarms of squalling nurglings had scurried away to hide beneath the stinking flesh of their late father.

A slow handclap drew Mannfred's attention. Isabella sat atop one of the few unsplintered fence posts, skirts gathered delicately around her. With a laugh, she jumped down into the corpse-strewn yard, her hand outstretched. Plaguebearers pressed in close around her, the flies swelling and billowing as they came.

Mannfred had little desire to risk another encounter with Isabella, but he no longer had the need to do so. Giving the countess a mocking wave, he directed Ashigaroth skyward. Harkon, mad though he was, saw the sense in the Lord of Sylvania's departure. Too spent for flight, he ran up the mound that was Pusregnant's corpse, then flung himself upward, grasping for a handhold on Ashigaroth's flank. Harkon's straining fingers locked around a nodule of bone, and he too was borne clear of the swirling flies below.



However, Mannfred had neither the desire nor need to save Harkon's wretched existence. With a snarl, the Lord of Sylvania lashed out. Gheistvor's enchanted blade hacked through Harkon's arm, severing it at the elbow. As Mannfred sped south to report his failure, a piece of Harkon still clinging to his mount, the vampire admiral plunged back into the fate he had sought to escape.

Harkon's fall was cushioned by the thick carpet of dead in the courtyard, but not sufficiently. There was a sound like a rotten bough breaking as he landed, his lower left leg twisting sideways at a sickening angle and pitching him face-first into the mounds of the slain. Still the Lord of the Vampire Coast did not give up. Shouting with madness and with pain, he pushed himself up onto his knees by jamming the point of his cutlass downward into the trampled dead.

As the daemons crowded close, Harkon sent the heavy blade sweeping out in an arc before him, slitting the flesh of plaguebearers' bellies and groins. He shouted a fresh challenge with each foe that fell, daring the daemons to face his cutlass, to finish what Mannfred had begun.

A dozen daemons had sunk lifeless to join the mass of corpses when their ranks parted to allow Isabella's passage. She regarded the crippled Harkon for a moment, a slight smile playing across her face, ignoring the vile torrent of curses that spilled from the other's lips. Then, without giving voice to a single word, she stepped inside the arc of Harkon's flailing cutlass. Isabella's own blade parried the admiral's strike. Before Harkon could attempt another, Isabella stamped hard on the flat of his blade, trapping it against the soft flesh of his victims. The countess' own sword blurred once, and Harkon's weapon-hand fell twitching from his wrist.

As Harkon's fresh stream of agonised vitriol split the air, Isabella gestured to the plaguebearers. They came forward, seizing Harkon by his ruined arms and holding him fast. Ignoring the spittle that flecked her face, she knelt before Harkon. Murmuring calming words utterly at odds with the cruel smile upon her lips, she took the vampire's head in her hands as might a lover, and held him tight. Isabella watched with rapt delight as her curse took hold. In moments, Harkon's undead body had collapsed into foetid liquid.

Getting to her feet once more, Isabella flicked slime from her fingers with an air of distaste. It was unfortunate that Mannfred had escaped, but she could sense that the present battle was not yet done.

On the southern slopes, Vlad at last emerged from beneath the choking folds of dead flesh in a shower of limbs, the effort costing him dearly in both strength and will. Blood Drinker cleared a path for him as Vlad struggled back up the slope, but the lesions had returned, and infected blood trickled from the joints in his armour. The vampire knew that his time was swiftly running out. Not knowing that his allies were now all slain or fled, he staggered back up the slope towards the Dead and Buried, hacking zombies to pieces as he went.

Seeing Vlad begin his retreat, the Nameless bade Huss spur his steed forward. As he rode, the warrior priest hefted his blessed hammer, and readied a strike to take the von Carstein's head from his shoulders. Warned by the thud and squelch of hooves upon soft, dead flesh, Vlad swung around to face his foe, and searched desperately for a means to reverse his fortunes.

The hammer swung down. Vlad parried, the shock of the impact running up his arm and eliciting a hiss of pain.

'Priest! I know you can hear me,' Vlad shouted, throwing himself aside from a blow that would have cracked granite. 'You're a puppet, a plaything to the same manner of creature you've dedicated your life to destroying.'

Huss made no reply, but the Nameless did, the words issuing forth not only from the warrior priest's mouth, but also from the zombies who crowded in on Vlad.

'He cannot hear you. He is mine.'

Vlad ignored the taunt and ducked back, his sword splitting a pair of zombies in two. Despite the Nameless' words, he felt a spark of defiance flare within Huss' mind. The vampire bent his own will upon the warrior priest, prying at the dark fog around Huss' mind.

'This is how you uphold Sigmar's memory, priest?' Vlad mocked. 'By doing the Dark Gods' work?'

Huss gave a pained grimace. This time, the hammer came down a little faster than before – or perhaps Vlad was slower, weakened by the Glott's plague. Either way, it slammed into Vlad's shoulder, sending him spinning into a dozen grasping hands. Vlad hacked and cut, severed hands and forearms, but more came forward to hold him fast.

'I told you, he cannot hear,' the Nameless repeated, urging Huss forward. The great hammer came up once again, the warrior priest's lips twisting into a smile not his own.

'Then perhaps he is a coward,' Vlad replied, trying in vain to pull free of the zombies surrounding him. 'Too weak of spirit to defend his faith.' Again Huss' face twisted. 'Or perhaps he needs only the opportunity to prove his worth?'

The hammer smashed down again. Vlad sent his will on a foray into the Wind of Death, hoping beyond hope that his gamble would succeed.

As the hammer swept down, Vlad threw all but the last of his strength into a single, desperate conjuring. The Wind of Death responded to him as it always had, and in an instant the von Carstein's will sped around the Dead and Buried.

Through Huss, the Nameless laughed, the sudden amusement causing him to check the hammer-blow. Hundreds of broken and lifeless corpses hauled themselves upright once more, given fresh vigour by Vlad's spell, but it did not end there. The ground rumbled, the damp sod crumbling apart as long-buried dead hauled themselves to the surface. The Nameless laughed again, and bent his fearsome will to take for himself the puppets that his foe had so kindly provided. Just as Vlad had hoped.

As the Nameless took control over his new minions, the tiniest crack appeared in the cage about Huss' mind. It was the tiniest of chinks, caused by the sudden strain on the Nameless' will, but it was what Vlad had been waiting for. The vampire focussed on that crack, hammered it. Alone, he could never have managed it, not in his weakened state, but Vlad was not alone.

Golden light flared in the darkness as Luthor Huss at last broke free of the Nameless' control. The warrior priest bellowed with humiliation and rage, the power of his faith transforming the wordless shout into a raging column of holy fire. Even from a lance's length away, Vlad felt the heat of Huss's wrath blister his skin.

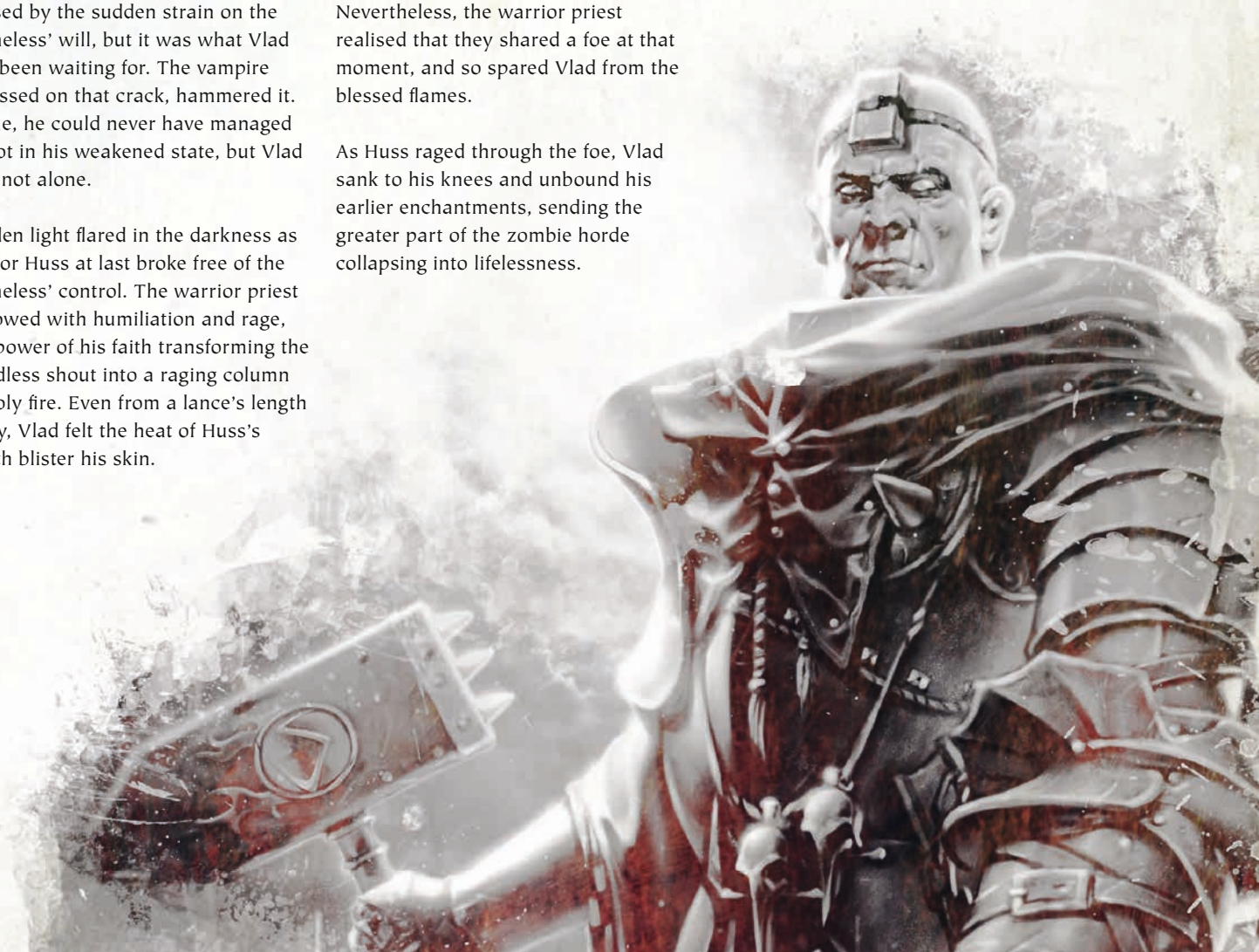
For the Nameless, with the better part of his spirit still lodged in the warrior priest's flesh, the consequences were far, far worse. The spirit evaporated like a shadow suddenly caught in the noon-day sun, his scream choked off as the power of Huss' faith blazed bright. The spirit gave a last, tremulous wail, then was consumed utterly by the fire.

Across the battlefield, zombies shackled to the spirit's will screamed once in echo of their former master, then slumped, slack-jawed. Huss did not notice, or if he did, he didn't care. He spurred along the slope, holy fire coursing forth from his hammer to consume reanimated flesh. Soon there was a ring of blackened and flaming flesh all about the warrior priest. Only Vlad was left untouched. Huss recalled everything the Nameless had seen through his eyes. He loathed the thought of fighting alongside Vlad as an ally – even though the vampire had been titled as an elector count. Nevertheless, the warrior priest realised that they shared a foe at that moment, and so spared Vlad from the blessed flames.

As Huss raged through the foe, Vlad sank to his knees and unbound his earlier enchantments, sending the greater part of the zombie horde collapsing into lifelessness.

He could not risk controlling them, for his will was fading fast, and he knew that he would need what remained to hold his own decomposing form together. What power he could regain from the banishing, Vlad once more used to check the advance of the Glott's plague. The reprieve was less than before, for the affliction had burrowed deep during his confrontation with the Nameless, but the reclaimed magic gave Vlad the strength to continue.

As the nearby zombies collapsed, Huss grimaced at vengeance denied, then felt his wrath deepen as plaguebearers began to shamble out of the darkness. At once, he saw that he was surrounded, that there were too many for him to fight alone. A second, blacker scowl grew out of the first. Riding back to where Vlad still knelt, the warrior priest hesitated, then reached low, his outstretched hand raising the vampire to his feet.



For a long moment, the vampire and the priest stood motionless as the daemons grew closer, and their sonorous drone grew ever louder. They exchanged no words, just a brief look that expressed their shared disbelief at the situation more clearly than mere speech ever could. Then Huss raised his hammer high, and bellowed the name of his warrior god. Wreathed in fire, he charged without fear into the fly-wreathed mass, his hammer striking defiance with every blow. Vlad shrugged, as if at some joke only he understood, then followed wordlessly in the warrior priest's wake.

It was a great pity no chronicler witnessed the fight that ensued. The world would never see the like again, and the two allies would surely have denied that it had ever happened, had anyone spoken of it. Both Vlad and Huss knew that escape was impossible, but that knowledge only fed their determination.

Huss was weary from months of the Nameless' abuse, but his faith was an endless reservoir of strength. His flames reduced plaguebearers to ash, the thick smoke of their passing smothering and scattering the fly swarms. His hammer glowed with golden light, a beacon of hope in the darkness. Plagueswords shattered beneath its impact, daemonic flesh shrivelled and burned.

Vlad, ailing once more from the Glott's disease, nevertheless refused to be found wanting in comparison to his mortal ally. Blood Drinker matched Huss' hammer kill for kill, the blows more ragged and less precise than Vlad was accustomed to delivering, but serviceable enough. Huss fought for holy vengeance, to seek absolution for the deeds he had performed when under the Nameless' control, but the vampire fought only so that he might catch sight of Isabella one last time.

Vlad's wish was granted at last in the moon-cast shadow of the Dead and Buried's ruined tower. At one moment, Huss was tall in his stirrups, his hammer staving in the skull of a corpulent herald. At the next, a shadow dropped onto the haunches of his steed from high amongst the rubble, and blood sprayed into the darkness as Isabella slit his throat from ear to ear.

Vlad heard Huss' last gurgling cry, and turned to see his beloved Isabella tip the warrior priest's body from the saddle. With fluid grace, she then slid to the ground herself, and planted one foot upon Huss' breastplate like a hunter posing with a trophy.

At once, the plaguebearers went still in anticipation of what was to come. Vlad strode towards Isabella, sword drawn. The daemons parted before him, their endless drone muted, and Vlad von Carstein, first of the vampire counts, went to meet his destiny.

'Hiding behind a priest,' Isabella tutted as Vlad approached. 'Have you truly become so weak?'

Vlad halted two paces from her, fighting back elation and dismay. The plaguebearers that encircled the vampire were so distant from his thoughts that they might as well have not existed.

'I hide behind no one,' he replied, taking a step to his left. Isabella matched the motion, and the two began to circle one another. 'And I find my recent allies – however they might fly in the face of tradition – far more palatable than those you've chosen. But then, you're not truly who you appear, are you? The stench of the daemon is not easily hidden.'

Isabella smiled thinly. 'Oh, it is I, my beloved. The daemon you sense merely grants me the power to indulge my wishes. Great Nurgle has yielded what you always withheld: the chance to seize my own destiny, and the ability to shape it.'

'You were my wife. I denied you nothing.'

'I was your pet, forever in your shadow,' she retorted.

'The daemon is twisting your memories. We were always equals.'

Vlad came to a halt and doubled over as a fit of coughing wracked his body, infected blood welling across his face.

'Then prove it,' said Isabella. 'Join me in the Plaguefather's service. You cannot escape the blessing in your blood this side of death, so embrace it. Be reborn a vessel of decay.'

'Then that is what all this was about?' Vlad asked, his poise mostly recovered. 'Recruiting me to the cause of your master?'

'No,' she said. 'My labours in Sylvania have only just begun. But Great Nurgle will accept you, if I wish it. He has told me so.'

Vlad did not even have to consider his response. Every day since Nagash had resurrected him, he had sought to restore his beloved Isabella, had compromised and bargained for her return. Now she stood before him, there could be only one answer.

'No,' he said sadly. 'What you ask, I cannot give.' He dropped his sword. 'I once thought I would have passed into any darkness to be at your side, but I was wrong.'

Isabella looked at him sharply. 'Reconsider, beloved. There is no escape for you here. Refusal means death.'

Vlad snorted. 'I came back from the void for who you once were, not to be taunted by the creature you have become. I return there gladly – this world has nothing else to offer me.'

Vlad did not move as Isabella raised her hands to his face. For a moment, he thought he saw a flicker of remorse in her dark eyes. Then, cold fingers brushed his skin, and the boiling in his blood grew swiftly to a raging crescendo.

In the last moment before death claimed him, Vlad von Carstein swore revenge upon a god.







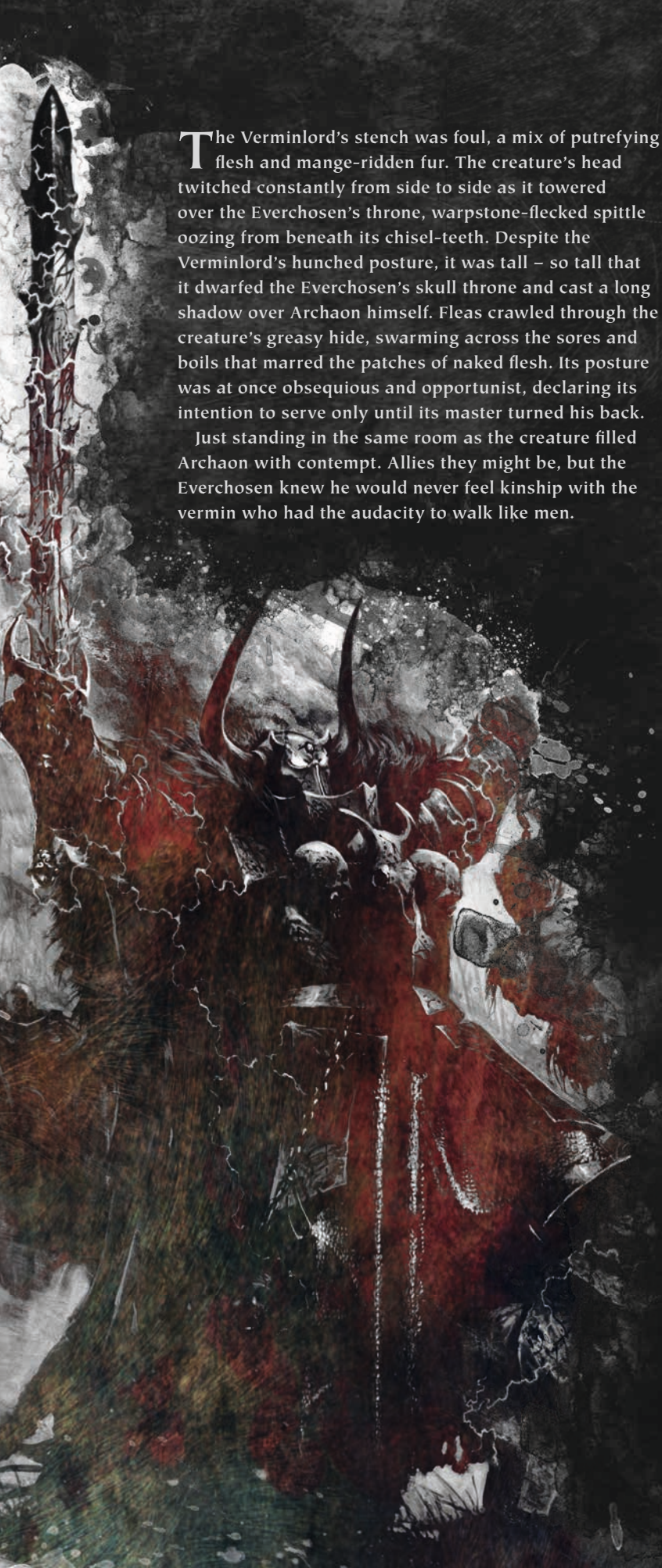












The Verminlord's stench was foul, a mix of putrefying flesh and mange-ridden fur. The creature's head twitched constantly from side to side as it towered over the Everchosen's throne, warpstone-flecked spittle oozing from beneath its chisel-teeth. Despite the Verminlord's hunched posture, it was tall – so tall that it dwarfed the Everchosen's skull throne and cast a long shadow over Archaon himself. Fleas crawled through the creature's greasy hide, swarming across the sores and boils that marred the patches of naked flesh. Its posture was at once obsequious and opportunist, declaring its intention to serve only until its master turned his back.

Just standing in the same room as the creature filled Archaon with contempt. Allies they might be, but the Everchosen knew he would never feel kinship with the vermin who had the audacity to walk like men.

'You wish us to delve-dig beneath the city?' the Verminlord asked, peering down at Archaon's throne, its eyes lingering where Ghal Maraz protruded from the cluster of bone. The Hammer of Sigmar was Archaon's prize, taken from the dead hand of the whelp Valten. It served both as a trophy, and as a warning to all who approached the throne. 'Is dangerous work. Expensive work. Require many slaves.'

'I understood that the Children of the Horned Rat had pledged themselves to the Dark Gods' cause.' Archaon let the accusation linger, unasked.

The Verminlord tilted its head to one side, and changed tack, seeking advantage in the situation. 'What do you seek-find that is so important?'

'Something very old. It will deliver the world into the Dark Gods' hands.'

A gleam crept across the creature's beady eyes. 'Is precious?'

Archaon did not doubt that the creature's mind was already awhirl with schemes to seize the Everchosen's prize. Did the Verminlord know how transparent its desires were? It didn't matter. If anything, it made the creature easier to control. Greed and fear were the twin lashes that drove the skaven soul, and Archaon knew how to wield them both.

'It is without price,' the Everchosen said.

'Then we will seek-find it, as you ask. I shall see to it personally.'

The creature turned to leave. Archaon raised a gauntleted fist, and four black-armoured Swords of Chaos moved to bar its path. The lash of greed had done its work. Now it was time to let the lash of fear bite deep.

'It is so precious, and so important,' said Archaon, 'that he who stole it would be pursued to the ends of the world. He would find no safe harbour in this realm or that which lies beyond, for neither god nor mortal would dare shelter him. One day, sooner than he would think possible, the daemons of the four powers would find him. Every inch of skin would be flayed from his body, his soul quartered and shredded. And only then would his true torment begin.'

The Everchosen's words hung on the air for a time. The Verminlord did not turn to face Archaon, but its scabbed tail twitched restlessly as the daemon considered its response.

'We will seek-find it,' the creature repeated, half turning to shoot Archaon a look that was part plea, part venom. 'For the glory of the gods.'

Satisfied, the Everchosen lowered his fist and the Swords of Chaos parted. Without another word, the Verminlord heaved aside the heavy door, and vanished into the night.

'For the glory of the gods,' Archaon echoed, reaching up to run his fingers along Ghal Maraz's rune-carven steel. 'Those that truly exist.'



When Mannfred returned to the Nine Daemons, he found a vast army of the dead mustering around the Black Pyramid. Legion upon legion of skeleton warriors stood unmoving beneath their banners – not just the graveborn dead of Sylvania, but the golden hosts of broken Nehekhara. Ghoul packs nested in the hills around the Lake of Death, fighting over old bones and worshipping Nagash from a prudent distance. Bat-winged monstrosities lurked beneath the eaves of the dead forests, and spirits flickered across the lake's amethyst waters. Towering over all were necrotectural constructs of stone and polished metal, patiently awaiting the order that would send them striding into battle.

Here and there, Nehekharan royal standards gleamed in the darkness, but not as many as had begun the long march from the south. Too many of the desert kings had given offence – unwitting or otherwise – to Arkhan the Black, and had thus forfeited their right to exist. To offend Arkhan was to offend his accursed master, and both bore insults poorly, to say the least.

It was plain to Mannfred that Nagash had already learnt of his defeat. It was therefore with some trepidation that the Lord of Sylvania arrived at the Black Pyramid, for he knew that failure was rewarded in much the same generous vein as insult. Seldom did a sunless day pass in Sylvania where the vampire did not curse the fact that he himself had made it possible for Nagash to return and thus blight his existence.

As matters transpired, it was Arkhan, not Nagash, who received Mannfred in the Black Pyramid's golden throne room. The Great Necromancer still slumbered in the depths of the structure, drawing the hoarded death magic into his skeletal form. The Liche King knew better than to disturb his master for anything save the most apocalyptic tidings.

So it was that Mannfred recounted his dire tidings to Arkhan, rather than their master. The Lord of Sylvania was careful to recast the arrogance and missteps – and therefore the blame for the defeat – as belonging solely to the unlamented Luthor Harkon. He would dearly liked to have held Vlad accountable for what had transpired at Grim Moor. However, he did not yet know if his sire had been slain at the Dead and Buried, and did not wish to risk his tale on such an unknown.

Arkhan listened impassively to the Lord of Sylvania's words, giving the other no clue as to his thoughts. He suspected that the vampire was lying about much of what had occurred on Grim Moor, but cared little. In truth, neither Arkhan or Nagash overly lamented the possibility of failure in the north – the vampire had been despatched as much to test the invaders' strength as anything else, though he realised it not. It was unfortunate that the battle had also cost Nagash the services of Luthor Harkon, but not desperately so. The pirate admiral had time and again betrayed himself as the weakest card in Nagash's hand, and his services were easily dispensed with. Each of the surviving Nehekharan kings commanded might equal to Harkon's, and moreover they were motivated by duty, rather than madness. Arkhan knew that replacement Mortarchs would be appointed from within their ranks when Nagash arose from his slumbers, a new brotherhood of the dead for him to shepherd in service to his dark majesty.

Mannfred's account of the battle did at least confirm the scale of the invasion. In truth, one census legion – no matter how vast – did not trouble Arkhan, not when set against the forces mustered in the Black Pyramid's shadow. Even if others followed after, the Liche King was confident that they could be destroyed without troubling the Great Necromancer. After all, the Mortarchs had faced greater odds in Nehekhara and yet emerged victorious. It was not complacency that guided Arkhan's strategy, but grim, relentless certainty. He knew absolutely and in exacting detail the capabilities of Nagash's forces, and saw, at worst, a bruising stalemate upon the shores of the lake surrounding the pyramid.

Nevertheless, Arkhan was nothing if not cautious – additional forces could only improve the chances of ultimate victory. Besides, Mannfred had failed in his responsibilities, however ambivalent Nagash had felt about his success. Such laxness required a punishment, even if it was only one crafted to humiliate, rather than leave a more lasting brand of failure. Thus was Mannfred permitted to linger at the Nine Daemons for only the shortest of times. Within hours, he was flying east to the mountains, with instructions to offer Neferata anything she wished in exchange for her return to the Great Necromancer's side.

Mannfred was less than pleased to be playing the role of a courier, but consoled himself with the fact that the depth of his failure had been concealed from Nagash's sight. Even so, the vampire fought against the command, until Arkhan implied greater knowledge of the events on Grim Moor. Unwilling to call the inscrutable liche's bluff, and thus risk the wrath of Nagash, Mannfred had at last agreed.

The Lord of Sylvania took no companions upon the journey, save perhaps his blossoming resentment. With every hour that passed, he was less the master of his own land, and more an ill-used servant. Something would have to be done.

The Neferata that Mannfred found at the Silver Pinnacle was not the one he recalled parting company with months before. The Queen of Mysteries' legendary composure was but a distant memory, her manner wild and her temper ever close to breaking point.

Part of the reason for this was immediately obvious. The once-luxurious chambers of her stronghold had been ransacked during her long absence, first by dwarfs, then by skaven, and at last by goblins. The most recent invaders had been in residence upon Neferata's return, and their corpses still lay littered about the place, their bodies bearing evidence of the most terrible wounds. Of the trinkets and fineries, the precious treasures Neferata had spent several lifetimes accumulating, nothing remained – all had been stolen or destroyed.

Yet the heaviest blow had fallen not against Neferata's possessions, but against her true passion: information. The tumult that had wracked the Old World since Nagash's return had wrought ruin upon her network of spies and contacts. Hundreds of her handmaidens had perished during the skaven uprisings, or as Chaos overtook the Empire. Mannfred suspected a good many had simply abandoned their loyalty to the Queen of Mysteries, instead choosing to vanish beneath the cover of the unfolding anarchy. Not that he said as much to Neferata, of course.

Thus, much to Mannfred's surprise, Neferata swiftly acceded to his request. The life she had spent centuries building was gone forever, and the Queen of Mysteries longed to make someone pay for the loss. So quickly did she agree that Mannfred did not initially trust the decision, and expected to receive a silver dagger in his back the moment it was turned. But then Neferata made one small, almost trivial request, one which Mannfred knew Arkhan would be happy to meet. The bargain was struck, the battered gates of Silver Pinnacle were flung open one last time, and the Queen of Mysteries rode to war.

'My commiserations on your loss, your majesty.'

Mannfred could not quite conceal his amusement. The once-glorious chamber was in ruins, its fineries looted and its walls daubed in goblin graffiti.

Neferata turned and shot him a look of pure poison. 'Your words do not interest me.'

Mannfred shook his head. 'It ill becomes one of your stature to lie so transparently. Had you not desired to speak with me, you would have had me turned back at what is left of the gate.'

'Am I to imagine that would have stopped you?'

'Probably not, but a token effort could have been made. Besides, the words I bring are not my own. Arkhan requests that you return to Sylvania.'

'Arkhan does not make requests. He gives instructions.'

'Indeed so, but he instructed that you should be offered whatever you wished.'

'I'm not interested in the liche's petty favours.'

'And, in truth, nor am I. He and his master have stolen my realm, and I see little prospect of regaining it. Not until they are destroyed.'

'Then destroy them,' said Neferata, disdain dripping from her tongue.

'Such a thing is not easily done,' said Mannfred. 'Besides, I reckon my chances of survival to be far better in Nagash's shadow than out of it, at least for now. An opportunity will present itself. In the meantime, it would behove me – behove us – to take our pleasures where we can, whilst we are able.'
He shot a sly look at Neferata. 'Now, I think we both know that there is in fact something within Arkhan's gift that you might dearly want?'

The Queen of Mysteries' lips parted in a thin smile.

'Khalida.'

Meanwhile, Isabella's army continued its march across Sylvania, her path straight as an arrow towards the Black Pyramid. She made no attempt to raise the dead to fight in her cause – driving Arkhan to speculate as to whether the countess was any longer able to do so – but she did not want for reinforcements all the same. As Arkhan had anticipated, two other census legions joined the advance, their shambling ranks drawn into the mortal world by the plague blossoming in Isabella's footsteps.

Krell was given the task of slowing the daemons' advance where he could, and the wight king dutifully threw the most savage and bestial of Sylvania's denizens into the daemons' path. Such battles invariably ended in a one-sided slaughter, but Arkhan cared not. The Liche King placed little trust in vampires, and none at all in those who were driven by ravenous hunger. Thus, he ordered Krell to spend their lives carelessly. Better that as many varghulfs and vargheists as possible perish far away from the Black Pyramid, somewhere where their ill discipline would not endanger a carefully crafted battle plan.

Wasteful though Krell's tactics might have been, they nonetheless left the daemonic host battered and bloodied. The wight king made no attempt to engage Isabella directly. The countess always travelled at the host's heart, and had taken no interest in personal combat since the siege of the Dead and Buried. Mannfred's presence would perhaps have drawn her out, but the Lord of Sylvania was yet many leagues away, and would surely not have risked a second confrontation.

As news of each skirmish reached him, Arkhan became ever more convinced that Isabella was more than merely the daemons' leader; she was their anchor. Nurgle's corruption spread only where she walked, and the invaders' grip upon the mortal world was far stronger when she was near. Whatever Nurgle

planned, Isabella was surely the key, and Arkhan grew increasingly convinced that she sought entrance to the Black Pyramid, to claim its power for her own. This sacrilege could not be permitted. Thus, by the time the daemons at last drew nigh to the Black Pyramid, their approach driving the ghoulkin from their hilltop nests, Arkhan had arrayed his forces with the intention of destroying Isabella and rooting out the daemonic corruption at its source.

Though the Black Pyramid's foundations lay deep in the lake of death magic, it was connected to the shore by a narrow isthmus of stone – the remains of the old roadway leading to its gates. Few creatures – daemon, mortal or undead – could touch the amethyst waters of the lake and survive the contact. The isthmus, then, would be Isabella's only point of approach, and Arkhan drew his battle plans accordingly.



Arkhan was ancient, his tactics founded in the formalised battles of the Nehekharan kingdoms, and he now put them to good use. He assembled the hosts of Sylvania in an east-west line in opposition to the daemons' advance; wide enough so that his armies would overlap the foe's, and deep enough to withstand their charge. Skeletal archers were set amongst the Black Pyramid's towers, their arrows nocked ready to bring down any daemon that sought to cross the Lake of Death on tattered wings. The tomb king legions, with their bristling spears and towering statue-constructs, guarded the far flanks. Their orders were to hold, to draw off what they could of the foe's strength. Arkhan gifted Mannfred and Neferata command of the near flanks. Save for Krell, these were his greatest generals, and he wanted them near at hand. But it was in the centre of the battle line, arrayed across the isthmus, that Arkhan placed his true strength. Krell would hold the bridge: Krell and the Doomed Legion. They would not do so alone.

Hidden beneath the swirling waters of the lake were hundreds upon hundreds of morghasts. They could endure in the raw death magic where other beings could not, protected as they were by divine heritage – however corrupted it had become. The morghasts were Arkhan's trap. All that remained was to see if Isabella would spring it.

Isabella's army was slow to attack. It assembled almost lazily along the northern hills, expending time without care. Tallyband by tallyband, it shuffled into a line of battle a league away from the Black Pyramid. Bell-hung banners chimed mournfully in the wind, and the low drone of the plaguebearers' endless counting was like thunder on distant mountains. Ranks parted as nurglings dragged palanquins to the fore, so that their masters might better survey the field of battle. Great Unclean Ones lumbered through the ranks, offering fond words of encouragement that went just as unappreciated as their foul-mouthed jokes.

Hours passed, and some of the tomb kings sent messengers to Arkhan, begging leave to march forth and attack. The Liche King refused each request. With the Lake of Death and the battlements of the Black Pyramid at his back, his was the superior position, and one he would not abandon. The banners of the daemon host grew thicker upon the hills, its accompanying swarm of flies rivalling the clouds above, and again messengers sought Arkhan's permission to sally forth. This time, the Liche King sent Krell to deliver his response. Some time later, the deathless wight brought Arkhan the severed head of King Pharak as proof of a message delivered.



For the better part of a day, the two hosts gazed implacably at each other across the rock-strewn valley with a patience no mere mortal could have possessed. Then, for no reason that Arkhan could detect, there was a discordant clamour of bells, and the plague daemons marched down from the hillside.

The catapults began firing as soon as the Chaos host came in range, flinging flaming skulls across the blackened sky. Soul-wrenching screams accompanied each payload, but the plaguebearers cared not. They trudged straight ahead, paying no attention to the fireballs bursting amongst their ranks, or the mangled bodies of their comrades left twitching in the missiles' wake. Arrows followed soon after, the feathered shafts swarming through the skies like insects of singular mind and purpose. The volleys plunged down into the packed formations, punching deep into diseased flesh. Ragged holes began to open up in the leading tallybands, holes soon exploited by the precisely timed charges of skeletal horsemen ranging far ahead of the undead phalanxes.

Still the daemons came onwards, untouched tallybands pressing unenthusiastically in behind those ravaged by arrow and artillery. Beasts of Nurgle were loosed from corroded iron chains by handlers worn almost to distraction by their exuberance, and bounded across the battlefield, easily outpacing the trudging plaguebearers. Nurglings darted forward in fits and starts. At one moment, a cluster of the plaguemites stopped to squabble over a severed limb or shiny arrowhead. At the next, they waddled forward for all they were worth, high-pitched voices squealing with excitement.

Another volley of screaming skulls smashed home, their fiery impacts hurling daemon corpses skyward. In response, Great Unclean Ones raised their voices, singing Nurgle's praises in the garbled argot of the plaguelands. Overhead, the sky heaved as the fecund grandfather responded to the pleas of his offspring. Meteors of frothing and gangrenous matter hurtled out of the clouds, slamming into Arkhan's battle line. Bones snapped like rotten twigs, or were pulverised to dust; golden sphinxes and ushabti were crushed flat, or dissolved by the missiles' voracious secretions.

Beasts of Nurgle had reached the Nehekharan phalanxes now, bouncing unconcernedly onto levelled spears, their wide, floppy grins turning to offended scowls as the spears' barbs dug deep. Before the creatures were slain, their flailing tentacles battered aside the front ranks' shields, scattering bones and weapons far and wide. The dry voices of liche priests recited ancient incantations, and the bones bound themselves together to fight anew.

Plague drones buzzed overhead, their riders hurling death's heads that crawled with contagion. Bone rotted into dust where the shrunken missiles hit home, unmade beyond a liche priest's ability to rebind them. To the west of Neferata, King Kantep directed his forces from a gilded sphinx-howdah, until he was struck by three such missiles. His ancient bones and bindings unravelled within seconds of the strike. Angry voices split the air as the king passed into true death, dry curses spitting from the mouths of Kantep's princes as they ordered their archers to scythe the fly-riders from the skies. This their warriors obediently did, the gold-tipped arrows punching through carapace and waxy skin to send the daemons spiralling groundwards. But these arrows were needed badly elsewhere. As the plague drones perished, the plaguebearers advancing beneath them at last pushed forward into Kantep's legions.

Neferata saw the phalanxes to the west begin to buckle, cursed Nehekharan stupidity and led the Lahmian Guard hard onto the daemons' left flank. Beneath her, Nagadron tore at the putrid flesh with voracious glee, and its mistress lashed and spat at the plaguebearers in fury. Neferata had learned enough of the Empire's fall to know that Nurgle's followers had been the architects of its demise. Whilst she cared nothing for the cattle who had lost their miserable lives amongst the ruins, the Queen of Mysteries deplored the senseless destruction of the bloodlines and spy networks she had so carefully shaped. Each blow she struck was a tiny repayment for that wasted effort, but the satisfaction it brought was fleeting.

Further to the east, Mannfred von Carstein had no desire to enter the fight in person. The last thing he wished to do was risk happening upon Isabella for a second time. Instead, he battled only through his undead minions, raising up hordes of skeletons and hurling them thoughtlessly at the foe. The mindless were no match for the daemons they faced, but it mattered little to Mannfred. So close to the lake of death magic, the vampire's spells were all but unstoppable, and he could replenish his minions far more swiftly than the plaguebearers could hack them down.

The battle lines buckled and shifted as the fickle fortunes of war began to favour one warlord or another. On the extreme east of the undead line, a Great Unclean One led a sudden surge of plaguebearers so deep into the tomb kings' line that they almost reached the lake's shores. Then a necrosphinx's claws scissored through the greater daemon's throat, and the attack lost all of its momentum. As the corpulent daemon gurgled into stillness, a rumble of gongs propelled a phalanx of ushabti into a counter-attack. Heavy golden blades clove plaguebearers by the dozen, then graven feet stomped forward across rock slippery with

tangled gizzards. In the west, nurglings swarmed over towering statue-constructs, squeezing beneath armoured plates to pick and pry at weakened mortar. And in the centre, Isabella at last emerged from ranks of her army, an ornate chalice clasped in one hand, a thin blade in the other.

Three Great Unclean Ones advanced alongside the fallen countess, nurglings bickering and squeaking about their feet, and plaguebearer tallybands marched in step alongside. The greater daemons' countenances were unusually stony, the customary humour of the plaguelords held in abeyance, for the moment at least. Theirs was a sacred duty, handed down from great Nurgle himself: to see that the countess reached the Black Pyramid unharmed.

As for Isabella, she shared none of her escorts' grimness, but advanced on the isthmus with the manner of a wronged queen reclaiming her birthright. Krell sent half-rotten wolves against her, but Isabella waved the creatures into dust mid-pounce. Terrorgheists slipped their roosts upon the Black Pyramid's flanks, and dove screeching against the countess. At once, the Great Unclean Ones pressed close, shielding Isabella with a wall of their own festering flesh. One had half of its ribcage torn away by skeletal claws and slumped lifelessly forward, but not before its flail had crushed its killer's skull. Another scooped up a handful of nurglings and hurled them skyward. The mites squeaked in momentary terror before bursting against a terrorgheist's leathery wing in a smear of virulent fluids. The desiccated membrane rotted in seconds, pitching the monster into a dive from which it would never recover. It ploughed deep into a tallyband's midst, and plagueswords hacked it apart before any sorcery could reknit its wounds. Abandoning her mortally wounded bodyguard, Isabella pressed on, throwing her tallybands onto the Doomed Legion's corroded spears.

From the midpoint of the isthmus, Arkhan surveyed the battlefield with satisfaction. He watched Krell lead the Doomed Legion into their prepared retreat, and readied the magical summons that would unleash the lurking morghasts. The enemy were stronger and more numerous than the Liche King had expected, but his preparations had served him well. Isabella's whole force was committed, and the turncoat witch was about to walk straight into his trap. With her destruction, the daemons' anchor would be severed, and victory won – all without rousing Nagash. However, what the Liche King did not – could not – know, was that a third army had come to the Black Pyramid.



Far below, a deep-throated whine echoed through Sylvania's ancient foundations. Sparks spat and hissed as warpstone drills bored at the living rock, bringing their skaven bearers ever closer to their destination. Dozens of teams laboured across three separate borings, three tunnels that would deliver the army of ratmen up beneath the Lake of Death and directly into the bowels of Nagash's Black Pyramid.

The expedition had started many weeks ago, and with hundreds more excavating machines, but the approach had been treacherous. The tectonic shifts that had created the lake had made a mockery of the skaven's knowledge of that part of Sylvania. Every whine and hiss of a drill risked flooding the tunnels with seething death magic, as hundreds of the burrowers had – briefly – learned to their cost. Even now, with time running short, the expedition's leader, Ikit Claw, hung far back from the exploratory boreholes, and ordered that his tunnellers carved caissons and overflow chambers as they advanced. In this way, the warlock hoped that their accidents would not claim the lives of the assault party that followed close behind. More importantly, he hoped it would not claim *his* life.

The Verminlords had given Ikit Claw his mission long before Isabella von Carstein had set foot in Sylvania. The warlock had not wished to accept the charge, had done all he could to avoid leaving the safety of his workshops, but now he took a measure of pride in the work. The warpgrinders and burrowing machines were Claw's own designs, and he doubted that another could have provided the necessary tools, or made such timely progress.

The tunnel ahead suddenly glowed with violet light, the brief, panicked shrieks of a dying tunnelling team echoing along the walls. Claw skittered smartly aside as a spill of roiling death magic bubbled past him and out into an overflow. The chief warlock checked his clattering timepiece. It had been impressed upon him to arrive neither too late, nor too early, but the timing mattered little if his bones were stripped bare by a flood of raw magic.

Meanwhile, in a darkened chamber far closer than Ikit Claw realised, Nagash awakened from his slumbers. He could sense the Army of Blight upon the lake's shores, could feel the power of Chaos wedded to Isabella's undead bones. Hissing with frustration at plans disturbed, the Great Necromancer rose from his tomb, and prepared to join the battle for the Black Pyramid.

GUARDIANS OF THE PYRAMID

The forces that awaited Isabella on her final approach to the Black Pyramid were the finest Arkhan could have assembled. There was no weakness in this host, no self-serving desire that could leave Nagash's plans in jeopardy. This was a force mustered with a single purpose: to shatter the Army of Blight and send it reeling to the Realm of Chaos in defeat.



NAGASH

Nagash arose from slumber reluctantly, for his absorption of Sylvania's death magic was still far from complete. Nevertheless, his might far exceeded that of any mortal creature – including the other Incarnates. Shyish, the Wind of Death, was suffused with the spirits of all those who had ever perished, and its glory therefore surpassed that of all the other winds, save for Ghyran, the Wind of Life. However, Nagash would never be able to countenance anything so mundane as a belief in too much power, and he was reluctant to give up the Lake of Death's dregs. Yet the Great Necromancer had awoken to a feeling of danger, of his plans imperilled, and so had chosen to take a personal hand in the battle.

ARKHAN

For Arkhan, the world was at last succumbing to a long-anticipated order. There existed only one last – if protracted – campaign, one that would see Nagash finally defeat the mindless anarchy of Chaos. The world that followed would be static and sterile, a timeless domain of endless order in which Arkhan would gladly serve. The Liche King had no desires of his own, no reward in mind for his tireless servitude. Arkhan served because he knew no other way, no longer saw any destiny save for the one in which he sat at Nagash's right hand in a perfect, unchanging desolation.





KRELL

Krell had been destroyed many times, each time restored to existence by Nagash's sorceries. The wight king felt no resentment for his fate – he was sworn, body and tarnished soul, to the Great Necromancer's service, and would have passed into final death with but a word from his dark master. However, Krell saw no need for such sacrifices at the Siege of the Black Pyramid. The Army of Blight, while large, was a clumsy and brutal weapon. Krell had spent countless years destroying such forces, and was more than ready to add another to his tally.

THE DOOMED LEGION

The deathless warriors of the Doomed Legion had fought at Krell's side since their mortal days. When they were alive, they fought for the glory of Khorne, but in death the Doomed Legion serve Nagash no less faithfully than does their chieftain. Krell had led only a portion of his old warband on the Nehekharan campaign. However, on his return to Sylvania, Nagash had despatched necromancers to the four corners the Old World, bidding them recover the legion's remains, and restore them to their former glory. Thus was a terror of old restored beneath its ash-dark banner, and the Doomed Legion made whole once more.





THE GRAND MORGHAST HOST

The morghasts were once divine beings, the servants of the almighty god Ptra. Slain by Nagash, they were remade in his bleak image, becoming harbingers of death and despair. Many had been destroyed in the years of the Great Necromancer's quiescence, but a great many more had survived, flocking from their underground lairs to serve he who had corrupted them. Once Nagash gained the full power of death magic, he intended to visit Ptra's fate – and that of his heralds – upon each of the Chaos Gods, solidifying his position forever as the only divine being in all of creation.



THE SEPULCHREX

The ushabti guard of Nagash's inner sanctum, the Sepulchrex responded only to Nagash's will – even Arkhan the Black, trusted though he was, had no control over their actions. Many of the Nehekharan kings thought it strange that Nagash would surround himself with graven images of the gods he had cast down, but Mannfred von Carstein – himself no stranger to hubris – had grasped the truth of the matter. The Sepulchrex bore the gods' likenesses precisely because Nagash had defeated them – they were reminders of a cherished victory, their voiceless servitude one of the Great Necromancer's few remaining conceits.

Nagash,
Supreme Lord of the Undead

Arkhan the Black,
Mortarch of Sacrament

Krell,
Mortarch of Despair

The Doomed Legion
One warband of Black Knights,
one warband of Grave Guard,
one warband of Skeleton Warriors

The Silent Legion
One host of Morghast Archai

The Hollow Legion
One host of Morghast Archai

The Bloodmoon Legion
One host of Morghast Harbingers

The Forsworn Legion
One host of Morghast Harbingers

The Shrieking Haunt
One Tomb Banshee and
three haunts of Spirit Hosts

Melodrax,
Warden of the Sepulchre
Cairn Wraith

The Sepulchrex
Two guards of Ushabti,
one regiment of Tomb Guard

The Morghane
One Mortis Engine

THE ARMY OF BLIGHT

Isabella knew that Arkhan would muster his strongest troops to defend the isthmus, but it scarcely concerned her. The daemon in her bones whispered to her of Ikit Claw's progress, of the skaven tunnels inching ever closer to the Black Pyramid. If all went to plan, it would not matter how many legions Arkhan had assembled...



ISABELLA VON CARSTEIN

The closer Isabella had drawn to the Black Pyramid, the more active and insistent Bolorog became. The daemon brooked no delay, and drove the countess on by recalling memories of her past life, and twisting them to imply a degradation that never was. Bolorog had noted that Isabella's resolve had slowly faltered following her murder of Vlad, and the daemon wanted to ensure that the countess remained in his grasp long enough for their shared mission to be completed. Meanwhile, in the deepest corner of Isabella's mind, the small, self-aware part of her psyche screamed uselessly for release.



SCROFULOX

Last of three brothers who had commanded the Legion of Soulblight, Scrofulox was reluctant to join Isabella's assault on the isthmus, wishing instead to batter Mannfred von Carstein to a soggy pulp with his monstrous fists. However, the countess would brook no argument and, by the time the Army of Blight had launched its attack, Scrofulox bore several angry scars as reminders of their differing opinions. Bolorog had whispered in Isabella's ear throughout, telling her of where to twist her claws to ensure the Great Unclean One's obedience.



THE LEGION OF CORPRUST

Corprust is one of Nurgle's many creations that devours the bodies of the dead. The inclusion of this particular census legion in the Army of Blight was therefore no accident. Indeed, Isabella's chalice, so often filled with mortal blood in the days of the countess' former existence, now contained ichor extracted from the Legion of Corprust's heralds, fermented and distilled to the point of unstoppable virulence. The plaguebearers themselves were sullen, even by their kind's standards, not even cheered by the prospect of humbling the self-titled Supreme Lord of the Undead.

IKIT CLAW

Little had changed for Ikit Claw since the ratmen had pledged their allegiance to the Everchosen. The secrets of magic and technology had to be delved, and who better than the chief warlock of Clan Skryre to lead the way? Nevertheless, not even a skaven of Claw's rank could entirely escape the changes that were sweeping the Under-Empire, and he had found it prudent to undertake the Sylvanian incursion, lest his dedication to the Horned Rat's cause be questioned. Claw consoled himself that no other could have accomplished the mission with such style as he, and looked forward to witnessing the effects of his specially designed warpbombs first-hand.





THE TECHNOX

Ikit Claw held the warlocks of the Technox as being as close to indispensable as it was possible for skaven to be. This was to say that they weren't sufficiently clever as to pose a direct threat to their master, but nor were they stupid enough to inadvertently imperil his goals. Each bore warp-powered equipment of Claw's design, complete with suicide switches that only the Chief Warlock knew. Furthermore, for that mission, each had also been granted a small but powerful warpbomb. No member of the Technox was aware of these devices' true power or instability, for Claw had gone to great lengths to conceal that information from them.



THE WARPFANGS

The Warpfangs were but one of the many claw-legions at Ikit Claw's command. A few of the clanrats were breedlings of Clan Skryre – most had been purchased from other clans in exchange for massive shipments of experimental weapons. Warpstone might have been the Under-Empire's chief currency, but there were always warlords willing to trade for a genuine Claw-crafted firearm. Many of the Warpfangs carried refined and stabler versions of those same mechanisms: warp-grinders, warplock jezzails and warpfire throwers.

Isabella the Accursed

Scrofulox
Great Unclean One

Grorpox
Great Unclean One

Hartgnaw
Herald of Nurgle

Rottlescab
Herald of Nurgle

The Legion of Corprust
Eight tallybands of Plaguebearers, three tallybands of Plague Drones, two packs of Beasts of Nurgle

The Legion of Soulblight
Two tallybands of Plaguebearers, one tallyband of Plague Drones, one pack of Beasts of Nurgle

The Bickermites
Three swarms of Nurglings

The Scablings
Four swarms of Nurglings

The Cacklerattles
Three swarms of Nurglings

The Plaguecrows
One flock of Chaos Furies

Ikit Claw

The Technox
Six Warlock Engineers

The Warpfangs
Four hordes of Clanrats, each with a Warp-Grinder, three hordes of Clanrats, each with a Warpfire Thrower, one clawband of Warplock Jezzails

SIEGE OF THE BLACK PYRAMID

The battle began in earnest when the Army of Blight's leading tallybands had pushed halfway down the isthmus. Krell uttered a wordless hiss, more the exhalation of a departing spirit than an identifiable command, and the trap was sprung.

With a bellow as deep as the roots of the mountains, the morghasts emerged from the Lake of Death. Magic streamed from their wings, the violet light casting inverted shadows in the darkness. Wailing souls crackled and writhed around the morghasts' weapons, victims of old bound to the fate and will of their slayers. Arkhan watched the host swoop into the fight and felt a rare moment of satisfaction. The invaders had experienced much success in the weeks leading to this point. It was time at last for them to pay the price of challenging Nagash.

The daemons' vanguard – a vast plaguebearer tallyband – were the first to suffer the morghasts' onset. Without slowing, the winged harbingers struck the daemons from either side. Soul-wreathed weapons hacked down, ripping through flaccid skin and rotting muscle, spilling limbs and innards as a sickly mess upon the stone. The plaguebearers responded sluggishly, turning to face the threat on their flanks, but those flanks were rapidly disintegrating under an implacable onslaught. By the time the Doomed Legion's horns sounded, their barrow-spears carried into the slaughter, the tallyband was nothing more than a pile of festering and dismembered bodies.

Without a moment's hesitation, the morghasts swooped away once again. This time, the legions divided, each group of harbingers and archai seeking their own target amongst the daemons' second line. Their orders, imposed by Krell's silent will, were simple: clear the way to the thing that had once been Isabella von Carstein, so that the Doomed Legion could make an end of her.

It was one thing for Krell to have such a plan. However, it was something else entirely for the daemons to permit its consummation. Scrofulox's ebullient voice rang out across the isthmus, bawling at his minions to counter the morghasts' attack. Plague drones swarmed to blockade the oncoming harbingers. The first wave perished, cut down by the morghasts' fearsome blows, but the second slowed them and the third halted their advance entirely. Bone shards and fragments of daemonic carapace rained from the skies as the winged opponents banked and dove. The daemons were more numerous than their foes, but the morghasts were stronger, and nimbler upon the wing.

On the isthmus below, the plaguebearers were still adapting to the altered circumstances. It didn't help that several nurglings – possessing both an unsuspected ability to mimic Scrofulox's stentorian tone, and a complete lack of concern about the battle's outcome – had begun to utter confusing, and oftentimes contradictory, orders. It didn't take long for the army's heralds to root out and squash the offenders, but even that was too much. Thus, tallybands that should have been formed and ready were still disordered when the Doomed Legion struck them. Cursed barrow-blades thrust deep into daemonic flesh, and scores more plaguebearers joined the ranks of the banished.

Even as the morghasts started to prevail in the battle for the skies, the beasts of Nurgle joined the fight. They struck the Doomed Legion's grave guard like bouncing, slobbering battering rams, their vile spittle gnawing away at armour and bone, their tentacles waving with delight. Dozens of wights were bowled from their feet, or had their skulls struck from their shoulders by a tentacle's playful caress.

Three of the beasts caught sight of the legion's black banner twitching in the dark. Deciding that the ancient rag had all the makings of an excellent toy, they lumbered joyfully towards it, ungainly mouths salivating in anticipation. It was doubtful that the daemons even saw most of the dozen wights they trampled, so fixed was their attention on their dubious prize.

Of the undead warriors clustered around the legion's banner, only Krell stood firm. As a beast bounced towards him, the Mortarch of Despair braced his legs and leaned into the impact. The pauldron of Krell's armour slammed into the creature's capacious gut, causing the daemon to draw back, an expression of puzzlement on its drooling face. The confusion did not last long. Krell's gauntleted hands shifted on the Black Axe's grips, and the enchanted blade came around to sever the beast's fleshy head. The other two daemons, startled out of their playful fug by their fellow's demise, burbled angrily and romped towards Krell. But the Black Axe was still in motion. It whirled around in a brutal arc to scythe through both beasts, leaving them twitching upon the ground. Ignoring the thick ichor splattered across his armour, Krell gave a small – almost imperceptible – nod, and drove the Doomed Legion on towards their target.

Towards the southern end of the isthmus, Arkhan was far from pleased by events. He had counted on the morghasts seizing mastery of the skies, but the daemons had proven surprisingly resilient. Hissing in irritation, the Liche King spread his arms wide and reached out, not into the winds of magic, but into the

pure sorcerous essence of the Lake of Death. It came at his command, boiling skyward on each side of the isthmus and crystallising into razor-sharp amethyst shards. There was a thunderclap as Arkhan brought his hands together, and a sudden flare of light as the shards whipped across the approach to the pyramid.

The plague drones disintegrated in a heartbeat, torn to soggy scraps by Arkhan's sorcery. The plaguebearers directly below fared scarcely better, for only those shielded by the corpses of their comrades survived the barrage. Nurglings gurgled and pitched to the ground, their bellies and skulls slit open by the shards. Beasts whined and collapsed. Only Isabella went utterly unharmed, and that only because Scrofulox had seized her in the moment of the spell's manifestation, and pressed her deep within the leathery folds of his paunch. The Great Unclean One had suffered for his selflessness, his skin torn ragged by the shards. Nevertheless, Isabella had no words of thanks, just a frozen expression of revulsion and a pallor somehow paler than was normal.

But Arkhan was not yet done. With the death magic's captive souls wailing around him, the Liche King uttered a second great enchantment hard upon the heels of the first. All across the isthmus, the cracked and ruined bones of fallen undead twitched into life once more. The magic flooded through morghasts, skeletons and wights, rebinding their broken bodies and instilling the undamaged with renewed vigour.

As his spell reached completion, Arkhan sent his mind out east and west beyond the isthmus, seeking tidings. What the Liche King saw pleased him greatly. To his immediate flanks, Mannfred and Neferata were driving back the invaders with all the vented frustration at their command. Further afield, even the tomb kings were holding their own. Arkhan had possessed few expectations concerning the kings of Nehekhara. Nagash had long since slain the cleverest of their number, leaving what the Liche King – not entirely unfairly – regarded as inbred half-wits. Only Khalida, late of Lybaras, was considered to be something approaching an equal. The rest had earned nothing but Arkhan's scorn, although they fought well enough. Drawing his attention back to his own battle, Arkhan raised his arms skyward once more, and ushered the re-bound dead to crush those daemons who remained.

The battle could well have ended there and then. No matter how Scrofulox and Isabella harangued their minions, there were simply too many of the undead. The morghasts, freed from their contest in the skies, flew freely about the battlefield, preying on plaguebearers still reeling from Arkhan's sorcerous onslaught. Plagueswords and corroded gongs clattered onto rock as their bearers were hacked down, and the odour of mangled and decaying flesh was rank upon the air.

Perhaps it was the stench that drew Nurgle's wandering attention. Or perhaps the Plaguefather had watched Isabella's progress from the start, determined that the Glottkin's failure would not be echoed by his newest emissary. Perhaps Nurgle was simply bored, his eye wandering between his eternal hobbies of concoction and libation. In any event, the Plaguefather's gaze was upon the Black Pyramid in that moment, and he decided to bequeath his gifts to those who fought below. Leaning hard against his cauldron, Nurgle heaved the pitted and rusted pot onto its side, spilling the contents through the cracks in reality and thus upon the mortal world below.

For Isabella and Scrofulox, Nurgle's gift was most welcome, if not entirely pleasant. A thick and greasy rain fell from the skies, its slimy waters pooling wherever the daemons had suffered their greatest losses. The daemons who fought amongst those waters were untouched, but the undead were dragged beneath the surface by grasping hands that were invisible through the murk. As the undead were forced back, the sickly broth bubbled. Plaguebearers lurched from the depths, the wounded and slain of the fighting restored to life by their god's beneficent elixir. For Arkhan and Krell, Nurgle's gift was a bitter reminder that there was no artifice of mortals that the gods could not match.

Sensing the battle slipping away from him, Krell redoubled his already prodigious efforts. The wight king splashed on through the frothing slime-pools, ignoring the gangrenous hands that clutched at his greaves, and scarcely noticing the plaguesword-strikes that clanged off his armour. The Black Axe was a blur as it wove and spun, the endpoint of each motion simultaneous with a plaguebearer's death. Behind Krell came the Doomed Legion's infantry, bound to his will as they had been for long centuries. Although their losses mounted with every step, still the skeletons and wights trudged on into the foe, stabbing and thrusting as they advanced.

From his vantage point, Arkhan saw Scrofulox bully the nearest plaguebearers into some semblance of a battle line. The sluggish daemons were easy targets for Krell's vicious strikes, and the liche deemed that most were still disoriented by their recent resurrection. Even so, Nurgle's intervention had massively shifted the battle's course, and the odds facing the Doomed Legion were enormous. Quickly discarding as an option the indignity of requesting aid from either Mannfred or Neferata, Arkhan took the only other course open to him. Summoning the morghasts to his side, the Liche King urged his mount, Razarak, into the skies, and flew to join his might to Krell's.



As he travelled, Arkhan looked upon the isthmus with distaste. Beneath him, the battle had become a brawl, a disorganised mess that was deeply offensive to the Liche King's mind. Clusters of plaguebearers had forced their way amongst the Doomed Legion's line, spoiling the careful order of battle that Arkhan had decreed. To the west, the Doomed Legion's knights were bogged down amidst a seething swarm of nurglings. For every one of the mites that was slain, another half-dozen came chortling and giggling to the fight. It took six or seven nurglings to pull a wight from his steed, and cost the lives of as many diminutive daemons in the attempt, but the nurglings never grew bored with the game. To the east, plague drones harried the right flank of Krell's advance. The bloated daemon-flies buzzed in close, darting clear of the spear- and sword-thrusts aimed their way. Then, snatching up victims, they climbed cloudward, before hurling the corpses into the Lake of Death's ethereal waters.

Thus had Krell's advance left a trailing mangle of broken skeletal remains. Arkhan drew from the Lake of Death to restore these scattered bones, forming them into disjointed and ragtag regiments that could follow in Krell's wake. The liche was disgusted to find himself adding to the battle's disorder, but hated the possibility of failure even more. Even as that unwelcome thought threatened to smother Arkhan's mind, a cloud of furies and plague drones gathered in the skies before him. The Liche King did not so much as hesitate. The thought of Nagash's displeasure was a painful spur, and it drove Arkhan onwards into the screeching, buzzing swarm, bolts of amethyst fire blazing from his staff.

Far below, Krell at last drew nigh to his target. The plaguebearers that had stood in his path were now churned offal, their ichor wet upon his axe. Scrofulox was now all that lay between the wight and Isabella,

but the sight of the daemon's looming bulk gave him not so much as a moment's pause.

The skulls that tipped the Great Unclean One's flail cackled as they hurtled through the air. The blow was aimed to take Krell's own weathered skull. However, the wight had expected the strike, and raised his own weapon to meet it. A dull chime sounded as the Black Axe's blade bit deep into the flail's corroded chain, severing the links and sending the skulls spinning away into the Doomed Legion's ranks. But Scrofulox had not placed his faith in the flail alone. Scarcely had the chains split when the daemon's massive plaguesword slammed into Krell's exposed left side, buckling armour plates and smashing three ribs to powder.

Krell staggered into a tallyband of plaguebearers, his splintered bones grinding against the inner face of his armour. Their plagueswords thrust and cut at the wight's armour as the daemons sought a weakness perhaps exposed by Scrofulox's strike. Before they could find one, the Doomed Legion pressed in behind their lord, driving back the daemons long enough for Krell to regain his balance. Scrofulox was close behind, surprisingly quick and already swinging his sword to finish the impertinent wight king.

This time, Krell made no attempt to block the Great Unclean One's strike. He simply ducked beneath the ponderous blade's arc, then rose up, axe swinging underarm up towards the daemon's belly. Scrofulox was heavier on his feet than the wight, and had no chance to get clear. The ebony blade cut deep into the blistered and shard-flecked folds of the daemon's gut, spilling forth diseased organs and a terrible stench. Scrofulox roared, more in humiliation than pain, and lashed out a second time. Again, Krell gave ground before the clumsy swing, and buried a second strike in the daemon's gut.

This time, however, the Black Axe caught fast in Scrofulox's sucking flesh. No matter how the wight king hauled upon the weapon's grips, he could not tug it free. Then, the greater daemon lashed out with a meaty fist, and Krell was sent sprawling away, his axe still embedded in the other's body. Isabella, watching the duel from behind Scrofulox's corpulent bulk, clapped once and laughed at Krell's predicament, her amusement only growing as the wight's witchfires blazed with anger.

Once again, the Doomed Legion pressed forward to Krell's side, this time keeping Scrofulox at bay with their press of blades. Isabella, however, was no longer prepared to stand idly by. Stepping briskly forward she ripped her chalice's lid clear and held the golden vessel aloft. At once, the vile fluid within began to bubble and churn, birthing a thick, dense spore-cloud whose greenish folds gusted away south across the Doomed Legion. Where the spores settled, armour and bone crumbled away, consumed by the hungry bacteria within the cloud. In a matter of moments, the front rank of the Doomed Legion was naught but liquefying spoil, and still the spores swept southwards, bringing the same fate to the skeletons marching behind.



Protected as he was by stronger magics, Krell endured the spores, but even he did not emerge from the cloud unharmed. His armour was left little more than a rusted mass, and his entire right side was pitted and slicked with seeping green fluid. Still the wight did not yield, and lurched towards where his axe was still buried in Scrofulox's gut. Alas for Krell, each step was but a stagger, and the Great Unclean One had little difficulty in seizing the wight's decaying bones. Hauling Krell up high by his shins, the daemon regarded him for a moment, watching as Nurgle's tiny children feasted. Then, with booming laughter swiftly muffled, Scrofulox lowered Krell's disintegrating corpse into his rotten-toothed mouth, and swallowed the Mortarch of Despair whole. Plaguebearers shuffled over the ruin of the Doomed Legion, Isabella's shrill laughter echoing about them.

It was then that Arkhan struck. The Mortarch of Sacrament plunged from the skies, tatter-winged morghasts in his wake. The surviving plague drones streamed after them, the air abuzz with their resentment, but the daemons were too slow. Morghasts swept over the plaguebearers, spirit-blades raking the tallybands from above. Morghast archai converged on Scrofulox who, still heavy with a meal that was sitting ill upon him, strove in vain to swat them from the skies. As for Arkhan, he came straight for Isabella, plunging out of the skies like an amethyst comet.

Caught by surprise, Isabella threw up her arms, instinctively shielding herself from Arkhan's attack, but the flames came on all the same. Her flesh and hair caught light, burning and blackening as the fires took hold. Laughter turned to screams, charred flesh flaked away on the wind, and at last Isabella uttered the counterspell. At once, the fires died, snuffed out like a candle at curfew, leaving the countess a twisted char of flesh that, in places, still glowed an angry red. Yet still Isabella stood, golden chalice glinting in an ash-black hand, sunken eyes peering hatefully out as the Liche King alighted before her.

Arkhan saw little challenge in the grotesque ash-thing that stood before him. The same fires that had ravaged Isabella had also repaired his own small wounds, draining her essence to strengthen his own.

Still, he was cautious. Rashness was no more in Arkhan's nature than was compassion, and the Liche King took care to protect himself before approaching further. The stones of the Black Pyramid were bound together with fragments of tortured souls as much as mortar, and the Liche King now wrenched many of them free, forging himself a shield of spirits as he bore down upon his foe.

Even now, Isabella was faster than she appeared. As the armies battled all around her, the countess let go her chalice and sprang at Arkhan. Fragments of her blackened flesh fell away as she moved, but these were paid no heed. All that concerned Isabella was that her cursed touch should fall upon Arkhan. She was bitterly close to failure, and dared not pay the price that would follow. On she forged, ignoring the pain of her wounds, leaping high above Razarak's head. She landed heavily, both feet balanced precariously upon the dread abyssal's spine. Arkhan's sword swept out, was struck from his hand by the countess' slender blade, and then Isabella was grasping at the Liche King's throat with her free hand.

Arkhan felt his shield-spirits screaming pitifully as Isabella's curse consumed them. He cared not for their demise, of course, save for the unfortunate fact that it likely also heralded his own. Again he sent his soul-fire washing across the countess' body, and again she blazed like a torch. But Arkhan felt his soul shield giving way before Isabella's curse, and was forced to throw his efforts into reinforcing it. Isabella sensed the liche's flow of magics shift. Casting aside her sword, she locked that hand alongside the other, tight about Arkhan's throat. The curse tore at the liche more ferociously than ever before. In his desperation, he reached out to the magics sustaining his army, sapping the morghasts' energies in order to stave off oblivion. The liche felt the curse's grasp fade, driven back by the magics he had stolen.

It was then that Isabella shifted tactics. Though she had made no attempt to wield them, she had not forgotten the magics of her former life. Now, with Arkhan's concentration solely fixed on the curse, she called forth the same soul-fire with which the liche had assailed her, and focussed it upon her foe.

The flames in Isabella's flesh flowed down her arms and into the liche, extinguishing the witch fires in his skull and setting his heavy robes alight. At the same time, the countess' own blackened skin healed, restored to its alabaster sheen as the soul-fire scorched Arkhan from inside to out. Isabella held on a moment longer, laughter again rising from her throat. Then she leaned down through the flames, kissed the brow of the liche's naked skull, and vaulted away.



Arkhan remained in Razarak's saddle for a moment longer, searching desperately for a way to consolidate his waning power, but he was too weak. The Liche King's blackened and lifeless bones hit the ground only a heartbeat after Isabella.

ENOUGH!

The voice was dark and majestic, every nightmare and horror infused into one word. Nagash had at last come forth from the Black Pyramid, and the battlefield fell still. Even the daemons were momentarily cowed as the looming shadow of black and bone emerged from the pyramid's colossal gateway and swept down the isthmus. The Great Necromancer's progress was slow – almost serene – but utterly implacable, and as inevitable as night following day.

Where Nagash travelled, amethyst sparks flared across the rock, ushering his fallen minions to new life and new purpose. A tallyband of plague drones, however, were the first to recover, and buzzed furiously to confront Nagash. They didn't even make it to within a blade's length. The Great Necromancer's eyes blazed brilliant green, and withering bolts burst forth, reducing the daemons to dust. Other plaguebearers followed their fellows' example, and they suffered the same fate. All who fell beneath the wrathful shadow had the fury of Nagash's magic loosed against them. Swirling vortices swept across the isthmus, leaving crystal statues in their wake. Amethyst fire and writhing tendrils of violet energy swept the causeway, burning daemons to ash, or crushing them to pulp.

So it was that before the Great Necromancer had passed halfway along the isthmus, most of the surviving daemons had chosen to continue the battle against his minions, cleaving true to the underling's time-honoured belief that some burdens were the responsibility of generals and gods, not mere foot soldiers. Thus, with the obstacles blasted or withdrawn from his path, the Great Necromancer soon towered over the upstart countess who had forced him to abandon his slumbers.

Isabella stood in silence as Nagash approached, her blade and chalice once more ready in her hands. Razarak snarled and prowled about her, forbidden from attacking by Nagash's will. If the countess felt any fear, she did not show it, but stood proud and erect as the Great Necromancer drew near. Scrofulox, already regretting the impulse that had led him to swallow Krell, lumbered swiftly enough out of Nagash's path. His orders had been to see Isabella safe until the self-styled God of the Dead arose. His duty was done, and he had no desire to perish in the countess' stead now that Nagash had arisen.

'UPSTART VAMPIRE, DISTAFF OF A DIMINISHING LINE.'

The voice was the finality of death given form, the slam of a tomb lid in the cold and empty dark.

'I LOOKED LONG FOR YOUR SPIRIT AMONGST THE DEAD, AND I AT LAST UNDERSTAND WHY I MET WITHOUT SUCCESS. DO YOU FORSAKE YOUR HERITAGE SO EASILY THAT YOU SEEK TO PIT YOUR BORROWED MIGHT AGAINST MY OWN?'

Isabella felt her posture slip as momentary fear overtook her. Nagash was correct. Her curse could not unmake so mighty a being, and her magics were but trickeries compared to his ancient and evil knowledge. With an effort, she regained her composure, trying to ignore the chastisement of the daemon in her blood.

'No, mighty Nagash,' she said, trying in vain to make eye contact with the wrathful shadow. 'You misunderstand my intentions. I make no challenge.'

'YOU HAVE PIERCED MY REALM UNINVITED, DESTROYED MY SERVANTS. WHAT IS THAT, IF NOT A CHALLENGE?'

Isabella lowered her eyes. He should have destroyed her already, she knew that, but deep in Nagash's soul lay a loathing of unanswered puzzles. Isabella presented a conundrum, and the Great Necromancer had been unable to resist seeking its answer before destroying her.

Isabella felt a strange gratitude. Humbling Mannfred had been a delight, destroying Vlad had been a bittersweet repayment of a life stolen away. But this? This moment had a flavour all of its own, and she was giddy with the joy of it.

'A distraction,' she whispered, with a sharp smile.

As if on cue, the first muffled explosion sounded away to the south. Isabella looked up to see a handful of monolithic black stones crack away from the pyramid's flank and slide into the Lake of Death.

Nagash uttered a thunderous roar of anger, and Isabella knew that no matter what followed, she had already won.



By chance more than design, Ikit Claw's drilling teams had breached the foundations of the Black Pyramid in the moment that Arkhan's charred bones struck the ground. The chief warlock had driven his skaven bloody for the last hours of the approach, increasingly aware that he was some way past the agreed time of arrival. Claw had already been preparing his excuses for failure when the first warpstone-tipped drill burrowed into the Black Pyramid's underbelly.

The clanrats had not waited for Claw's orders, but had surged past the sweating drilling team and into the gloom beyond. All were glad to escape the treacherous confines of an increasingly unstable tunnel network, though they would have undoubtedly been less eager had they known what awaited them within. Claw had shared the particulars of the mission with no one, and with good reason. Few skaven were cast in a heroic mould, and delving into the Great Necromancer's sanctum required heroes – or, at the least, ample promise of reward.

Ikit Claw was neither ignorant, nor a hero, so it was with great relief that he discovered Nagash had departed. It had always been the plan for the tunnelling party to arrive only after the Great Necromancer had been drawn into the battle, and it had worked. Claw contemplated how his delays might even have ended up being crucial to the timing, but then he remembered that Nagash would likely dispose of the Army of Blight before long. Success was success, but that outcome was still in doubt. Claw had six warpbombs at his disposal – twice as many as he thought necessary to bring down the Black Pyramid – but no amount of redundancy would matter if he was slain before they could be placed, and the time-delay fuses set to allow the army's escape. Rasping orders, Claw returned some semblance of order to his tunnelling party, and headed deeper into the tombs.

Nagash might have been absent, venting his unbridled fury upon the daemonic host, but the Black Pyramid was still far from unguarded. Spirit-bound statues were scattered throughout the tomb, not sentient enough to act upon their own cognisance, but sufficiently aware of the mortal realm that others could use their eyes to witness who came and went. In the long months of Nagash's repose, this duty had fallen to Varisoth the Keeper, a Sylvanian necromancer whose loyalty and utter lack of ambition perfectly suited Nagash's needs.



Varisoth had not slept in all the months of his watch, for Nagash had seen to it that such mortal needs were beyond him. Now, gazing through an ushabti's eyes, he caught sight of the skaven. Varisoth was unburdened by pride, and had no hesitation in casting his mind upon the winds of magic so that he might alert his master. However, so deep and abiding was Nagash's rage that Varisoth could sense that his voice had gone unheard. Rising to his feet, the necromancer muttered the seven harsh words of awakening. Long-dead spirits burst from the chamber's walls, writhing and swirling about Varisoth's throne, lifting it from the gilt-edged flagstones and bearing it away towards the intruders. The necromancer's mind was already far afield, rousing the pyramid's guardians from their slumbers.

The attack came just as the first warpbomb was placed, in a wide, galleried chamber directly below Nagash's sanctum of repose. In Claw's triple-checked calculations, this was the structural heart of the Black Pyramid – here, a detonation of sufficient force would bring down the entire structure. At Varisoth's urging, newly awakened ushabti lurched down from their plinths with no other sound save a creak of ancient stone, easily lost beneath hundreds of scurrying footfalls.

Claw was overseeing the placement of the first warpbomb when a chorus of terrified squeals cut through the air. Turning, he saw a tidal wave of panicked clanrats stampeding towards him. Behind them came expressionless ushabti, their great golden blades rising and falling murderously with every step. Already the living statues were spattered with skaven blood.

Bracing himself against the tide of fleeing underlings, Claw levelled Storm Daemon and sent a bolt of warp lightning into the advancing war-constructs. It struck one of the statues dead-centre with a deafening report, blasting a hole clear through its chest and sending gilded rubble flying in all directions. Again, Claw smote the ushabti, and this time other fire joined his own. The sharp crack and whine of jezzails echoed around the chamber. Claw saw one ushabti collapse as a heavy bullet smashed its right leg.

Warp lightning sizzled as Claw's apprentices joined the battle, then fell silent as the chief warlock's metallic snarls bade them continue fusing the bombs. By the time Claw returned his attention to the battle, the ushabti had been smashed apart, but the echo of heavy feet upon stone told the warlock that the fighting wasn't yet over. Confirmation swiftly followed. A burst of warpflame, brilliant green in the darkness, showed enemies converging from all sides. Tomb guard were emerging from alcoves and cross-corridors around the chamber's perimeter. Whirling clouds of spirits spiralled in from openings let into the chamber's roof. Other ushabti, summoned from elsewhere in the pyramid, converged remorselessly.

Claw was torn. He didn't trust his engineers to fuse the warpbombs correctly, but then nor could he rely on his clanrats to fight the undead without his leadership. Reluctantly, he left his engineers to their work and squealed orders at the wavering clanrats. Those that had fled the first attack were long gone, scurried away into the shadows, striking for the entrance tunnel. However, victory over the ushabti had helped others find their courage, and their resolve grew firmer when a burst of warpflame fell plumb-centre in an approaching tomb guard cohort. So loud were the discordant cheers that no one paid any heed to the fate of the warpfire thrower team. Their weapon's feed-lines had split, and the leaking fuel quickly caught light, dooming the pair to a fiery death.

Capitalising on his warriors' rising morale, Claw hurled them forward. Time was needed, time for the warpbombs to be fused, and clanrats were easily replaced. Chief warlocks, however, were another matter, and Claw was careful to remain at the rear with the weapon teams, the better to supervise and make a swift retreat if circumstances required it.

The battle's pace quickened as more of the pyramid's guardians joined the fight. Spirits ebbed and swirled across the chamber, chill fingers reaching through flesh and bone to squeeze the life from fearful hearts. One clawband, realising that their weapons were useless against their ethereal foes, lost all heart. Screeching in maddened panic, they streamed away from the fight, the spirits hungrily close behind. Ikit Claw saw the rout begin, and ordered his remaining warpfire throwers to fire along the path of retreat. Desperate squeals turned more raw, more frantic as the green flames overtook the fleeing skaven, but Claw didn't care. All that mattered to him was that the pursuing spirit hosts had been caught in the same torrent, consumed by the same magical fire as those they had set to rout.

The jezzails continued their punishing volleys, pounding shot after shot into the ushabti. The duel was not all in the skaven's favour, however. A handful of the constructs had bows, which they shot without breaking step. Arrows the size of saplings hissed across the chamber, smashing aside jezzail pavises and skewering both shieldrat and gunner with the same shaft. But it was in the grind of shield upon shield, where clanrat strove with skeletal guard that the skaven made their superior numbers count. Blind to all but the foe immediately before them, given courage by the sickly bursts of light that told of weapon teams still firing, the clanrats thrust and bit and gnawed at their foe, almost berserk in their determination.



Varisoth had waited in the shadows whilst the battle raged, allowing the unholy relic upon his throne to feast upon the death and destruction. Now, as the mortis engine glided forward, the necromancer cracked the reliquary seals, and reverently lifted the blackened skull high. At once, pale spectral energy blazed from the skull's eye sockets, crazed streamers of death magic that sought living essence. Where they struck, clanrats fell dead, their lives instantly extinguished. Worse for the ratmen, the magic empowered the skeletal guardians, reknitting broken bones and driving them into the fight with renewed vigour.

Ikit Claw saw all this, saw the black skull held high by the scarecrow necromancer. Warp lightning arced out from Storm Daemon, punching through the roiling spirit cloud at the mortis engine's base, and making the throne heave with sudden instability. Atop the throne, Varisoth staggered, slipped and finally fell into the reliquary's iron railings, nearly losing his grip on the black skull as he did so. Still the pale magic blazed and writhed, sucking the life from nearby skaven and strengthening the dead warriors they fought. Not even the ratmen's battle-madness could blind them to this threat. In ones and twos, but soon by the dozen, the clanrats broke from the fight.

Realising that the situation could only be rescued if the necromancer were slain, Ikit Claw readied another bolt from Storm Daemon. Before he could release it, however, a guilty screech of alarm made him turn. An engineer was holding one of the warpbombs, arms clasped tight around it in an attempt to conceal from the chief warlock the green glow pulsing through the bomb casing.

Smothering his frustration, Claw made a tally of the fused bombs. Two had been readied – two, plus the one cradled in his foolish apprentice's arms. Perhaps sympathetic explosions would do the rest. In any case, there was nothing to be done. Claw knew that the pulsing sphere's detonation could not be arrested, that he could either abandon his army with the Black Pyramid and hope for success, or perish in that chamber. The chief warlock didn't hesitate. Spooling up his warp compensators, Ikit Claw rasped a series of arcane syllables. There was a puff of greasy green-tinged smoke and a sudden stench of rot. When they cleared, the chief warlock had gone, abandoning the rest of his army to their fate.

A moment later, the pulsing warpbomb detonated, and searing light swept the chamber.









The Black Pyramid was older than any of the Old World's civilisations, and it did not lightly yield its grip on existence, but yield it did all the same.

In the first heartbeat after detonation, brilliant green energy tore through its inner chambers, the fantastic temperatures causing the gold of the bas-reliefs first to run like water, then boil into a gilded steam. For those skaven who remained, death was instantaneous, so swift that none amongst them even glimpsed their fate. For Varisoth and others amongst the temple guardians, salvation came only from the reliquary's black skull. Supercharged by the torrent of death unleashed by the bomb's detonation, the skull's power shielded those undead clustered nearby, rebuffing the storm of warpfire that raged about it.

In the second heartbeat, a wave of massive, concussive force ripped through the ancient black stones. Those closest to the detonation were battered into inert dust. Others were flung outward by the blast, smashing through walls and ceilings that had barely survived the explosion's onset. The Black Pyramid's outer flanks shuddered beneath these hammer blows, but they held.

A third heartbeat heralded a second detonation as the casings of the unprimed warpbombs finally melted under the onslaught. Chunks of masonry the size of buildings howled loose from the pyramid's outer slopes, crashing down upon the isthmus, upon the Lake of Death – even as far away as the ruins of Castle Drakenhof, those many leagues distant. Fire blazed from balconies and gateways, incinerating untold thousands of undead. Still shielded by the black skull, Varisoth was propelled from the pyramid's innards like a shot from cannon, slamming into the Lake of Death's rocky shores.

In the fourth heartbeat, what remained of the pyramid began to collapse, the walls falling in upon themselves, or toppling outward into the lake's amethyst waters. It would take nearly an hour for the last of the rubble to finally settle.

From the isthmus, Nagash watched the only constant in his long unlife disintegrate before his eyes, and went berserk. He rounded on Isabella, but found her gone, fled in the moment of the pyramid's conflagration.

Giving voice to a bellow of rage that shook the distant mountains, Nagash sent magic sweeping outward. There was no shape to the spell he called down, no logic or goal. It was but a tidal wave of punishing force, his wrath given sorcerous form. The magic howled like a gale across the isthmus, and where it touched, daemonic flesh withered to dust. Scrofulox, too slow to escape as Isabella had, was torn apart by the magic, leaving only dust and Krell's mangled remains behind.

Isabella, swift enough to escape Nagash's sight, but an eternity too slow to outpace his magic, was swept up by the torrent. The countess was hurled a full furlong, coming to a stop only when she struck the remains of an old Ulrican shrine with a sickening thud. Her flesh endured where the daemons' had not, but as Isabella lay broken and tangled, she felt Bolorog shriek in her mind. The daemon within her blood was in agony, and through their link she shared every moment of his terrible pain.

The bow wave swept further east and west, rolling across the battlefields where Mannfred and Neferata fought, before continuing on, fading steadily with every league travelled. It was only then that exhaustion overtook Nagash. As the wave of magic faded at last, he sank heavily onto his staff, and realised his terrible mistake. With the Black Pyramid's destruction, Nagash's tether to the Lake of Death was irrevocably destroyed. The Wind of Death was still his to command, was still anchored to him. However, he could no longer draw upon the vast reservoir of power that he had jealously hoarded and grounded in Sylvania's bedrock in the wake of his rebirth. Worse, in a moment of fury, the Great Necromancer had just expended much of what he had spent months absorbing. Nagash had known the power of a god. Now he was mortal once more, no more mighty than any of the other Incarnates.

All along the isthmus, skeletons and wights stood motionless. Lacking either a foe to fight, or any command from their master, they stared blankly across the ruin of their enemies, waiting patiently for a change in circumstance. The morghasts knelt before their creator, their tattered wings gathered tight.

Nagash was still kneeling in the dust when Mannfred and Neferata arrived at the isthmus. Nothing could have concealed the Black Pyramid's demise, and it had struck both vampires – almost in the same moment – that the Great Necromancer could well have been destroyed in the explosion, leaving opportunity for another to ascend in his stead. Thus had they left the dying battle in other hands, and flown south. Neither vampire dared address Nagash, for fear of betraying a disappointment so massive as to deny concealment. Instead, they simply attended in silence.

Nagash scarcely noticed their arrival, so lost was he in contemplating his sparse options. There was no calculating the enormity of the blow that Chaos had struck against him, nor did he see how his original plan was to be recovered. Years ago, when Teclis had first sought him out in the void between life and death, seeking to forge an alliance against the growing power of Chaos, Nagash had refused. Nonetheless, he had seen in the mage's plan something he could use for his own schemes. Though it irked him, he had never considered making himself the master of death magic, and had grudgingly accepted

that Teclis' mind might almost be on par with his own. Yet subverting Teclis' plan, taking the power of death to drive his own ascension, had failed.

Two possibilities now presented themselves, both equally distasteful to proud Nagash. One was to succumb to the Chaos Gods, to become their servant, as so many of his own vassals had done in recent years. The other was to stand with the living against the forces of Chaos – for the Great Necromancer to treat with ephemeral mortals as if they were his equals. It mattered not that he could sense that other beings had been infused with magic's raw essence just as he had. Other beings – mortals especially – would always be inferior.

Neither course held much attraction. To take either was an admission of failure, to accede that Nagash was not so mighty as he proclaimed. Moreover, he suspected that Teclis had interfered with his chosen course nearly as much as the Dark Gods had, for that alone could explain how his meticulously planned resurrection had nearly ended in absolute disaster.

Coming to a decision, the Great Necromancer stood tall again. The skeletons and wights formed beneath their banners once more as his will fell upon them. The morghasts rose, weapons held in salute. Neferata at last knelt before her master. Mannfred made no move to match the gesture, though he averted his eyes as Nagash's gaze swept over him.

Turning away from his mostly subservient Mortarchs, Nagash surveyed the remnants of battle. His eyes rested a long time on Arkhan's blackened bones. The liche could not be truly destroyed whilst his master walked the mortal world – their fates were too closely bound for that. Certainly, Arkhan had failed once again – neither he, nor Krell, deserved resurrection. On the other hand, Nagash knew that he was about to enter into a den of enemies, and whatever Arkhan and Krell's failures, disloyalty was not amongst them. Striding to each in turn, Nagash touched the tip of his staff to their remains, giving of his own essence in order to restore his servants.

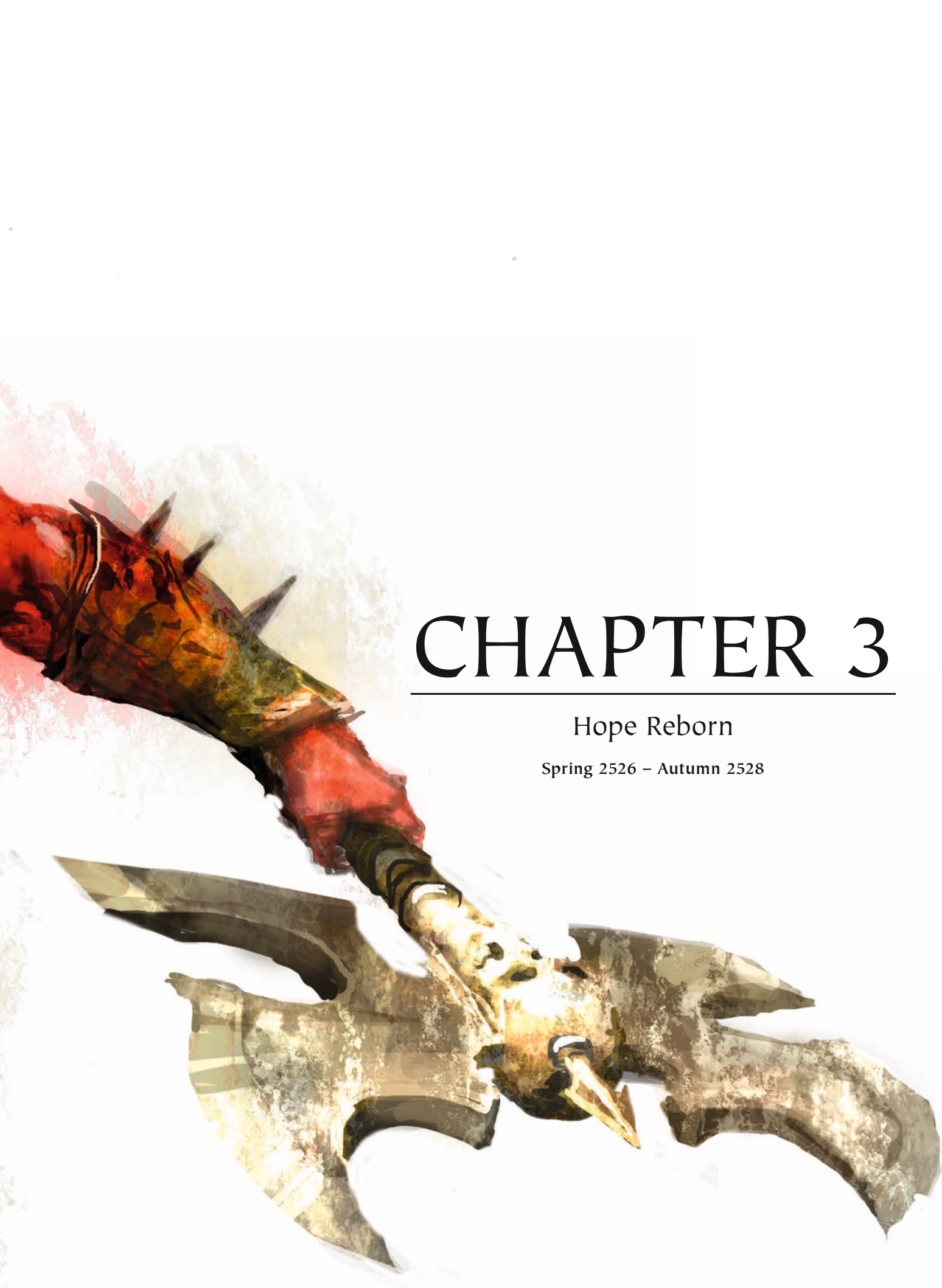
Then the Great Necromancer made the long walk to the Black Pyramid's shattered remains, raising up all those capable of holding a blade. Against all odds, Varisoth was amongst these, shielded by the Black Skull of Morghane and thrown clear by the explosion. The necromancer clearly believed he had been raised again only to be struck down for his failure, but Nagash had forgiven greater failures that day.

Soon after, the army of the dead was on the march. Much to Mannfred's anger, Nagash had appointed Neferata as ruler of the realm in his stead, had bidden her to hold Sylvania in his absence. In many ways, the decision was inevitable. There were now more Nehekharan nobles than vampires in Sylvania. Their customs were alien to Mannfred, and revolt a certainty if he tried to impose his will upon them – even if it were Nagash's by proxy. Nevertheless, Mannfred had to struggle to quell his anger. He had no doubt that it would be days before any challenge to Nagash's will would end in aught save his own destruction. By contrast, Neferata was greatly pleased by the edict. She cared little for ruling Sylvania – a fact she was certain to impress upon Mannfred before his departure – but the Queen of Mysteries rejoiced that her new position would place the hated Khalida wholly within her power.

Yet more than the loss of Sylvania, it was Nagash's destination that troubled Mannfred. Given the choice between an alliance with mortals, or with the servants of the Dark Gods, the Great Necromancer had chosen the former. With each step, the army of the dead moved steadily westward, towards the realm of undeath's antithesis. Towards Athel Loren.







CHAPTER 3

Hope Reborn

Spring 2526 – Autumn 2528



For a short span following Malekith's crowning as the Eternity King, Athel Loren had known a period of stability. With the refugees from Ulthuan and Naggaroth supplementing the wood elves' own warriors, the beastmen of Athel Loren had stood little chance. Warherds had been slaughtered or driven out of most of the realm's twelve kingdoms. In their wake, the waystone-marked boundaries were secured against further intrusion from the wasteland that had once been Bretonnia. Thousands of lives were lost in the trying, and many ancient groves were left scorched and bare. Nonetheless, a victory of sorts had been achieved. Most elves reckoned the cost worth paying, and cast their eyes forward to a future of reclamation.

Yet amongst the triumphs, the wider war was being lost. The Weave – the natural balance that the wood elves had laboured so long to protect – was shifting badly as Chaos grew dominant. This was not solely due to the travails facing Athel Loren. The Dark Gods' triumphs affected the Weave there more than in any other land, but every assault they made upon the natural order pushed the world closer to its unmaking.

Such a change would not happen overnight. Indeed, without an explosion of Chaos energy not seen since the fall of the Old Ones, it would take centuries for the Weave to be upset so gravely for the world to be torn apart. However, a tipping point was approaching, a point of no return that would herald an inexorable slide into timeless and formless Chaos. Already its precursors could be felt.

As the balance shifted, madness began to overtake Athel Loren itself. Ever more forest spirits were driven to Coeddil's cause, and an uprising that had begun in Cythral spread across the woodland realm. This stretched the forest's defenders all the more gravely, allowing the corruption to spread further, in a self-perpetuating loop of destruction. The areas of Athel Loren most heavily suffused with magic suffered the worst, and soon the paths of Fyr Darric and Argwylon were unsafe for even the elves to travel. Stories abounded of dryads running with daemons, and of enraged treemen smashing apart the hidden shrines.

Fortunately for the elves, those forest spirits who kept their sanity still outnumbered those who had been corrupted by Chaos. Durthu, ever the stalwart of Athel Loren, remained rational, and laboured long at Alarielle's side, trying to undo the spreading corruption. Progress was slow, and easily reversed. Athel Loren's spirits were creatures of magic, like – and yet unlike – the daemonic servants of the Chaos Gods. That kinship alone should not have been enough to sway them to the Dark Gods' cause, but the sad truth was that too many forest spirits resented the presence of the elves, or longed to return to a simpler time, though they remembered it but dimly.

Malekith and Alarielle had always known that the situation would grow more dire – though they had shared the information with but few of their subjects. They were soon proven correct. Even as Archaon travelled south to the Empire city of Middenheim, the forces of Chaos had revealed themselves to be quiescent, rather than defeated. When they came forth a second time, they did so in numbers so vast as to defy belief.

The first blow fell in Arranoc, the glorious Summerstrand, where the sun never went dark. Daemons spilled forth from the Vaults of Winter, the cold of the accursed caverns spreading before them. Glades and fields that had never known aught save the most glorious of summers vanished beneath thick hoarfrost. Those who survived the icy onset were numbed and disoriented by the sudden change, none more so than the forest spirits, who plunged instantly into a slumber so deep that they would never again waken to the living world. Even Amadri Ironbark, the spirit king of Arranoc, fell prey.

Without Amadri's leadership, and bereft of their forest spirit allies, the elves were able to mount but a token defence. The Summerstrand was once the brightest and most beautiful of the woodland realms, but it soon became a haunt of madness and horror, where lithe daemonettes flitted from tree to tree, searching for fresh playthings to torment. Nonetheless, the elves of Arranoc refused to abandon their home. They fought and died amidst the frozen rivers and frost-wreathed glades, their arrows and spears but pinpricks against the hide of an otherworldly leviathan.

Help came from other realms as the Summerstrand slipped deeper into eternal winter. The elves of Atylwyth, whose groves were permanently locked in winter, were well-used to fighting beneath rime-clad boughs, and their arrival served to slow the Slaaneshi advance. Yet Arranoc's salvation came from what would have once been considered an impossible source. Many of the exiled dark elves had made new homes in Atylwyth, finding reminders of Naggaroth's bitter chill beneath its bare boughs. A few dreadlords voluntarily mustered their forces northwards, and more marched on Malekith's order.

Thus reinforced, the elves of Arranoc at last reclaimed their home, or nearly so. Though the daemons were driven back into the Vaults of Winter, the Summerstrand remained locked in ice. Worse, new gates to the Dreaming Wood – the Realm of Chaos – had burst open upon the sites of the greatest battles. These needed guarding ever after, lest other daemons stray into Athel Loren from the world beyond. Though it remained in elven hands, Arranoc was lost as surely as sunken Ulthuan, and a cursed land forevermore.

Arranoc was only the beginning. Scarcely after the Vaults of Winter had been sealed once again, myriad new assaults were launched against Athel Loren. In Anmyr, the Witherhold, the Tree of Woe collapsed into rot. Morghur, accursed Cyanathair of legend, was reborn from the stinking mulch, and rejoicing bray-cries thickened on the wind as beastmen hurled themselves upon Anmyr's borders. Lady Delynna of Anmyr was the first of hundreds to perish that day, her flesh mutating into something unspeakable before her blade could end the threat. Morghur escaped in the anarchy that followed, as elves set spear and bow upon the twisted remains of those kinsmen twisted by Morghur's touch. Other elves hurried to defend the waystones upon the realm's boundaries. They were an age too late. By the time Lady Tevaril's spear slew the creature that had once been Delynna, the waystones had been toppled, and the warherds were rampaging across the border.

Arranoc had endured only through help from the other kingdoms. There would be no such aid for Anmyr, for the other realms too were under assault. In the depths of the Vaults, northlander sorcerers shackled the dead of ages to their will, and hurled them against the borders of Atylwyth, Cavaroc and Modryn. Horsemasters and hawklords met the dead upon Cavaroc's wide plains, the thunder of hooves echoing beneath skies thick with arrows. Yet the dead of the mountains were a rich resource, and the sorcerers who drove them on were always careful not to expose themselves to the keen eyes of Modryn's scouts.

In the east, the briarmaven Drycha at last shattered the binding stones of the Wildwood, Cythral, after years of striving, loosing the corrupt treeman Coeddil and his cruel spirit army from their age-old prison. Lady Draya the Nighthawk held them for a time, her rangers reinforced by the aesanar of twice-broken Nagarythe. However, Coeddil's followers were too many, the treeman's rage too unyielding. The halls of Tyr Vanna and Tyr Edrell soon fell to the spirit army's advance, and the Nighthawk's army found itself trapped against the bastion of Cullodinen Edge. That battle left the elves of Cythral scattered, and their maid-queen dead amongst the ashes of a burnt grove. That Coeddil did not push deeper into Athel Loren was thanks entirely to the leadership of Alith Anar. The Shadow King rallied the weary Cythrali and harried the treeman's host, blunting their every advance through stealth and guile.

In Torgovann, where blind Daith's funeral pyre still raged, gates to the Dreaming Wood ran with blood, and baying daemon-hounds hunted beneath starlight skies. As the blood flowed, the gates grew wider, and the daemons were so numerous that there were scarcely enough arrows in Torgovann to see them slain. Yet they were held, barely, once again with the assistance of asur and druchii blades.

In Wydrioth and Argwylon, in Fyr Darric and Talsyn, the tale was the same, and Athel Loren rescued from destruction by those its own defenders had saved scant months before. Just as the forest itself had been preserved millennia earlier by the arrival of the first elves, the newcomers ensured that it endured against the rising tide of Chaos.

Yet it would have been a mistake to view the elves as a truly united force, even then, for resentments and hatreds of old could not fade in so short a span. Many a defeat was visited upon Athel Loren's defenders through the refusal of asur to cooperate with druchii, or asrai to place their trust in any save their own kin. Sadly, this was an example set from the apex of the realm.



It was a truth poorly hidden that there was little fondness between Malekith and Alarielle, and no intimacy whatsoever. Theirs was a marriage of state, forged to bring a divided people together. Trust – ever an elusive commodity in those dark days – existed but tenuously between the king and queen. Malekith watched ceaselessly for betrayal, the suspicion of the past a hard habit to break. For her part, Alarielle remained always alert to the possibility of her husband lapsing into familiar ways, of him becoming anew the tyrant of old. The tragedy lay in the fact that neither had any true grounds for their suspicion. It was pride, and history's inexorable weight, that drove Malekith and Alarielle apart, and their distance was plain to far too many of their subjects.

Nonetheless, the Eternity King and his Everqueen fought readily in Athel Loren's defence. The forest was a true home to neither, and had been bequeathed to their rule by dying gods, but they strove to prove worthy of it, all the same.

Malekith was ever at war, wielding the shadow-power once held captive in the Great Vortex. By his hand, armies traversed vast distances in an eye-blink, marching in the spaces between the shadows, and often attacking a flank that their enemies had thought secure. Wreaking destruction had always been Malekith's greatest talent – that it was now loosed in a righteous cause did nothing to stifle his joy.



Alarielle was seldom more measured in her deeds. She was the Incarnate of Life, and many of the elves – especially those high elves who had not fought beside her during Ulthuan's dying days – had assumed her transformation would render her more akin to the spiritual Everqueens of old than the war-queen she had so lately been. They could not have been more wrong. They had forgot that life was a force of destruction as well as healing – especially in a land such as Athel Loren, where the trees themselves were willingly roused to war. Indeed, in those early days no greater slaughter was wrought than at Tal Merion, where those beast-kin whom Alarielle did not drown beneath the waters of the Grismerie she tore apart with writhing thorns.

None of this went unnoticed by Lileath, Goddess of the Moon and last of the elven pantheon to remain in that age of the world. From the very start, Lileath had not believed that Chaos could be defeated. Where others sought to win the war at hand, she had drawn her plans for the future. She was little more than mortal now, her power almost spent in the fashioning of a haven designed to allow her daughter to ride out the storm of Chaos. What little remained, she wielded to delay the inevitable tipping of the Weave, for every moment of delay would ensure that the Chaos Gods would be weaker in whatever world came to pass.

As yet, none of the elves had guessed at Lileath's despair – they saw only a goddess who fought at their side, heedless of the cost to herself. The creation of the Incarnates had been her idea, though brought to fruition by Teclis, and all believed that the goddess could yet change their fortunes. All, perhaps, save Malekith, who was little given to placing trust in any other creature, be they mortal or goddess. Even Teclis, whose labours brought him secretly to Athel Loren shortly before Averheim's fall, did not suspect Lileath's deception, and still worked to complete her plan.

'You should rest.'

Teclis brought Malhandir to a halt, and tore his attention from the overgrown path. As ever, he couldn't be sure whether the shadowy figure had actually uttered the words, or whether his mind was playing tricks. Perhaps he was going mad, he thought.

Certainly, the casket's four bearers were little more than elementals, woven from strands of life, shadow and memory. The casket's front was carried by a rugged, lion-cloaked warrior, and a slender, more refined noble of the southern courts. The rear was borne by elementals in the forms of a robed loremaster, and a tall, eagle-helmed lord whose face lay ever in shadow. In theory, they had no will – and therefore no opinions – of their own. In theory.

'I cannot afford to rest,' Teclis said. 'Time is short enough as it is. The forest is changing around us. If the corruption reaches Yn Edri Eternos before we – before I – do, then all of this will have been for nothing.'

'Haste will do no good at all if exhaustion leads you down the wrong path,' cautioned the lion-pelted shade.

'How long is it since you last slept?' asked the southern noble.

'Too long,' said the shadowy loremaster, not giving Teclis time to respond. 'I thought I taught you better than that.'

'You did,' said the final shade, the words spoken gruffly, 'but he never listens. He does what he will, no matter the cost to himself, or to others.'

Those words were knives in Teclis' soul, even though he knew them to be but a reflection of his own thoughts. It was too late to make amends for the decisions of the past. There was only the future, and the hope of salvation for all.

'We continue,' he said, urging Malhandir on once again. 'We have no other choice.'

Even with Lileath's deceit concealed, it was not long before the elves too began to experience severe division. Hellebron, rescued by chance from the ruin of Ulthuan, had become the godhead of her murderous cult following Khaine's destruction. She had fought as keenly as any in Athel Loren's defence. Indeed, some said too keenly, for she gladly expended the lives of her followers if their deaths would bring victory. Hellebron's were the bloodiest triumphs of those days, and it was not always the foe who paid the steepest price for her success. Nonetheless, her cult had continued to grow, drawing worshippers from all three elven races.

Many lords and ladies pleaded with Malekith, begged him to rein in Hellebron's worst excesses, but the Eternity King judged her actions but one of many sane responses to surviving those insane times. If blood were the coin of Hellebron's victories, then Malekith was glad for her to spend it as she wished. However, not all were so sanguine. Alarielle, in particular, was greatly worried by the Crone Queen's excesses, but her authority alone was insufficient to bring about censure.

It was at the Battle of Cerura Carn that matters came to a head. There, Imrik of Caledor, first of the asur princes to support Malekith, did battle with a truly vast beastmen warherd. So great was the danger that even the proud dragon prince was forced to call for reinforcements. Lord Arlas of Modryn was first to answer the call, his midnight-clad warriors falling hard upon the beastmen's western flank whilst the iron-disciplined Caledorians held them in the centre. But Hellebron too had answered the call – though more out of desire for slaughter than to aid Imrik.

The witch elves and executioners assailed the warherd from behind, tearing the embattled beasts apart in an orgy of blood and blades. But so swept up in slaughter were the warriors of Har Ganeth that they did not slow when their lines met those of Lord Arlas. Over half of the Modryn host was slain at Cerura Carn, a good part of it by Hellebron's followers.

Furious, Imrik petitioned Alarielle. Soon after that, the two of them then confronted Malekith in private, and at last persuaded the Eternity King to check Hellebron's power. Thus was the Cult of the Blood Queen outlawed in Athel Loren. In a rare moment of reluctance, Malekith did not issue the decree himself, but left the matter to Alarielle. The Everqueen could not divine the reason for her husband's reticence, but it mattered little. The Cult of the Blood Queen was outlawed at Alarielle's order, and Hellebron was stripped of all duties and titles.

Humiliated and embittered, Hellebron fled with her followers to the Shrine of Khaine on the Wydrioth–Talsyn border. From its tallest tower, she stared westward across the burning forest, and brooded upon her fate.

It was there that the daemon Be'lakor, architect of the elves' woes, found Hellebron one moonless night, and stole into her dreams like a thief. The daemon sought to twist the unwitting Crone Queen to his purposes but, to his great consternation, Hellebron recognised his nature from the first. This hardly mattered, however, for Hellebron considered herself too many times betrayed. Her feet, then, were already set upon temptation's path. Nonetheless, Be'lakor took great enjoyment in sharing with the Crone Queen what he claimed was a vision of the future, in which Alarielle flung her bloodied corpse from atop a pinnacle of stone. Already receptive to the daemon's promises, Hellebron was swift to embrace the Dark Gods, in exchange for a promise of revenge against those who had wronged her.

That same night, Aqshy, the Wind of Fire, swept masterless through the skies far away across the Grey Mountains. Loosed from mortal form by the death of Ungrim Ironfist, it sought another host, but could find none to its liking. Many sorcerers sensed its power upon the breeze and sought to chain it, to imprison its essence within themselves, but Aqshy was a primal force of magic, and even the most powerful could not overcome its fiery independence. In the tunnels beneath ruined Altdorf, Egrimm van Horstmann made endless sacrifices, buttressing his own might with stolen souls, but still dominance over the Wind of Fire eluded him. No sooner had the sorcerer taken Aqshy into his body than it burst free once more, the force of the separation burning his body to a blackened and lifeless crisp. Others tried and failed, with similarly gruesome results, but still Aqshy blazed and wheeled in the sky, as it sought its destiny.

As the elves battled for survival, two armies marched on Athel Loren from the east. The first was the Emperor's motley assemblage of humans and dwarfs – the scant survivors of Averheim. They made painfully slow progress through the mountains, for they were burdened by too many wounded. That they could proceed at all was only thanks to Gotri Hammerson's knowledge of the Grey Mountains, of hidden dwarf roads seldom seen by outsiders.

Nevertheless, every day of the march brought fresh challenges. Mindless undead clustered in those high places, their only motivation to slay the living. Pockets of wild magic had birthed daemons amongst the peaks, and chimerae were ever-ready to stir from their lairs. Worse, that stretch of the Grey Mountains was home to a dozen orc and ogre tribes, and none of them bore intrusion lightly. Some of the dangers could be bypassed, but not all. Time and again, the loose column of men and dwarfs shook itself into a rally square as howling greenskins came charging down the slopes, or a chimera came roaring from its nest.



There would likely have been no victories at all but for Gelt's magic and dwarfen firepower, as the passes were too confined for the knights. None felt this frustration more fully than Duke Jerrod. He had now witnessed the destruction of two realms, and he longed to steep his blade in righteous retribution. Instead, however, he had to watch as the ignoble weapons of the dwarfs wrought his salvation.

For their part, the Zhufbarak had become more accepting of Gelt during the march. At first, they had resented his magics no less than the Bretonnians resented the dwarfs' own firearms. However, where Gelt walked, runes flared into vigorous life – not just those whose power Hammerson knew well, but simple naming runes whose true power had long lain forgotten. In Gelt's presence, gromril armour became hardier still, and weapons gained a killing edge that no whetstone could replicate. As the days passed, ironbreakers whispered of the spirit of Grungni, and wondered if his power had come to rest in the man who hid behind a mask of metal. These voices were never raised within earshot of a human, for the dwarfs found it deeply discomfiting that one of their ancestor gods might bless an outsider so.

Gelt was wholly unaware of the consternation that he had provoked, but then he was aware of little during that march. Gelt's days were spent in battle, his nights in sombre meditation as he attempted to understand the power that had become shackled within his bones. He was all too aware how easily curiosity had led him astray in recent years, and he was determined that he would not make the same mistake again.

The Emperor was still bereft of magic, stripped of Azyr's might at Archaon's hand. Nevertheless, he did not shirk from his duty in the line of battle. Though Hammerson chose the route, it was the Emperor who had set the destination, even though it met with little approval. To Jerrod, Athel Loren was a haunted and spiteful place, its denizens responsible for the deaths of too many of his friends and subjects. To Hammerson, it was a wellspring of grudges, ranging from the time of Grungni Goldfinder all the way up to the present day. And for Gelt, whose life hereto had been grounded in the Empire's great metropolises, Athel Loren was a realm of barbarians. Nonetheless, all allowed the Emperor's will to guide them, though they could not have explained why. Thus, battle by battle, the refugees of Averheim gradually drew closer to the woodland realm. Behind them, growing closer every day, came a far larger host. This too had come from Averheim, but it was possessed of a far darker purpose than the one that preceded it. If the brass totems they bore had not betrayed their allegiance, the trail of carnage left behind surely would have done so. Where the Emperor's army had avoided all but inevitable confrontation, this army sought out bloodshed, leaving shattered corpses and piled skulls in their wake to attract Khorne's favour.

This Army of Skulls was led by a dead man: Skarr Bloodwrath, slain by Duke Jerrod, but restored to life by slaughter, as he had been so many times before. Skarr knew he had failed his dark patron, and yearned to claim the skulls of those who had escaped his wrath as penance. Skarr had long transcended the need for any sustenance save battle itself, and brooked no delay caused by the human frailties that still beset the Skaramor who followed him. Those who could not keep to their warlord's pace were abandoned on the trail, their skulls oftentimes added to those of their victims.

As the Emperor's army reached the boundary of Wydrioth, the fabled Pine Crags of Athel Loren, the wind at last shifted, carrying the berserk howls of the skullreapers westward. At once, weary men and dwarfs redoubled

their pace, preferring to make their stand in the dubious safety of Athel Loren rather than in the daemon-haunted mountains.

Their intrusion was noted at once. Swift Wydriothi scouts scattered unseen from the Emperor's path, carrying word to the king and queen of Athel Loren. Dryads shadowed their approach, glinting eyes alert for any misstep. Alarielle had long expected that others of her fellow Incarnates would make their way to Athel Loren. With Durthu's aid, the Everqueen had impressed the need for restraint upon those forest spirits who had not been lost to madness. Athel Loren, not ordinarily a realm much given to friendliness, was quick to welcome allies in those dark times. Nevertheless, had so much as a single bough been split for firewood, the dryads would have gladly torn the newcomers limb from limb. Hammerson had learned the lesson of Goldfinder's doomed expedition where many of his kin had not, and forbade that any axe be set against living wood. Pleased and disappointed in equal measure, the dryads held their peace.

But there was another who bore witness to the Emperor's arrival in Athel Loren. Be'lakor disliked the turn that events had taken. Gelt's power shone like a beacon to the daemon, a brilliant gold light that could pierce the shadows of his very being. Moreover, Be'lakor could sense the touch of Azyr in the Emperor's mortal flesh, and feared that these two could tip the battle for Athel Loren if allowed to reach Malekith and Alarielle.

Be'lakor knew that any battle would likely bring the king or queen to Pine Crags all the sooner. Therefore, if one was to be fought at all, victory would have to be guaranteed so that they would not find the allies they sought. Unfortunately for the daemon, Wydrioth had resisted his minions with an efficiency seldom matched. What armies Be'lakor had there were too small to guarantee victory, at least alone. Skarr presented another problem. The Army of Skulls was within a day's march of the forest boundary, and their presence would surely draw the attention that Be'lakor sought to avoid.

Stepping through the shadows, Be'lakor flew to Skarr's side. Utilising every iota of guile, the daemon tried to convince the warlord to stay his advance, not to breach Athel Loren's bounds before his own forces could converge, and thus guarantee a swift victory. Another northlander, awed by the power and glory of the First-damned, might have acceded to Be'lakor's request, but not Skarr. His loyalty was given to Khorne, his heart to slaughter and his mind to vengeance. Heedless of Be'lakor's growing wrath, he refused the daemon's petition, instead driving his army harder than ever before.



Just as Be'lakor had predicted, Athel Loren went wild as soon as the Skaramor trod beneath its eaves. At once, the dryads who had been shadowing the Emperor peeled away eastward, and fell upon Khorne's devotees with all the shrill fury of their kind. The sounds of battle rang out across the glades, alerting elves and spirits for leagues around. Glade lords marshalled their households, slumbering dragons awoke to rage and treeman ancients roused entire groves of forest spirits to war. Cursing Skarr's stubbornness, Be'lakor withdrew to his fastness in the ruins of Tal Esth, and began to draw his plans anew.

Thousands of skullreapers and wrathmongers perished in the hours that followed, but Skarr would not be slowed. Every axe-blow, every cloven treeman and beheaded elf, brought him closer to his quarry – and vengeance. Even now, he made better time than the Emperor's army. The dense forest impeded the humans and dwarfs as much as it did their Chaos-touched pursuers, and they dared not offer violence or offence so freely as did Skarr. Steadily, the Army of Skulls' bloodied vanguard drew closer.

At last, as the refugees made their way through Esdari Corrin – the Chasm of Echoes – Gelt came to a decision. Turning Quicksilver back to face the oncoming host, he bade the others continue, to seek help whilst he kept the Skaramor at bay between the steep-sided walls. All knew what Gelt was offering – that the wizard intended to sacrifice himself to buy the others time to escape. It was a logical and noble sentiment, but alas one entirely wasted, for the Zhufbarak refused to leave his side. Instead, they calmly took position where the pass was narrowest, and no entreaty on the wizard's part would move them.

The Emperor and Duke Jerrod knew that their column of exhausted knights would be of little use in that chasm and, following a brief farewell, rode hard. Despite Gelt's parting wishes, abandonment could not have been further from their minds. At Jerrod's suggestion, the force was divided. Each company took a different path, the boldest and swiftest of their number riding ahead, braving the forest's dangers in their desperation to make contact with Athel Loren's hidden defenders.

As the humans sought aid further west, Skarr Bloodwrath reached the Chasm of Echoes. At Hammerson's order, thunderous volleys rippled across the boulders, shots screaming through the air and the first blood shining red beneath the forest canopy. The Battle of the Chasm had begun.

THE THRONG OF METAL

Hardier than the humans they had escorted from the ashes of the Empire, the Zhufbarak were raring for a fight. They had lost many good comrades during the fall of Averheim, and looked forward to repaying those losses in kind. If this were to be their last battle, the dwarfs of Zhufbar would meet it with steel.



BALTHASAR GELT, INCARNATE OF METAL

Gelt's transformation into the Incarnate of Metal had brought with it a certain clarity of purpose. Gone were the doubts that had pursued him of late, and the emptiness of spirit that had formed his earliest rememberings was vanished also. For the first time, the knowledge of magic that Gelt had always sought was ready at his fingertips, his for the calling. More than any in the Chasm of Echoes, Gelt had a sense of unfolding destiny, of a future awaiting fulfilment. It was that same feeling which had driven him to hold back the Skaramor, and it too that assured him that he would not meet his end that day.

GOTRI HAMMERSON

Gotri Hammerson had always sworn to avoid Athel Loren and its treacherous inhabitants, so it still boggled him to be fighting a battle inside its borders. Then again, his younger self would never have believed that he would one day go into a hopeless battle for a human's sake, and for a human wizard, at that. Nonetheless, it was plain to Hammerson's sight that Gelt's power did not derive purely from gold magic. The blessing of Grungni – perhaps even the spirit of Grungni – was with him, for what other explanation could there have been for the runes sparking to life in his presence?





THE HOLZENGARD

Of Zhufbar's many hammer-throngs, only the Holzengard remained. A cave-in had trapped them in the Underway early on in Zhufbar's siege. The sound of hammer upon stone had echoed ferociously as the Holzengard sought to escape their tomb, each blow driven home harder as the death-screams of family and comrades echoed down from the fortress above. Ultimately, the Holzengard escaped only to find their king slain and the hold all but lost. Denied an honourable death at their king's side, they swore to fight without fear alongside the other Zhufbarak who remained.

THE ZHUFBAR FIREBORES

Few of the Zhufbar Firebores had ever travelled further from their hold. Like Hammerson, they had always regarded Athel Loren as a semi-mythical place, and found it little to their liking. Nevertheless, they had chosen to make their stand, and were determined not to shame their ancestors over such trivial things as the lack of a proper ceiling overhead. Whatever complaints the Firebores might have levelled about the situation, paucity of ammunition was not amongst them. Every dwarf still carried upwards of two hundreds rounds each, and was determined to make every shot count.





THE IRONCLADS

Few of the Ironclads were talkative fellows, preferring to watch and listen while more garrulous dwarfs filled the silence with speech or song. Their deeds had always spoken more loudly than their tongues, and this was doubly true at the Chasm of Echoes. It had been the Ironclads who had first formed up at Gelt's side, the runes on their armour glowing with golden light. There they stood, waiting wordlessly for the battle to come, seemingly unconcerned whether any of their fellows would join their shield wall.



THE BLACKWATER SQUADRON

Not all gyrocopter pilots would have relished a battle beneath a forest canopy. However, the Blackwaters met it more with relief than with any other emotion. The preceding days had been vastly frustrating for them, with much of their mountain-crossing beset by howling daemonic winds that had made flying impossible on most days. Hammerson had given serious consideration to abandoning the flying machines. Only the pilots' point-blank assertions that they would travel only where their beloved gyrocopters went had stayed the runesmith's command.

Balthasar Gelt,
Incarnate of Metal

Gotri Hammerson
Runelord

The Zhufbar Firebores
Three throngs of Thunderers,
one of Dwarf Warriors,
two batteries of Cannons and
one of Organ Guns

The Ironclads
One throng of Ironbreakers,
one throng of Irondrakes

The Holzengard
One throng of Hammerers

The Blackwater Squadron
One squadron of Gyrocopters

THE ARMY OF SKULLS

Be'lakor's attempt to slow Skarr's march had only made the Skaramor warlord all the more determined to press on. He was undaunted by the losses that the forest spirits had inflicted upon his army, for he could smell his quarry's desperation upon the wind. Victory in the Chasm of Echoes would reaffirm Skarr's standing in Khorne's eyes, of that he was sure.



SKARR BLOODWRATH

Such was the slaughter at Averheim that Skarr was reborn at the height of his powers. However, as with every resurrection before it, he returned to the living world slightly less a man, and slight more a ravening beast. What little strategic acumen Skarr had once possessed was long gone by this time, drowned beneath an echo of his master's bloodlust. Skarr dimly recognised this, was aware that he was somehow diminished from how he had once been. Nevertheless, he had no regrets, and rejoiced in the heightened strength that his revivification had brought.

THE SONS OF KARAMOX

The Sons of Karamox had suffered horrendous losses during the siege of Averheim, but believed that the blood they had shed and spilt had only drawn them closer to Khorne's favour. They marked in blood each step across the Grey Mountains, culling the weak from their own ranks – and those of rival warbands – if no foes presented themselves by nightfall. By the time the Sons of Karamox reached Esdari Corrin, their numbers were roughly a tenth lower than at the start of the march, and several smaller warbands within the Army of Skulls had vanished entirely.





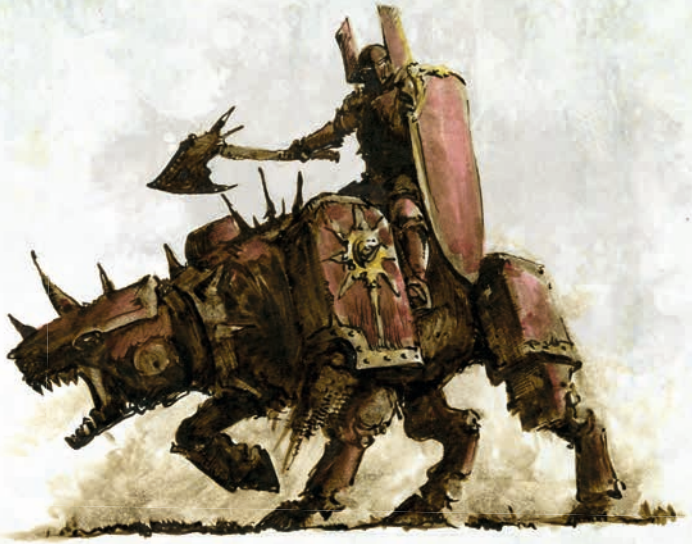
THE GORECHAINED

From scars, brotherhood; from brotherhood, glory: that was the Gorechained's motto. Each member of the warband bore a scar for each of their victims. Not the warriors' personal conquests, but those of the entire warband. From the very first, the Gorechained deemed that a greater tally of skulls could be claimed for their brooding master if their efforts were not wasted in competition with one another. It was an ethos derided by many other northlanders, though not by those who knew the significance of the crusted blood-whorls that covered every inch of each Gorechained's skin.

THE BLOODSHIELDS

The Bloodshields had little loyalty to Skarr Bloodwrath. They had been drawn to his side following the siege of Averheim, recognising him as a champion truly touched by their lord's madness. The Bloodshields sought not to serve Skarr, but recognised that Khorne's gaze often followed where he trod. Thus, they feigned subservience, trusting that Skarr would draw the Lord of Skulls' favour upon them all before he inevitably perished. If this failed, the Bloodshields stood ready to kill Skarr themselves, and present the champion's skull as an offering to Khorne.





THE CRIMSON RAMPAGE

Another band of warriors who pledged themselves to Skarr after Averheim, the Crimson Rampage gave no explanation for their arrival, and indeed were not heard to utter so much as a word during the pursuit. By the time the Army of Skulls had begun its descent into Athel Loren, many of its chieftains had come to suspect that there was no flesh within the Crimson Rampage armour at all, just a daemonic essence that lent the metal shape and form. Most gave the warband a wide birth after that.



THE HOUNDS OF HERUMAR

Herumar was a houndmaster of great renown in the northern wastes. He often claimed that his beasts were as much daemon-spawn as mortal hound, and those who saw the slavering brutes in battle seldom had reason to question that assertion. Herumar was always ready to sell warhounds to those who had the coin or plunder to pay, but had no truck with those who sought to steal his wares. More than one chieftain ended his days as fodder in Herumar's kennels, his bones fashioned into crude armour for one of the pack leaders.

Skarr Bloodwrath

The Sons of Karamox
Three warbands of Skullreapers

The Gorechained
Two warbands of Skullreapers, one warband of Chaos Warriors

The Red Tide
Three warbands of Skullreapers

The Axes of Erakan
Two warbands of Skullreapers

The Bloodshields
Two warbands of Chaos Warriors, one warband of Chosen

The Crimson Rampage
Three warbands of Skullcrushers

The Hounds of Herumar
One Chaos Lord on daemonic steed, five packs of Chaos Warhounds

The Wrathkin
One vast warband of Wrathmongers

The Worldreavers
One warband of Chaos Marauders, one warband of Marauder Horsemen

THE HOST OF FIRE

It was by the blindest chance that Jerrod discovered the aid he sought. Urging his steed down a path that looked like any other, he found himself upon the hidden road to Ystin Asuryan. He nearly perished in that moment, for the elves did not lightly forgive intrusion into their holiest of places.



CARADRYAN

Many elves had wanted to punish Jerrod's trespass with death, but they had swiftly subsided at Caradryan's wordless decree. All knew that the gaunt captain had been the Creator's truest servant in recent years, and his will was seldom defied. They might have been less ready to yield had they known how uncertain Caradryan was of the future before him. For long decades, he had been guided by the word of Asuryan, as laid down on the wall of fire. Now, both Asuryan and the wall were gone, and the captain was blind to the future for the first time.

VARANDI AND VALANAR, THE BROTHERS OF FIRE

It was rare for two siblings to enter the service of Asuryan – rarer still for twins to do so. Varandi and Valanar had served in the Phoenix Shrine since before Caradryan's time, each reaching the rank of anointed before their two-hundredth year. By the time of the evacuation to Athel Loren, the brothers were all of their family that remained – the rest had been slain during Tyrion's rampage through Saphery. From the moment of their induction into the Phoenix Guard, Varandi and Valanar knew what their family's fate was to be, and that burden hung heavy with them, even long after Ulthuan had vanished beneath the waves.





THE EATAINE GUARD

Of the Eataine Guard's thirty proud legions, only one remained by this time, and that had been bloodied and battered by war. Under the command of Prince Yvarn, it had fought on the front line of Eagle Gate, had witnessed first-hand the onslaught that had laid the fortress low. Like many exiles of that kingdom, the Eataine Guard had pledged themselves to Caradryan's service in the wake of Ulthuan's destruction. They could not bear to serve beneath Malekith, or even Imrik, both of whom they held accountable for the loss of so many of their comrades – including Prince Yvarn.



THE FLAMEHEARTS

The Flamehearts were all that remained of Caradryan's old legion, and had shared his every battle since Malekith's invasion of Ulthuan. Like their captain, the Flamehearts fought on both sides in that war – though at different times – fulfilling the role Asuryan had decreed for them. They had lost many fellows to Khaine's madness before the Destroyer had at last been defeated – had found it necessary to end many of those lives themselves lest the madness spread. Like Caradryan, the Flamehearts were now blind to the future but their faith, as ever, remained with their captain.



THE LAST PRIDE

Chrace was ravaged long before the war between Malekith and Tyrion, its forests set ablaze by daemons. The Last Pride was not a single regiment of white lions, but a conglomeration of survivors from those times, axe-brothers and lone hunters who had found new comrades with whom to face the darkening days. In them, the fierce pride of Chrace lived anew, the traditions of ancient times upheld by strong arms and ready steel. And their axes seldom rested, for there were always more foes who could only be vanquished by Chracian might.



THE CRIMSON DRAICHS

Har Ganeth had been a city of harsh rules and cruel justice, where existence was defined by the law. Many of its elves had gone mad with excess once freed from its strictures, but others had been lost without them. Such was the case of the Crimson Draichs, a greatly denuded cult of executioners, fallen from Hellebron's favour. Unable to function without guidance, they embraced duty at Ystin Asuryan. In the dangerous days since, there had been many opportunities to put their fearsome draich-skills to work, and doubtless there would be many more ahead.

Caradryan

Varandri and Valanar
Two Anointed of Asuryan on Flamespyre Phoenixes

Ainur Firemark
High Elf Dragon Mage on Sun Dragon

The Eataine Guard
One legion of High Elf Spearmen

The Flamehearts
One legion of Phoenix Guard

The Last Pride
One regiment of White Lions and one White Lion Chariot

The Crimson Draichs
One cult of Executioners

The Shrine of Sanguine Repentance
One Bloodwrack Shrine

The Guardians of the Hidden Flame
One kinband of Deepwood Scouts

Aubruch Brackenarm
One Treeman

The Talsyn Hearthwardens
One kinband of Eternal Guard

BATTLE FOR THE CHASM

Few warlords would have wished to attack the Zhufbarak position in the Chasm of Echoes. The slope was steep, thick with undergrowth and roots, split by shallow streams and jagged outcrops. The dwarfs had spent their time well, and had entrenched themselves amongst the crags and boulders. Moreover, there had been many dead trees on the chasm floor, dry husks which dwarfen axes had refashioned into crude barricades. Live trees, as ever, had been carefully left untouched, for the Zhufbarak recognised that there was no sense inviting trouble from the forest's spirits.

Skarr saw it all as soon as he rounded the last spire into the chasm's eastern mouth. The sun was blazing bright far above the canopy, shafts of golden light piercing the leaves to illuminate the warriors below. He saw the thunderers and war engines clustered at the chasm's narrowest point, the gleaming blocks of rune-armour upon the flanks. Overhead, Skarr could see the gyrocopters bobbing like corks upon a wave, waiting for the signal to attack. Between the chasm's treacherous confines and the waiting Zhufbarak, he knew that hundreds of Skaramor would perish before even coming to within blade's length of the enemy. Skarr was unconcerned. Khorne was with him, and the Lord of Skulls cared not from whence the blood flowed.

Bellowing more like a beast than a man, Skarr charged into the chasm's depths. His shout was taken up by the warriors who came behind, and the Skaramor attack began.

The Zhufbarak did not match the northlanders' war cry with one of their own. Instead, their war machines spoke for them. There was a colossal roar, and the dwarfs vanished from sight, hidden at once by seething cannon smoke. The first shot was high, whining far over Skarr's head to impact with the mountainside. The second shot ploughed into the skullreapers on Skarr's left, taking down a dozen blood-mad warriors in a single smear.

On the Skaramor charged, boots thudding through briar and fern, careless of the uneven footing. The scent of blood – the blood of their tribe – was thick in their nostrils, and the heady tang brought with it a divine battle rage. Ankles snapped like broken boughs as warriors missed their footing amidst the tangle, brief shouts of pain echoing up the chasm walls. Still the Skaramor came on, their slavering war hounds running free amongst them, the wounded dragging their twisted legs behind, or else trampled by their fellows.

Further down the slope, the cannons roared again, their voices joined this time by the staccato cracks of the Zhufbarak's organ gun, and the thunderers' volley. At Hammerson's command, the gyrocopters of the Blackwater Squadron at last opened their throttles. Skimming as low as they dared, the pilots strafed the skullreapers, jinking deftly to evade the heavy axes thrown their way in return. The leading edge of the Skaramor charge all but evaporated under that assault. One moment there was a bellowing mass of northlanders, axes whirling in anticipation of the fight to come. The next, the chasm floor was painted red with their blood, the undergrowth littered with corpses and body-parts.

Skarr was suddenly alone, his vanguard snatched to ruin by the Zhufbarak, the nearest reinforcements a dozen paces and more behind. Yet the champion did not slow his pace, did not balk at the odds before him. He merely bellowed fresh praise to Khorne, set his chained axes whirling, and redoubled his pace.

Bullets whined around Skarr as he charged home. Most of the shots weren't aimed for him, but rather at the skullreapers thundering in his wake. The dwarfs of Zhufbar were well-practised at this way of war, and Hammerson knew better to waste bullets on a single foe when hundreds more clustered close behind. Even so, Skarr was struck many times, the heavy lead punching bloodily through his flesh and bone. The champion didn't feel the wounds. He had been slain so many times that pain no longer had any purchase upon him, was naught but a spur to slaughter. He gave his blood freely as an offering to the Lord of Skulls, a votive to seize Khorne's attention so that he might see the deeds wrought in his name.

The Zhufbarak saw the bleeding and shot-ravaged northlander continue his mad charge, and dismissed him as a berserker whose strength would fade long before he reached their lines. Gelt suspected otherwise. The wizard's senses had been widened since his joining with Chamon, and he could feel a dark and oppressive presence drawing across the battlefield. He had no name for it, nor even a true feeling of its shape. He knew it was monstrous beyond description, as dark and unknowable as the abyss between the distant stars.

Up to that point, Gelt had drawn but little upon his magic. He had lain enchantments upon the dwarfs' weaponry, rousing runes to brilliance with a gesture, but had kept the greater part of his power shrouded, held back for a crucial moment.

As Skarr drew nearer, Gelt deemed the time had come. Urging Quicksilver forward, the wizard supped deep of Chamon. A filigree orb of gold began to form between Gelt's outstretched hands, growing larger and more solid as magic flooded into it. When the orb was about the size of a man's

head, the wizard breathed gently upon it, sending it rolling serenely uphill, directly into Skarr's path. On the orb travelled, through the crash and thunder of artillery, through the smoke that clogged the chasm floor.

The orb grew larger with every moment, quickly surpassing an ogre's girth, and then a dragon's wingspan. The Blackwater gyrocopters aborted their attack run, and banked hurriedly aside from the orb's path. Rotor blades skirted the rocky walls as they put their craft through evasive manoeuvres that danced on the very edge of suicide. Still the orb rolled on. Gold glittered in its wake, the rock and flora of the chasm transmuted into a king's ransom in precious metal. And still the orb continued.

By the time Skarr realised his danger, it was too late. The glimmering orb loomed large before him. The champion could not run past it, for it now filled the space between the chasm walls. Retreat was Skarr's only course, but it was also an unthinkable one. Refusing to admit defeat, the champion hurled himself into the orb's golden depths, roaring defiance as he did so. A heartbeat later, his wrathful cries fell silent. The orb continued its journey, leaving Skarr as a perfect golden statue in its wake. Immediately after, the next wave of Skaramor met the same fate as their warlord, as the orb's transmuting touch stilled their fury into golden silence.

Despite their best efforts and natural cynicism, many of the dwarfs were awestruck by what they had just witnessed. Their fire slackened and almost stopped, until Hammerson's gruff voice stirred them to action once again. Hundreds of the foe had been vanquished, but hundreds more remained. Armoured warriors with tall shields and stamping juggernaut steeds could be seen entering the chasm's eastern end. Even with this respite the battle was far from done, and there was nothing, save for defeat, to be gained from lollygagging.

Gelt first realised that something was wrong just as the dwarfen fire thickened once more. He had intended to keep the orb in motion until it reached the far end of the chasm. However, it had not even covered a third of that distance when the sky went suddenly dark, and a wrathful thunderclap rolled overhead. At once, Gelt felt the orb unravel, the magics of its creation dissipating like smoke in a sudden breeze. Pain followed, a thousand red hot needles stabbing deep into his mind, the sudden agony of it causing him to fall from Quicksilver's saddle. Hammerson saw the wizard collapse, ordered the Ironclads to his side, but he could not have been prepared for what followed.

What happened next took many forms in the minds of those who saw it. For some, a wall of dark fire sprang up along the chasm, enveloping the dwarf line and the transmuted remains of the Skaramor, and setting the canopy ablaze. Others recalled a gale sweeping down from the east, its winds striking armour and flesh with the force of an axe. More witnessed the rock floor of the chasm buck and heave, sending boulders and wicked shards tearing across the Zhufbarak lines. Gelt saw all this through eyes half-lidded with pain. However, he bore witness as much through Chamon's senses as his own, and so perceived something the others did not, something that sent black fear worming its way through his guts.

Gelt saw the tip of a colossal sword – so vast that its breadth was scarcely less than the chasm's width – plunge through the forest canopy behind the dwarf lines and deep into the rock floor. As its unseen wielder twisted the blade, the sword's tip scraped eastward through the chasm. The ground trembled and split, and great slabs of rock broke off from the chasm walls, crushing one of the Zhufbarak cannon. Fire sprang up and rock shattered wherever the god-steel touched, thick black smoke billowing behind it.





The dwarfs unfortunate enough to be caught in the blade's path were pulped instantly, those lucky enough to avoid its strike were cast from their feet, choking from the fumes. This was all bad enough for the dwarfs, but where the god-steel touched those Skaramor transmuted by Gelt's spell, it unmade the enchantment. The gold exploded into glittering dust soon lost amidst the smoke, and then the sword was gone as quickly as it had struck, it bearer's gaze drawn elsewhere.

In that moment, the Zhufbarak lines were thrown into disarray. Scores of dwarfs had perished in the sword's strike, whether immolated by the flames, crushed beneath falling rock or pulverised by the blade itself. Shield walls and gun lines had been split apart, the survivors lost in the choking black smoke. Voices carried through the murk as Hammerson and his veterans tried to restore some order to the battered Zhufbarak. They were far too late.

Skarr understood little of what had just happened. However, he had heard Khorne's voice in his mind as the enchantment fell away from his flesh, felt new strength flood into limbs that had last felt leaden and heavy. For one such as he, understanding mattered little. All he craved was another chance to wreak slaughter, and the Lord of Skulls had granted that to him. Skarr scarcely noticed the acrid smoke, or the fire still raging fitfully across the chasm floor. All he knew of were the axes heavy in his hands, and the promise of hundreds of skulls ripe for the taking.

The hammerers of the Holzengard were the first to feel Skarr's reborn fury. Twin axes parted the smoke, and hacked deep into the Zhufbarak front rank. Skullreapers came screaming behind their warlord. Some were those who had been restored by Khorne's intervention. Others had come from further east, bloodied by the dwarf artillery, but untouched by Gelt's magics. All had felt Khorne's gaze upon them that day, and it drove them forward with a savagery that even gromril armour could not thwart.

The Holzengard's banner fell as a skullreaper's blade clove the bearer's head from his shoulders. Another hammerer snatched up the metal pole as it toppled, determined that Zhufbar's last royal banner should not be dishonoured. He too fell dead, hacked apart by frenzied blades, but the fire of battle was in the dwarfs' bellies now. Giving voice to a booming challenge in Khazalid, the Holzengard's survivors surged forward like a battering ram of gromril and flesh. They heaved the northlanders back from their banner, their great hammers crunching flesh and bone. Screams of the dying echoed through the smoke, merging with dwarfen oaths and the northlanders' guttural roars.

Back and forth that battle heaved. Fresh Skaramor came constantly to the fight, the sheer weight of their charge driving the dwarfs back over the tidemark of dead. In response, the dwarfs shrank back, letting the northlanders expend their momentum, then forging resolutely into the fray once more.

The dwarfs had been staggered, but now they came back strong. Tongues of flame licked the Skaramor's right flank as drakeguns were brought to bear, whilst the northlanders' left shrank steadily back as the locked shields of the Ironclads slammed home. Runes blazed as hammers and axes crashed down, splitting armour and flesh. Though his skull still throbbed, Gelt had recovered enough to play his part, and his enchantments rendered gromril armour harder than diamond, proof against even the most frenzied of axe-blows.

What had begun as a battle now devolved into little more than a brawl. Zhufbarak and Skaramor banners were little more than markers that roughly showed zones of dominance.

Dwarfs and northlanders swirled through the smoke's confusion, navigating by the sound of clashing metal more than sight.

Only the Ironclads kept their order, their shield wall grinding remorselessly through the enemy ranks. However, as another group of Skaramor disintegrated under the Ironclads' assault, a new northlander warband came to the fight, one whose shields were tall and whose armour was a close match for Zhufbar-wrought gromril. These were the Bloodshields, and they had marched far in the hope of finding worthy victims. Giving voice to a raucous cry, the northlanders rammed their shield wall forward. The Ironclads' response was automatic, as instinctive as breathing. Without a word, the dwarfs shrank their line and locked their shields tight together. The two shield walls met with a crash that could be heard a dozen leagues away, but not one dwarf took a step back.

At last, the smoke was clearing. Rays of sunlight penetrated the ravaged canopy once more, revealing the battle's true shape. From his position amidst the Firebores' clansdwarfs, Gotri Hammerson could see that the Zhufbarak line had been fractured, and the Skaramor had poured in through the gaps; everywhere, the dwarfs were surrounded. Hammerson had not expected to survive the battle, had no faith that the elves of Athel Loren could be convinced to effect a rescue. He was gravely disappointed all the same, for he had hoped to pass into his ancestors' halls with tales of a battle worthy of legend. There was no glory here, just a squalid slaughter.

That the Zhufbarak had not been swept away by the onslaught was testament to their resolve. Hammerson doubted that any mannish army would have held under similar circumstances, although Gelt's determination was scarcely less than that of the dwarfs he fought alongside. As the runesmith watched, the wizard plucked a vial from beneath his robes and sent it arcing towards the foe. The strange missile shattered against a northlander's helm, sending seething liquid in all directions. At once, the warrior began to scream as the liquid ate away at his armour and flesh. A heartbeat later, he collapsed, the metal of his helm still hissing and bubbling.

Skarr Bloodwrath fought all but alone atop a pile of human and dwarf corpses, the few skullreapers at his side drenched head to toe in blood. There was no technique to Skarr's blows, just the brutal instincts of a born warrior. He hacked through shields and helms, throttled dwarfs with his axes' chains – even tore out their throats with his teeth, if the opportunity presented itself.

Skullcrushers thundered down the chasm, their daemonic steeds trampling friend and foe alike. The gyrocopters banked around to engage, engines running fitfully as they sucked in smoke-clogged air. Bomb-clamps snapped open, payloads arcing lazily downward to explode amongst the armoured daemon-cavalry, and muffled explosions kicked more smoke into the air. A dozen of the brutes went down, the riders broken and bloody, the juggernauts slumped motionless with ichor seeping from great rents in their brass hides. But more came on, the survivors splitting left and right around the Bloodshields. Lances punched through the Ironclads' shield wall, sending dwarfs hurtling. The ironbreakers staggered, but held.

Gelt saw the ironbreakers' shield wall buckle. Muttering an incantation so familiar that it needed no conscious recollection, he sent a searing golden beam into the nearest cluster of skullcrushers. Gelt saw the pressure on the shield wall slacken, saw the Ironclads reclaim lost ground. Another respite had been earned, but Gelt knew he could not be everywhere.

As if in confirmation, another wave of Skaramor swept through the clearing smoke, crashing against Hammerson's clansdwarfs. Gelt urged Quicksilver into the air, reaching for another enchantment that turned the northlanders' axes to rusty scrap. With their blades rendered useless, the Khornate tribesmen hammered at the dwarfs with feet and fists, but such weapons were hardly a match for dwarf steel.

As Quicksilver carried Gelt into the thicket of dwarf axes, Hammerson felled his immediate opponent – a burly northlander whose skin was more scarred than not – and pressed back through the Firebores' ranks to greet the wizard.

'You'll be wanting thanks, I suppose,' the runesmith muttered gruffly.

'If you have any to offer,' Gelt replied, wondering if he'd correctly guessed the dwarf's mood.

'As much as you like,' said Hammerson. 'Not that I reckon it'll change our situation. We're not going to last much longer. If it'd just been the barbarians, we'd have been able to hold for hours, but when their bloody god got involved...'

'You saw that?' Gelt interrupted, surprised.

Hammerson snorted. 'Of course I did. Don't be mistaking me for a fool, just because I don't have your flashy magics. I have the sight, though I'd rather have been blind, all told.'

'I've never seen anything like that before,' Gelt told him. 'The walls between the mortal and immortal realms must be thinner than ever.'

'Then it doesn't much matter if we die today, does it?' Hammerson said dourly. 'Seems like time's running out for everyone, not just us.'

Another, larger wave of Skaramor rounded the spire and charged headlong into the fire-scorched chasm, but help had finally arrived. For a second time that day, flames wreathed the skies. These were not the unnatural fires of Chaos, but the contrails of phoenixes. Screeching with fury, they blazed down into the chasm like meteors.

The attack was coordinated to perfection. The firebirds swept low across the Skaramor horde, unconsciously mirroring the god-steel's earlier path. Fire followed in their wake, setting light to flesh and fur. Hounds howled as the flames consumed them, northlanders collapsed mid-swing, but not so much as a single dwarf was scorched.

Halfway along the chasm, the phoenixes suddenly split away at right angles to their previous course, each heading towards one of the chasm walls. Within moments, the chasm was split in half, with the bulk of the Skaramor horde trapped behind a towering wall of flame. Back and forth the phoenixes flew, weaving their blazing trails like spiders weaving webs, ensuring that the fires did not fade. Those northlanders closest to the barrier attempted to cross it, heedless of the fellows' earlier fate. But the fires were too hot, and those who tried to breach them were dead before they had covered even half the distance. Even the juggernauts could not endure the fearsome heat without their joints fusing and their brass hides blistering.

Whilst the firebirds had struck to deny the northlanders their reinforcements, Caradryan's frost phoenix swept back its wings and ploughed straight into the battle. Ashtari's icy talons slammed into the Skaramor, scattering the tribesmen's bodies like windswept leaves. The survivors hurled themselves forward undismayed, their cursed blades hacking shards of frost from the phoenix's wings. Few survived to land a second strike.

Caradryan's halberd was a blur of steel, handled with a grace more befitting a duelling rapier. On the ground, Ashtari fought with huge buffeting blows from his wings, each sweep dashing a half-dozen broken northlanders to the chasm floor.

Scarcely had the Zhufbarak registered the newcomers' arrival when horns sounded from the chasm's western end. Trees parted to reveal a column of tall-helmed elf warriors, lion-pelts draped across their shoulders and keen axes ready in their hands. They came forward at a run, armoured boots unerringly finding safe footing amongst the chasm floor's tangled undergrowth. Behind came yet more elves, their flame-marked cloaks and shields bright against the chasm's fire-blackened walls.



Now it was the turn of the Skaramor to be outmatched. However, their change in fortunes did nothing to quench the northlanders' ardour. Indeed, the arrival of fresh enemies only seemed to drive them into a deeper and more abiding rage. They fought like beasts in a trap, howling and lashing out at any who came close. Their reason was lost to berserk madness, their savage lusts a foreshadowing of what Khorne wished for the world. The cornered Skaramor were a blood-curdling sight, yet Caradryan's elves had lately fought Khaine-lost kinsmen captured by a similar rage. The elves' hearts were unmoved, and they hacked the northlanders down like the beasts they had become, though it cost them many lives to do so.

From that point on, the fate of the Skaramor to the flame-wall's west grew steadily more dire. The Zhufbarak, though secretly glad that they would not join their ancestors that day, refused to be outdone by elves – no matter how timely their arrival. Indignation and stubborn pride redoubled within the dwarfs' doughty hearts, lending strength to arms wearied by battle. All at once, shield walls that had been on the point of collapse locked tight once again. They drove forward over dead and dying northlanders, Khazalid war songs booming.

Even through his berserk haze, Skarr could sense victory slipping away. He swept his axes in a reverse-arc, beheading three dwarfs, and sending a fourth reeling back with half his chest torn away, but the sense of triumph was fleeting. A great slaughter had been wrought, but defeat was still defeat. The Blood God might have prized skulls more than any other token, but Skarr – like all mortal champions – sought glory as well, and there was little glory without victory. But there was glory in felling the mightiest foeman, and Skarr at once knew what he had to do.

Skarr leapt from his cairn of dead and dying, the momentum carrying him clear over the Firebores' shield wall and deep into their ranks. On he forged, axes clearing a path through the stocky warriors, every step, every hack and cut, bringing him closer to his chosen target. Skarr did not feel the axes that bit into his own flesh, or the hammers that pummelled at his armour – there was only his prey. At last, Skarr Bloodwrath hacked his way clear of the Firebores and into the press of Skaramor on the far side. Gathering himself, he leapt high in the air, axes already swinging.

With his attention fully focused upon the northlanders swarming about him, Ashtari did not mark Skarr's approach, but Caradryan did. The Phoenix Blade swept up, parrying

one of the warlord's axes with a dull chime. The other cut down hard on Ashtari's neck. The phoenix shrieked in pain. Shards of razor-sharp ice crackled across Caradryan's armour and gouged deep into Skarr's flesh. The northlander landed heavily on Ashtari's wing, rolling away down the rime-laced feathers as the phoenix tried to shake him loose.

Skarr's axe bit down hungrily into the wing, its blade glowing a dull red as it lodged deep in the phoenix's frozen flesh. For a heartbeat, Skarr hung ignominiously from the axe's grip as Ashtari shifted beneath him. Then he hauled himself upright, regained his footing and charged along the shifting wing once more.

Caradryan's blade arced out to sweep Skarr's legs from beneath him, but the warlord was prepared for such an attack. One axe blurred as it left his hand. The chain snagged on Caradryan's halberd, the axe's momentum yanking the captain half-out of his saddle, and the weapon back and out of his hands. Skarr struck before Caradryan recovered his balance, his remaining axe hissing to cleave the captain's skull. With no other option save death, Caradryan rode the momentum of the initial blow, falling clear from Ashtari's back and feeling the wind of Skarr's axe pass above his head.

Ashtari bucked hard, but Skarr would not be denied. Taking his remaining axe in both hands, he brought the blade down on the phoenix's neck a second time. There was a sound like breaking glass, and a chill blast that sent the warlord sprawling to the ground. With a last wailing screech, Ashtari shuddered once, and slumped dead. Skarr roared in triumph, and the sound was taken up by the Skaramor, spreading and growing in volume as other voices took up the cry.

Caradryan uttered no word as he regained his feet, but the rage on his face was plain to see. Freeing his halberd from the tangle of chains, the captain ran at Skarr, the sound of his footsteps lost beneath the bellows of victory. Flames flickered along the Phoenix Blade as it struck, the killing edge hacking deep into the warlord's spine, killing him instantly. Yet Caradryan was given no time to take satisfaction in his vengeance – other northlanders were upon him before Skarr's corpse had hit the ground. Caradryan had time to whisper a silent prayer to a god who no longer existed, and then the Skaramor were upon him.



Gotri Hammerson saw Ashtari perish, saw Caradryan all but vanish beneath a swarm of red-armoured northlanders. He knew that the elf's arrogance had led him to that fate, though honour insisted that he not be abandoned. But there was little the runesmith could do. The elves' arrival had bought the Zhufbarak a temporary respite, but there was still a sea of raging northlanders between Ashtari's corpse and the nearest dwarfen shield wall. Fortunately, others were able to act where Hammerson could not. With a clatter of engines, the Blackwater gyrocopters hurtled towards Caradryan's last position, nose-guns thinning the horde.

Asuryan had not heard Caradryan's prayer. The Creator had passed from the mortal world, his fire lost forever. Leagues away to the north, however, another force took note of the plea. Though near-mindless, Aqshy felt the desperation of a kindred spirit, and blazed south towards the Chasm of Echoes. The Wind of Fire picked up speed as it travelled, leaving a shining flame-trail stretching briefly across the skies. It reached its destination within moments, slamming down into the thick of the battle, through the press of Skaramor, and claiming Caradryan as its own.

Heavenly fire slammed into the chasm. A heartbeat later, a nova of flame spilled out from the impact site, incinerating scores of Skaramor and engulfing the Bloodshields' rear ranks. And rising from out of the plume of fire, blazing like a meteor, came Ashtari, reborn to the flames of his youth by Aqshy's touch. Atop the phoenix's back rode Caradryan, eyes blazing with fire, his soul melded to the flame-wind. Ignoring the northlanders howling beneath him, the new Incarnate raised his hands to the sky. At his command, the flame-wall began to move, inexorably flowing up into the eastern hills and consuming all in its path.

A few chieftains held their ground at the chasm's eastern end, but the tide of fire made ashes of them soon enough, and their followers fled back into the mountains. To the west, pockets of skullreapers battled on, snarling defiance, but Caradryan sent Aqshy's fury flowing through the allies marshalled against them. As one, the dwarfs and elves surged forward, the fire kindled in their hearts spilling forth and rippling across their blades. Blinded by desperate rage, the skullreapers fought on, but their hour had now passed, and their victory had fallen to ashes. By the time Ashtari wheeled to join the other phoenixes, and swooped down into the battle trailing fire, the outcome was no longer in doubt.





Be'lakor had not stood idly by as Skarr roused the Pine Crags to furore. Though the First-damned would have preferred better timing, he appreciated the value of a good distraction. The elves had responded in far greater force than he had anticipated. Aside from Malekith and Alarielle, there were perhaps a dozen commanders of note within Athel Loren, and no fewer than six of those had been drawn into containing the Skaramor invasion. With most of the others engaged fighting Morghur's warherds in the west of the forest, there was a small – but adequate – window of opportunity.

Be'lakor feared that time was running out. He knew full well the task that the Dark Gods had set Archaon, and was determined to do what he could to upstage the Everchosen. Let Archaon delve into the rock of Middenheim if he wished. Be'lakor would destroy the Oak of Ages. He would rend the very Weave itself asunder, and thus upstage the mortal who had stolen the gods' favour.

As the first blood was spilt in Esdari Corrin, Be'lakor cloaked himself in shadow. Unseen save by the insane, he ghosted along the secret paths of Athel Loren, drawing together allies long-cultivated. Hellebron was the daemon prince's most recent acquisition, and the most eager to join his cause, for humiliation still clung to her like a waterlogged cloak. Others were more difficult. The daemons of the Vaults of Winter knew Be'lakor of old, and remembered the ill favour with which the Dark Gods regarded him. Nevertheless, they had long coveted the Oak of Ages, had sought to devour its sweet magics, and greed soon drove them into the First-damned's clutches.

Drycha and Coeddil were the most reluctant of all those whom Be'lakor sought out. Daemons and the spirits of Athel Loren had ever been the greatest of enemies, and at first the briarmaven and the fallen ancient rejected his approaches. But Be'lakor was a prince of lies, and Drycha and Coeddil too resentful of the elves. Too readily, they believed his tale of merely wanting to humble the elves, to claim their souls as an offering to thirsting Slaanesh. Drycha and Coeddil did not see the deeper and darker desire lurking in the First-damned's mind, for they would surely have opposed him had they done so. Instead, they pledged themselves to Be'lakor's plan, and rallied the fallen forest spirits to his cause.

Yet it was no simple matter to approach the Oak of Ages. The secret paths surrounding that ancient tree were the most heavily defended in all Athel Loren. Hidden eyes watched every spur, and way-fortresses overlooked every junction. Even Drycha could not approach by that route – she would already have done so were she able. Be'lakor, shrouded as he was in primeval shadow, could tread those paths, but he could take no other upon the journey. A few weeks before, Hellebron could have marched her supporters along more mundane paths, coming to within striking distance of the Eternal Glade, and the Oak within entirely unopposed. However, with her recent disgrace, it was doubtful that the Crone Queen would be regarded with anything but the utmost scrutiny – especially if she brought an army at her back.

Another distraction was needed, and Be'lakor already knew how it could be done. Binding himself in shadow once more, the First-damned sped to the halls of Naieth the Prophetess, and trod lightly into her dreams. For one such as Naieth, there was little difference between dream and vision, and it was simplicity itself for Be'lakor to redirect her path.



Naieth the Prophetess was dreaming of Middenheim, or rather, what remained of it. The City of the White Wolf had been gutted. Where the houses and taverns, barracks and merchantrooms had once stood there was a colossal pit, an excavation carved deep into the Fauschlag rock. What buildings remained lay in ruins. The Temple of Ulric was the only structure of any size that still possessed a roof, and it was daubed with blood and filth, the corpses of its priests hung from the walls by their own entrails.

Northlander campfires were clustered throughout the devastation, the totems of the Dark Gods raised upon skull-draped poles. Hounds howled, and roaring monsters pulled uselessly at chains set into the rock. Magic screamed and swirled through the devastated city, channelled to blood-spattered ritual circles by chanting acolytes and horned sorcerers.

As her dream-self flew closer to the pit, Naieth saw toiling chain-gangs haul rock up from the depths. The slaves were mostly humans, captives taken during Archaon's assault on the Empire, but there were dwarfs and even ogres as well – the latter held captive by far bulkier chains than the rest. All were stained by the sweat and dirt of heavy labour, their sagging skin betraying the hunger gnawing at them. Skaven overseers stood guard over the slaves, chivvying them with lashes and spear butts, standing guard from rickety towers fashioned from Middenheim's collapsed houses.

Down flew Naieth's dream-self, down through the excavation's winding tunnels. Soon she was deeper than the humans had ever explored, but still the shuffling, grimy slaves trudged steadily upward, clutching torn baskets, or pushing handcarts laden with rocks. The dead lay where they had fallen, misshapen rats gnawing at their pale corpses.

Deeper still, and the rough tunnels became a memory, yielding to vast chambers. Though lined with moss and strange lichens, there was no hiding the regular, geometric design of these new tunnels. Shining stones lined the wall, half-hidden by the cave-flora and millennia of calcification, and Naieth knew at once that these tunnels far predated the time of the elves.

At last, Naieth's dream-self passed into a half-excavated and stalactite-encrusted chamber. The floor was thick with fragments of stalagmites, the ancient formations presumably shattered to allow easier access to the chamber's heart. There, held in place by two perfect hemispheres of gold, Naieth at last saw what the northlanders had delved so deep to find.

The globe was as black as night, its surface pulsing and rippling like liquid. Each pulse caused a dull burst of light that travelled lazily across the rocky walls. The light was colourless, and yet somehow all colours at once. Even in her dream state, Naieth could sense the magic emanating from the globe, could taste the corruption on the stale air. Her dream-self drew near, longed to reach out and touch it, but Naieth knew that to do so would destroy her, dream or no.

Circling the orb, Naieth took note of a tall, black-armoured figure standing silently upon its far side. A coven of sorcerers stood in silent attendance, heads bowed as their gold-helmed master communed with his treasure. Naieth's dream-self could hear the lord addressing his minions, but the sounds were too distant, too muffled for the prophetess to make any sense of them. She drifted closer, trying to get some sense of what was said.

The golden helm snapped suddenly up, its hollow eyes staring directly at the prophetess' dream-self.

He could see her.

Naieth reeled away in panic, desperate to flee, but she already knew she was too late. The third eye on the lord's helm glowed a searing white, and suddenly all Naieth could hear were her own screams.

Naieth's screams did not linger. Through Be'lakor's manipulations, her spirit-form had crossed the Eye of Sheerian's gaze, revealing her to Archaon, and to the Dark Gods. The prophetess was one of Athel Loren's foremost mages, but the spark of her power was as nothing before the all-consuming flame of the Chaos Gods. Caught in their unblinking and terrible gaze, her fragile soul was smothered in an instant, the scraps hungrily devoured by Slaanesh. The fury of the Dark Gods' assault – far exceeding that required to vanquish a mortal foe – flooded back through the boundaries between the mortal and immortal realms. The pulse of wild magic tore Naieth's halls apart, leaving a crater whose slopes gleamed like glass, and a jagged tear in the fabric of reality. Moments later, otherworldly screams split the glades as the daemons of the Vaults of Winter forced their way through.

At once, Talsyn awoke to fury. Those who had not jolted from slumber at the sound of Naieth's dying shriek were roused as the forest shuddered in pain. Desperation reigned. Naieth's halls were less than a league from the Eternal Glade, and to have daemons so close to the ancient tree was unthinkable. Many elves – too many – lost their lives by attacking the daemons piecemeal, without waiting for reinforcements. The defences of the hidden paths were abandoned as elves flooded to defend the Eternal Glade. It was only when Malekith and Alarielle arrived that any semblance of strategy began to form. By then, however, it was too late. As the daemons forced their way into the Eternal Glade, Hellebron's and Drycha's followers overwhelmed the remaining defenders of the hidden paths and launched their own assault on the Oak of Ages. Athel Loren stood on the brink of destruction.

THE HOST OF SHADOW

Though he had often scoffed at the concept of the Weave, Malekith well understood the Oak of Ages' importance, and was swift to mobilise an army to defend it. However, the Eternity King was distracted. The shadow within Malekith was calling out to another in the Eternal Glade, and he knew he would have to prove his mastery before the battle was done.



MALEKITH, THE ETERNITY KING

Some had hoped that Malekith's ascension to Eternity King would have extinguished the darkness in his heart once and for all. Perhaps if Asuryan's flame had not withered and died, such a transformation would have been possible. As matters stood, Malekith had become the embodiment of shadow, and he could not be thus without darkness rekindling in his soul. For the moment, the perils of the Rhana Dandra held him true to a more virtuous path than he had known for many centuries, but it was impossible to say how long that would last.

THE RAVENSPEARS

Information had ever been key to Malekith's rule in Naggaroth. In Athel Loren, his need for accurate tidings had only grown, for he now held dominion over an unfamiliar land, and a fractured people whose loyalty he could never entirely trust. The Ravenspears were the Eternity King's trusted heralds, who rode the hidden paths to bring him word from Athel Loren's outflung realms. They were swift horsemen, but canny with a blade too, for there were many dangers on the hidden paths, and not all could simply be outpaced.





THE ETERNITY GUARD

In Ulthuan's dying days, Malekith was defended by a bodyguard drawn from Naggaroth's Black Guard, and Ulthuan's Phoenix Guard. Once he became king of all three elven peoples, the Eternity Guard was expanded to include a cohort of Wildwood rangers. More properly, Malekith should have perhaps been accompanied by eternal guard, but he would always have doubted the loyalty of a bodyguard stolen from another lord. Moreover, he found the grim bluntness of Cythral's guardians a much closer match to his own intemperate moods.

THE KRAKENSIDES

Naggaroth's once-mighty corsair fleets had been all but destroyed during the destruction of Ulthuan, with only a few scattered crews remaining at Malekith's side. The Krakensides were, in fact, only a quarter of one such crew – the rest of the elves aboard the *Tower of Oblivion* had thrown in their lot with the Khaine-struck Tyrion. Malekith's faith in them was far from unassailable, but then the Eternity King trusted no one completely. Nevertheless, the Krakensides had been stalwarts of Malekith's war host since their arrival in Athel Loren – though it remained to be seen if that would continue.





THE WINTERBORN

The Winterborn arrived unheralded at Malekith's new palace on the day he was crowned Eternity King. From the first, they made it clear that they intended to serve Malekith, whether he wished it or no, and insisted that they be given quarters within the palace halls and rank within his court. Several lords and ladies, knowing both Malekith's uneven temperament and his unfamiliarity with the sisters of the thorn, sought to explain the honour that the Winterborn bestowed, however abrupt their manner. More amused than outraged, Malekith welcomed the witches into his retinue.



THE REVENANTS OF KHAINE

That the Revenants of Khaine chose to fight alongside Malekith was perplexing to many. It had been they who had fought and died on the Blighted Isle to prevent the then Witch King from claiming the Widowmaker. Close-mouthed as ever, they had made no attempt to explain their actions, but it was widely assumed that they weren't so much fighting at Malekith's side as standing ready to end his existence if he turned on his people once again. It is doubtful that Malekith felt threatened by this, as the Revenants had already tried – and failed – to kill him once before.

Malekith, the Eternity King

Mezekar of the Dawn
Black Ark Fleetmaster

Meliss, Queen of Winter
Spellweaver

The Eternity Guard
One tower of Black Guard,
one legion of Phoenix Guard,
one kinband of Wildwood Rangers

The Winterborn
One kinband of
Sisters of the Thorn

The Chaindancers
One troupe of Sisters of Slaughter

The Ravenspears
One vanguard of Dark Riders

The Krakensides
One crew of Black Ark Corsairs,
three Reaper Bolt Throwers

The Shadows of Naggaroth
Two regiments of Darkshards

The Revenants of Khaine
One regiment of High Elf Spearmen,
one regiment of High Elf Archers

Raema's Vengeance
Two War Hydras, one Kharibdyss

THE HOST OF LIFE

Where her king might doubt the concept of the Weave, Alarielle was under no such delusion. As the Incarnate of Life, her powers were intrinsically bound to the Oak of Ages, and to the threads of reality that it held in place. The attack upon the Eternal Glade was akin to an assault upon the Everqueen herself, and it provoked her to a cold fury that her foes would soon learn to fear.



ALARIELLE, INCARNATE OF LIFE

Alarielle had met with far more acceptance amongst the newly-united elven race than Malekith. The wood elves approved of Alarielle from the moment Isha's dying power was bequeathed to her, and still honoured her even though that holy light had departed. The high elves still looked up to Alarielle as their Everqueen, now shared with others. And the dark elves? They had come to respect Alarielle for the ruthlessness and drive she had displayed many times since Ulthuan's fall. To be a champion of life was sometimes to be a bringer of death, and Alarielle did not shirk from inflicting suffering where it was needed.



DURTHU

Durthu had been part of Athel Loren since its earliest days, and he now saw its last moments drawing nigh. Where once the ancient had possessed great hope for the future, now he saw only ashes on the wind in the days ahead, and a hungry darkness which none would survive. Nonetheless, it was not in Durthu's nature to yield the fight simply because the odds of victory seemed slim. His service, body and soul, was the Everqueen's to command, and Athel Loren his to protect. Those who wished to harm either of Durthu's charges would first have to survive his wrath.



THE EVERGUARD

The Sisters of Avelorn had guarded the Everqueen since the earliest days of the elves. That duty had not changed, although their number had. Of a sisterhood once counted by the hundred, only a few dozen remained, banded together into a single guard dedicated to the Everqueen's protection. The Everguard did not find Athel Loren much to their liking. It was somehow grimmer and darker than Avelorn, its glades oppressive and alien. But Avelorn was gone, and it was not for the Everguard to choose the realms that their mistress deemed worthy of protection.

THE ASHENHAWKS

The Ashenhawks had once been Lord Araloth's personal guard, but had dedicated themselves to Alarielle following their master's disappearance. It was said that there were few in Athel Loren that could match their skill with a longbow. Most had been trained by no lesser hand than Scarloc's, and though the famed scout had plainly kept many of his secrets for his own, he had just as plainly shared a great many more with his students. Scarloc had not, however, managed to teach the Ashenhawks any manners, and a bitter rivalry had sprung up between them and the Everguard.





THE SISTERS OF THE ETERNAL GROVE

A dryad is an aspect of the tree to which she is bound, her characters and strengths defined by her parent. The Sisters of the Eternal Grove were daughters of no lesser tree than the Oak of Ages itself, and its fire and might echoed through their being also. Moreover, where most dryads were cruel and malicious, the sisters were haughty and aloof, more akin to elves than their fellow spirits. This, more than anything else, had allowed them to reject the madness that had overtaken so many of Athel Loren's dryads, but it was unlikely that they would resist forever.



NAESTRA AND ARAHAN

Since Ariel's death, her twin daughters had seldom strayed far from Alarielle's side. The twins perceived that the Everqueen was touched by the same greatness as their mother, and would suffer no harm to befall her. Nevertheless, it seemed to many that Naestra and Arahan were growing apart, Arahan ever wilder, and Naestra more reserved. The twins were seen arguing more often than not, though the details of these quarrels eluded even Alarielle. The truth was, of course, that Naestra and Arahan were bound closer to the Weave than any other elf; as its tipping point approached, so did theirs.

Alarielle, Incarnate of Life

Durthu

Naestra and Arahan

Skarana
Treeman Ancient

The Everguard
Two Handmaidens of the Everqueen,
one regiment of Sisters of Avelorn

The Ashenhawks
Two kinbands of Glade Guard,
one kinband of Deepwood Scouts,
one kinband of Glade Riders

The Gnarled
One war-grove of Tree Kin

The Sisters of the Eternal Grove
Three war-groves of Dryads

The Oathkeepers
One kinband of Wild Riders of Kurnous

FIENDS AND BETRAYERS

The horde that fell upon the Eternal Glade comprised a number of unlikely alliances, motivated by madness, selfishness, or a mixture of both. Be'lakor, Hellebron and Drycha each believed themselves the leader of this unstable host, yet in truth none of them held but circumstantial power over the others. This was an army driven by self-destructive insanity, and bound together only temporarily in common cause.



BE'LAKOR

Be'lakor had once believed himself the highest of all the Dark Gods' servants, yet time and again his masters had elevated a mortal above him. Their most recent humiliation had also been the greatest: commanding the First-damned to crown Archaon as the thirteenth Everchosen – a status that was rightly Be'lakor's. Ever since, the daemon prince had sought some way to sabotage Archaon's plans or, better yet, to pre-empt them. With the excavation at Middenheim all but completed, Be'lakor's options were growing thin – thin enough to force his hand in Athel Loren.

HELLEBRON

It has long been said that the first step into betrayal is far harder than those that follow. In Hellebron's case, however, it is hard to say with certainty when that first step had been taken. Was it when she refused to abandon Naggaroth at Malekith's order? Or was it when she refused to take sides in the war for Ulthuan, getting involved at last only for her own selfish reasons? Certainly, by the time Be'lakor spoke of his plan to destroy the Oak of Ages, Hellebron felt no twinge of conscience or regret – even though, unlike Drycha and Coeddil, she knew exactly what would happen if they succeeded.





DRYCHA AND COEDDIL

Drycha and Coeddil were awash in their own resentments, their own recollections of when the elves had failed Athel Loren. Both had been marked by Morghur in times past, and perhaps it was his madness that drove their actions. Certainly, Be'lakor had exploited their marred souls, used Morghur's taint as a weakness that left them susceptible to his manipulations. Yet all along, the branchwraith and the treeman believed that they were using the daemon to their own ends, that Athel Loren would return to normal once the elves were driven from beneath the trees.

THE CARNIVAL OF SILENCE

Years of meeting defeat at the wood elves' hands had left the daemons of the Vault of Winter without a strong leader of their own. Too many of their heralds and Keepers had been banished to the Forge of Souls, there to languish until Slaanesh experienced a rare moment of pity. They were weak and leaderless – easy prey for Be'lakor's insincere promises of elven flesh and endless revels. In truth, the First-damned intended to use the daemonettes as arrow-fodder, wearing down the enemy until he was ready to strike. They lacked a part in his glorious destiny, and were therefore expendable.





THE CULT OF THE BLOOD QUEEN

Though the Cult of the Blood Queen had been abolished, many of the crone's worshippers had maintained their faith in secret, waiting for their mistress' call. Hellebron had not wanted for worshippers within Athel Loren. The wood elves had never been so coy about godly worship as their estranged cousins, and had thrown themselves as readily into rites of blood and sacrifice as contemplative prayer. Even a few high elves, resentful of a reserved existence that had brought them only woe, had been drawn to Hellebron's simple creed of blood and pain.



THE WILDKIN

Drycha's army was a strange mix of the lost and the damned, of those forest spirits caught up by in their mistress' flawed ideology, and those twisted by the seeping taint of Chaos. Not all were mad. Some were quite rational, if lost in self-delusion. Others were given to cruelty simply because it was their nature, or because the trees to which they were bound had been eaten away by malice or Morghur's creeping influence. Mad or otherwise, they were not opponents to be taken lightly – not since the days of Coeddil's rebellion had the elves needed to face so many forest spirits in battle.

Be'lakor

Hellebron

Shadowblade

Drycha

Coeddil
Treeman Ancient

Slaanshari the Golden
Keeper of Secrets

Sslivoth Glorybound
Keeper of Secrets

The Carnival of Silence
Five Heralds of Slaanesh,
eight courts of Daemonettes,
three courts of Seekers,
three packs of Fiends,
three Seeker Chariots, two Hellflayers

The Cult of the Blood Queen
Three warbands of Witch Elves,
one regiment of Executioners,
one regiment of Dreadspears,
one regiment of Bleakswords,
one regiment of High Elf Spearmen,
one crew of Corsairs,
two kinbands of Glade Riders,
one flock of Harpies

The Wildkin
Six war-groves of Dryads,
three war-groves of Tree Kin,
three Treemen, one Treeman Ancient

Sabberast
Soul Grinder

Mournsolis
Soul Grinder

DEFENCE OF THE ETERNAL GLADE

Hellebron's cultists came upon the Eternal Glade from the east. They were a mass of chanting, howling murderers eager for victims, keen to avenge the slight upon their priestess. Be'lakor's daemons came from the north, springing from the Chaos rift birthed by Naieth's subverted flesh. Coeddil and Drycha struck from the south-west, accompanied by a host of the Wildwood's mad spirits.

There was little coordination between the three forces. Each party considered the others to be nothing more than a means to an end, distractions whose deaths would speed victory along. Slaughter was their only goal. Only Be'lakor, whose manipulations had brought them all to the Eternal Glade, had any semblance of a plan, and he would no more have shared it with his allies than with a rotting dog.

Malekith and Alarielle had marshalled what forces they could, and deployed them as a wall of blades around the Oak of Ages. Had it been the daemons alone who had attacked, the Eternity King and Everqueen would have been confident in victory. Alas, the presence of Drycha and Hellebron changed the odds considerably. Nevertheless, those who observed Malekith noted that their sardonic monarch was of good cheer. Since his crowning as Eternity King, Malekith had yearned to prove the rightness of his ascension in the fires of battle. A great victory at the Oak of Ages would forever cement him as the ruler of Athel Loren – the greater the victory, the more unassailable his rule. Not for a moment did Malekith consider that he might lose the battle. The Eternity King was prepared for the fact that he would almost certainly perish in the Rhana Dandra, but to fall before such an assemblage of traitors and lackeys was unthinkable to him.

Arahan and Naestra led the defence to the east, although to express it thus did poor justice to what really entailed. Seeing Hellebron's forces lost in blood-madness, Arahan announced her intent to counter-attack the Crone Queen's lines. Naestra disagreed with the strategy, deeming it too risky with so much at stake. However, their dragon, Ceithin-Har, clearly agreed with Arahan, for he flew full tilt at the foe before Naestra was able to articulate her fears. As the mighty beast struck the cultists' lines, horns rang out as wild riders and archers came behind.

Arrows thudded amongst the cultists' ranks, and the wild riders' spears thrust home. The howling prayers of the cultists melded with their death-screams, but the blood of comrades served only to drive Hellebron's worshippers into a deeper and more abiding frenzy. Green-skinned knights were dragged from their steeds. Harsh voices cut across the din, and skull-helmed executioners forced their way through the cultists, eager to test their skills against the chosen of Kurnous.

With a deafening roar, Ceithin-Har slammed into the fray, crumpled bodies spiralling away from his impact. Executioners' draichs cracked against his thick scales, or jabbed high to strike at the twins upon his back. The dragon's head lunged forward, snatching up an executioner in his jaws. Arahan and Naestra darted lithely back and forth upon Ceithin-Har's back, spears jabbing down through the eye sockets of the executioners' skull helms.

Naestra braced her feet on Ceithin-Har's neck and hauled upward on her spear-staff. Blood fountained from the cultist's skull helm as the point came free.

'This is madness!' Naestra shouted.

'I know!' Arahan replied with a grin, her eyes as wild as an autumn wind. 'It's marvellous, isn't it?'

Naestra didn't reply. A wholly alien bloodlust was scratching at the edges of her mind – it was all she could do to keep control. The smell of blood was intoxicating; she longed to run her tongue along her spear's blade, to taste the fruits of her kill.

***NO!* Naestra screamed silently. The madness of the Blood Queen's cultists was infecting her, and she thought she knew why.**

Sliding her spear back into the leather loops on her back, Naestra ran further up Ceithin-Har's back, fingers reaching for an arrow and drawing back her bowstring as she did so. Turning back to the east, she saw it – a dark and jagged silhouette against the trees, thick steam rising from the cauldron at its front.

Naestra loosed the shot without a conscious thought. She saw it blaze towards the cauldron of blood, flying true for the masked priestess cavorting and chanting beneath the statue of a dead god.

At the last moment, the priestess darted aside, her chanting stilled for the moment. The arrow struck one of her acolytes, snatching her up and smashing her through the jagged pillars at the shrine's rear.

Naestra felt the bloodlust recede, relief flooding in to take its place. She looked down to see the wild riders, freed from the cauldron's spell, retreating at last.

'We need to go,' she shouted.

For a moment, Naestra thought Arahan was going to deny her. Then her sister gave a curt nod, and Naestra at last saw an echo of her own concern in her twin's face.

Their reprieve thus bought, the wild riders fell back, riding hard towards their lines of archers. Arahan and Naestra lingered a moment longer, the former laughing only a touch less cruelly than those she slew. Then Ceithin-Har's wings beat once, the downdraft sending executioners and cultists reeling, and the dragon went skyward once more. Thinking the retreat evidence of victory, Hellebron screamed at her cultists to pursue. This they gladly did, singing their Blood Queen's praises in raucous tones. Then a great volley of arrows sliced through the leading ranks, and the pursuit's momentum stumbled and failed.

Hellebron was all but lost to battle-madness. From the top of her cauldron-throne, she saw the charge and retreat of the wood elves, but scarcely realised the grim tally it had cost her own forces. Perhaps a third of the Cult of the Blood Queen was dead or dying, but the Crone Queen hardly noticed. She saw only that the enemy had fallen back, that the first victory of many was hers. She screamed orders at her followers, promising an eternity of slaughter to those who survived the day. As one, the survivors forgot their wounds, and ran headlong after Arahan and Naestra's forces.

Further to the south, Alarielle's forces were already locked in conflict with Drycha's Wildkin. These were the bitterest of battles. Much of the briarmaven's army was drawn from the resentful spirits of the Wildwood; they offered and received no quarter from the elves they had hated for so long. They tore at Alarielle's warriors with thorn, branch and briar, shredding, choking and slashing – anything to rid the forest of the despised usurpers.

However, not all the forest spirits supported Drycha. Many dryads and tree kin remained true to their friendship with the elves, fought their own kind in the name of that ancient alliance. Dryads shrieked as they tore at their sisters, treemen boomed in languages of old as they exchanged blows that would have staggered mountains. It was nothing less than a battle for Athel Loren's soul, with the fate of the Weave – and indeed, the world – hanging in the balance.

To the north, the Carnival of Silence covered the ground to Malekith's lines with swift strides, each step part of a dance that had begun when the world was young. The daemonettes sang as they advanced, though none of the notes reached the ears of their foes, for their pitch was beyond the conscious mortal mind. Snake-bodied steeds and horned fiends hooted and trilled as they outpaced the running daemonettes, and behind came the four-armed Keepers, each moving with a smooth grace that was neither fast nor slow.

Malekith could sense the fear building in his army. Not in the Black Guard, of course, for past experience had taught them to fear him above all other things. However, the high elves and wood elves under his command had not fought beneath the Witch King of old, had not been forged in the fire of his mercurial temper. As the daemons closed, Malekith urged Seraphon forward at a brisk walk, and ordered the Black Guard to advance at his side. To the Eternity King's approval, the Phoenix Guard came also, mirroring their dark brethren on Malekith's right.

A heartbeat later, the first seekers crashed home against the wall of levelled halberds. The daemons were swift beyond most mortals, but not the elves. Claw thrusts were parried, halberd blades hacked down and pale, otherworldly flesh was stained with black ichor. A trio of fiends charged straight for Malekith, chittering and clicking as they came. The Eternity King was disappointed – he had hoped to draw the ire of one of the Keepers, but the upset didn't slow him in the slightest.



As Seraphon belched a gout of choking black cloud, Malekith drew upon the shadow-power of Ulgu. His first spell blinded the chittering daemons, dulling their senses and their reactions; his second sent a great shadowy blade sweeping across the fiends' line of advance, and cut all three in half.

Daemonettes had come in behind the seekers now, and the first elves started to fall. They perished in silence, the Phoenix Guard because of their oath to a departed god, the Black Guard out of a desire to show no weakness. Thus was the battle fought in an eerie near-silence, with the occasional death-hoots of Slaaneshi steeds and the wet thud of blades in yielding flesh.

The daemonettes were much more numerous than the elves of Malekith's guard, and soon began to spill past the wall of halberds, but such had been the Eternity King's plan. Those daemons who flooded past his flanks were disorganised and anarchic, their attention focussed more on encircling and overwhelming the immediate foe than engaging the entirety of Malekith's force.

This quickly proved a mistake. As the wave of daemonettes split apart on the Eternity King's breakwater, Malekith ordered the rest of his army to engage. Crossbows rattled and glowing javelins hissed through the air, thinning the numbers of those daemons who thought to overwhelm the Eternity Guard. At once, the mass of daemonettes shuddered and shrank inward. As they did so, a chorus of roars split the air as Malekith's war hydras were driven against the foe's recoiling flanks.

Be'lakor, ever a careful custodian of his own skin, hung back throughout. From the glade's edge, he watched the ebb and flow of the fight, drinking in the carnage he had so effortlessly orchestrated, taking stock of Malekith and Alarielle. The daemon was careful not even to utilise his magics, for he deemed that such an act would be as good as unfurling a banner to announce his presence. Instead, he watched Hellebron's cultists hack and tear at their kinsmen, witnessed Drycha's maddened dryads work to purge the hated elves from the Oak of Ages. It occurred to Be'lakor that both the crone and the briarmaven intended to slaughter the other once the battle was won, and it amused the daemon that they believed he would allow them the chance.



Yet though the First-damned took no personal part in that battle, he did not stand entirely idle. The daemons of the Vaults of Winter were anarchic in the extreme, adhering to little in the way of strategy. As a result, Be'lakor often had to force his will upon one troupe or another. He instructed daemonettes to abandon doomed attacks against enraged treemen, directed hellflayers and seekers in coordinated strikes, and wove a constant bewildering pattern from the daemons' dances.

The Vaults' Keepers were reluctant to be commanded – even by a creature so powerful as Be'lakor. However, the First-damned was in little mood to be defied and he ruthlessly smothered their resistance. Be'lakor felt no fondness for his half-kin. Indeed, they were no less his tools than the elves and forest spirits under his command. However, the battle was too close to risk wastefulness. Be'lakor was determined that those who died that day would do so to forward his goals, rather than out of laxness or stupidity on their part.

Be'lakor's web of manipulation was far from undetectable. Had all things been equal, Alarielle or Malekith would have sensed his voice upon the winds. However, neither had attention to spare.

Hellebron's insanity was a living thing, wine-dark and infectious. All who fought in the Eternal Glade felt its presence, and none more strongly than those elves who strove with the cultists blade upon blade. Without Alarielle's presence, hundreds of elves would surely have been overcome by Hellebron's seductive madness. As it was, the power of life blossoming through the Everqueen healed minds as well as bodies, casting back the tide of insanity from all who fought at her side as surely as it drove away their physical harms. Not all could be saved. Some elves rounded suddenly on their fellows, hacking and slashing, tongues spewing hatred and horror. But these were few, a warning of the full terror that would have unfolded without the Everqueen's presence.

Malekith, too, found his powers tested to the limit. As the battle had worn on, Drycha's dryads had abandoned their attempt to strike solely at Alarielle's lines. Instead, they shifted and faded through the trees, employing paths long-hidden from the elves to strike at vulnerable sections of the elven lines. Again and again, the Eternity King had to bend the shadows to his bidding, enfolding a kinband or legion and transporting them to a distant corner of the glade to counter the latest threat. Only he had the slightest inkling of Be'lakor's presence. Each time Malekith reached out into the shadows, he heard echoes of a sibilant voice – near, yet far-distant. But each time he considered investigating, another burgeoning crisis stole his attention away, and Be'lakor went undiscovered. It helped not at all that a part of Malekith's attention was given to seeking a particular presence amongst the enemy ranks, one that he was determined not to overlook.

Deep beneath the Oak of Ages, Teclis looked down at the withered corpse as Malhandir waited restlessly at his side. The body was clad in a robe of green and gold, and lay upon a bed of leaf and briar. For all the world, it looked like it had lain there for centuries, although he knew not more than a few years had gone since Ariel had passed away.

'Time is running short,' said the shadowy loremaster at Teclis' shoulder.

'It is almost spent,' agreed the southern noble.

The elementals lowered the casket to the ground, but Teclis hardly noticed. He couldn't tear his eyes from the corpse, was not sure he could bring himself to act now that the time had come. What if Lileath had been wrong? What if he had been wrong?

'Am I not allowed a moment's doubt?' he asked, forgetting again the futility of arguing with splinters of his own subconscious.

'No,' the eagle-helmed shade said bluntly. 'The time for doubts was long ago.'

'Now you must finish the journey you began,' the lion-cloaked figure concurred.

'That journey led to your deaths,' Teclis protested.

The eagle-helmed shade shook his head. 'We did not die by your hand.'

'We chose our own paths,' the loremaster agreed.

'We trusted you,' the southern noble assured him.

'And we would do so again,' said the rugged warrior.

Teclis sighed, his eyes drawn to the casket. So many sacrifices. So many betrayals.

'Ah, but will he trust me?' he asked aloud. 'Will he understand?' He looked again at Ariel's desiccated body, then up at the four shades. 'You're right. Doubt is a luxury I cannot afford. What will be, must be.' He gave a sad smile. 'Thank you for sharing this burden, but now we must part.'

Teclis spoke the words of unmaking, watched as the shadowy likenesses of Belannaer, Finubar, Eltharion and Korhil vanished into nothing.

And then he was alone with the dead.

With a bellow that shook the leaves overhead, Coeddil came straight for Alarielle. In his madness, the ancient perceived the Everqueen to be her predecessor, Ariel – she who had caged him, all those centuries ago. Eternal guardsmen and warriors of the Everguard held firm before Coeddil, and paid for this bravery with their lives. Bones snapped like twigs as Coeddil trampled forward, crushing elves underfoot or bludgeoning them aside with his gnarled fists. Spears and arrows rebounded off the treeman's thick hide, with only the luckiest of strikes penetrating the bark and drawing forth streams of sap.

Coeddil scarcely noticed. Vengeance drove him, and hatred numbed his wounds. A hundred elves could not have held him at bay, and twice that number would have done little more than slow him down. Karann – a treeman less than half Coeddil's age – moved to bar the ancient's path. He was knocked away spinning by a two-fisted blow that left his face pulverised, and his torso running with sap. Alarielle called thorns to cage Coeddil. He tore free, snapped and twisted tendrils trailing from his shoulders and legs. Wildwood tree kin and dryads followed their elder's path of destruction, the former falling upon the scattered elves with rumbling sighs at the prospect of vengeance, the latter with shrill cries of delight.

Far to the east, Naestra and Arahan at last recognised Alarielle's peril. With a mighty roar, Ceithin-Har banked sharply towards the Everqueen, but knew that he would be too late. The Everqueen's lines had been shattered by Coeddil's charge, and those elves not desperately fighting for their lives were separated from their queen by a tide of forest spirits. Yet Alarielle stood her ground, refusing to flee before Coeddil's rampage. Again she called thorns to bind him, used magic to smite him with enchanted deadwood. Even when a vast, thorn-scarred fist reached down for her, the Everqueen did not flinch.

Coeddil's fist never touched Alarielle. In the moment before the blow landed, a thunderous impact struck the ancient's shoulder, hurling him aside. Dryads screeched as Coeddil stomped them flat in a desperate attempt to find his footing, the survivors scattering as the ancient's assailant lumbered close for another blow.

Durthu's voice boomed out as his sword swept down, the Daith-forged steel sending splinters of iron-hard bark spraying in all directions. His words were too ancient for the elves to comprehend, but Coeddil understood their challenge, and met his brother's blow with one of his own. Durthu staggered back as Coeddil's fist slammed into his chest, buckling the bark across his midriff. Durthu swung again, but Coeddil stepped inside the arc, and locked one massive hand around the other treeman's wrist. For a moment, nothing happened as the two mighty beings strove silently against one another. Then there was a twisting, cracking sound as Coeddil tore Durthu's weapon hand free.

Durthu loosed a cracking bellow of pain as Coeddil dropped the severed forearm – and the sword it still held – to the ground. But Durthu did not waver. Lurching forward, he butted Coeddil hard in the face, the impact shearing off several antlers. Coeddil staggered under the impact and Durthu struck once more, the forepart of his undamaged arm smashing down into his brother's shoulder and driving Coeddil to one knee.

Far below, elves and dryads scattered like ants, knowing that to tarry was to be crushed by these battling giants. Only Alarielle held fast, her lips moving soundlessly and the magics of life flowing from her fingertips as she sought to reknit Durthu's wounds. Already, green tendrils were bursting through the ruin of Durthu's right arm, winding and flailing as they formed a new limb.

Realising that he could not defeat Alarielle and Durthu together, Coeddil reached out for the Everqueen a second time. Again, Durthu interceded, snaring his brother's straining hand with his own fingers. Using Coeddil's momentum, Durthu hauled him to his knees. Before Coeddil could twist free, Durthu shifted his grasp. Moving with a grace entirely at odds with his appearance, Durthu locked his forearm across Coeddil's throat, and stepped behind him. At the same time, the fingers of Durthu's new-grown right hand fastened around the hilt of his fallen sword, and plucked it up. Coeddil tore and scraped at the forearm holding him prisoner, but Durthu's grip did not slacken.

With a last bellow, that was half triumph and half sorrow, Durthu drove the point of his sword through Coeddil's back and out through his breast. The blighted treeman lurched hard against his brother's grip, but the reaction was only reflex. Durthu had pierced the web of knotted fibres of Coeddil's heart, and his brother was already dying. Orange sap turned black as it pulsed across the elf-forged steel. Drawing his sword free, Durthu let Coeddil fall. The vast corpse hit the ground with dull thud.

To the west, Drycha knew that her master was dead, and let cry a shriek of rage and grief so pure that it chilled the blood of all who heard it. The ululating wail was taken up by other Wildkin dryads, and they threw themselves back into the fight with renewed ferocity.

To the east, Hellebron at last realised that her true foe – the Everqueen – was not present in the forces arrayed against her. Slighted that her banisher would choose to face any foe other than herself, the crone ordered her army to march south and confront Alarielle directly.

This decision cost the Cult of the Blood Queen dearly. Neither they, nor their mistress, gave any thought to the danger of leaving Naestra and Arahan's forces unengaged upon their flank. For their part, the daughters of Ariel were bewildered that their foe should embrace such a self-destructive tactic, but this did not prevent them from taking advantage of the strange opportunity. As Hellebron's cauldron rumbled south, her right flank was torn increasingly ragged by bow and spear. Another army might have broken and fled, but the blood-madness still lay thick upon Hellebron's followers.

Nevertheless, for all that Hellebron's decision pushed her own forces closer to destruction, it proved equally dangerous for Alarielle's army. The Wildkin had become even more savage following Coeddil's death, and it was all the Everqueen could do to hold them back. When the first of Hellebron's cultists crashed against Alarielle's eastern flank, it became clear to the Everqueen that she would have to fall back closer to the Oak of Ages or be overwhelmed.

Elsewhere, Malekith had eyes only for the battle against the daemons – a battle that was going well. To the north of the Oak, the ground was strewn with cairns of pale, daemonic flesh. Elves had perished too, but the tally was well in their favour. Daemonettes had been slain by the hundred, and their beasts of war had fared little better. One of the Keepers was already dead, its strange, silken hide pierced by more than a hundred crossbow bolts. The other at last bore down on Malekith, scented magic dripping from its long, slender fingers. Elves fell numb as the Keeper advanced, weapons dropping slackly to their sides, eyes staring vacantly ahead until a sweep from the monster's sword ended their lives.

Malekith alone was unaffected by the creature's wiles. He had faced N'kari, the greatest of their kind, many times before. On each occasion, he had emerged the victor, and he was not about to fall before some lesser Keeper. The Eternity King drew upon his own magics as the daemon approached, sending swirling phantoms of long-dead elves to dog the creature's steps. Slowed by the elemental effigies, the daemon had no chance to evade Seraphon's sudden pounce. The dragon's talons struck the Keeper of Secrets high in the chest, bearing it to the ground.

Though pinned beneath the dragon's weight, the daemon did not give in. It hammered and tore at Seraphon's flanks, ripping free great chunks of scaled flesh. Seraphon roared in pain, but she had known far worse wounds in her long life, and fought back all the harder. Iron-hard teeth tore a huge gobbet of flesh from the Keeper's shoulder. Taloned foreclaws scored tracks along the daemon's face. Atop Seraphon's shoulders, Malekith unmade his phantoms with a gesture, transmuting their remains into a cloud of razor-sharp darts that burrowed into the Keeper's flesh, worming their way deep into its unnatural organs. The daemon screamed. It gave a final shudder that might have been pleasure or pain, and then lay still. Seraphon gave a roar of triumph, then dipped her dripping maw to tear out the creature's throat.

Despite their horrendous losses, the Carnival of Silence pressed on, but now Malekith deemed that corner of the battle to have been won, and at last spared a thought for his beleaguered queen. Leaving the northern quarter in Fleetmaster Mezekar's command, he ordered the Eternity Guard to march southward,

to reinforce Alarielle's lines. Malekith intended to follow them. However, in the moment Seraphon took wing, a shadow dropped from the trees above, a curved dagger arcing towards the Eternity King's back.

At another time, or another place, Shadowblade might have succeeded. However, Malekith had expected the assassination attempt from the moment that Hellebron's cult had been outlawed – the Blood Queen's presence on the battlefield had made it a certainty. Throughout the battle, even during the clash with the Keeper of Secrets, the Eternity King had kept a portion of his mind fixed upon the shadows around him. The Malekith of old could perhaps have been taken by surprise by a blade in the dark, but not Malekith, Incarnate of Shadow. There was little that moved in the darkness that he could not sense, and thus he was aware of his would-be killer's approach almost in the moment it began.

Even then, Shadowblade was nearly too swift. Malekith twisted aside in the saddle, but could not evade the blade entirely. Sparks flew as it ripped deep into the Armour of Midnight. Blood pulsed through the rent. There was poison on the blade – Malekith felt its sting at once. However, the Eternity King had taken precautions since Shadowblade's last attempt on his life, ingesting minute amounts of the toxins he knew the assassin favoured, in order to build up a resistance. This precaution did nothing to numb the poison's searing pain, but Malekith was well accustomed to agony, and it slowed him not in the slightest.

Shadowblade's next strike came a split second after the first, a lightning-fast cut intended to slit the armour at Malekith's throat. But the Eternity King ducked under the blow and out of his saddle. Effortlessly finding a foothold on Seraphon's back, he turned to face his assailant, blade at the ready.

Thus did the assassin and the king fight their battle, not on firm ground, but upon the back of the speeding dragon. Wind whipped at the duellists, threatening to pluck them from the skies at any moment, but still they fought on. They were evenly matched, blades blurring with each parry and thrust. Shadowblade had the advantage of speed, but Malekith had the greater reach. Neither of them could land a blow. A dozen times, Malekith swept out his sword, only for it to hiss through empty air as Shadowblade darted back. But just as often, the assassin had to turn his own strike into a desperate parry, lest the Eternity King strike his head from his shoulders.

Seraphon passed beneath one of the Oak of Ages' vast boughs, and all three were swamped in shadow. The assassin saw Malekith turn, his guard suddenly down. Shadowblade gave a growl of delight and sprang forward, dagger aimed to slam into the Eternity King's throat. He missed. Malekith was gone without trace, and the blade thrust through empty air. The assassin was thrown into rare confusion, then gave a brief cry as Malekith emerged from the shadows behind him and hacked deep into his ribs. As Seraphon emerged into the light once more, Shadowblade slipped sideways across the dragon's back, dagger falling from unresponsive hands. Malekith looked briefly down at his would-be assassin, then lashed out with an armoured foot to send him on his way. Unable to anchor himself, Shadowblade tumbled from Seraphon's back and vanished into the battle far below.

Drycha's cruel handmaidens had wrought terrible ruin on Alarielle's forces. The briarmaven had wielded her sisters like claws, ferociously raking the grove-covens still loyal to the Everqueen. The broken bodies of dryads littered the approach to the Everguard, and only Durthu's indefatigable presence had kept the elves from being overwhelmed.





Malekith saw all this as he retook his saddle, and urged Seraphon to where Drycha hissed orders at the other Wildkin. The dragon's mouth gaped wide as she descended, and a choking spume swept over the darting dryads. It could not choke the forest spirits, for they did not breathe as mortals did. Nonetheless, its thick, toxic fumes ate away at the dryads' bodies, poisoning the sap within their veins. Dozens perished in agony, eaten away both outside and in by Seraphon's black breath. Those that survived were scattered a heartbeat later, when Seraphon slammed down like a thunderbolt, crunching the delicate dryads like twigs.

Drycha saw her sisters perish, and sprang towards Malekith. As the briarmaven did so, she reached out to the magics of the forest, breathing new life into the fallen. Green shoots burst forth from crushed and soot-black bodies. Seasons of growth passed in an eye-blink as shoots grew into vines which wound and wended about Seraphon's limbs. The dragon tore free, but more tendrils whipped out to snare her, then slithered further up to seize Malekith.

The Eternity King hacked left and right, severing tendrils with each stroke, but more came to restrain him. Beneath him, Seraphon was dragged lower to the ground as roots burst from the glade floor to aid the vines. Still hacking, Malekith sought to counter Drycha's magics. However, Shadowblade's poison was at last beginning to numb his senses. This, taken alongside the fact that the briarmaven's fulsome wrath lay behind every cantrip of her spell, meant that Malekith could find no crack to exploit within it. A moment later, Drycha was upon him, slashing and stabbing at the trammelled Eternity King.

With Malekith occupied by Drycha's fury, and Alarielle falling back before Hellebron, Be'lakor at last joined the battle. Stepping through the shadows on the glade's boundary, he swooped low across the battle, rejoicing in the terror his appearance instilled. Some elves reacted quicker than others, sending arrows and bolts speeding across the sky towards the First-damned. However, Be'lakor was a creature of shadow, his form uncertain even under the noon-day sun. Only a single lucky arrow hit its mark, and this Be'lakor tore free without slowing his advance. As the daemon landed before the oak, cloaked rangers threw themselves at him, glaives gleaming. Be'lakor left them twitching in a heap with a single sweep of his shadow-sword, and pressed on to claim his prize.

For Be'lakor, it was a moment of triumph. He could feel the power of the Oak of Ages pulsing before him, could see how it could be twisted and unmade. At last, the Dark Gods would have to pay him heed once more. Even if they did not, the plan of Archaon the pretender would be pre-empted, his moment of glory usurped. With a sibilant cackle of victory, the First-damned sank his talons deep into the tree's venerable flesh. Tiny spiderwebs of darkness spread out from the wounds, worming their way deeper into the Oak of Ages.



At once, the Weave screamed, and the world shuddered in response. The sky darkened, and the ground rumbled in pain. All across the Eternal Glade, the forest spirits' strength ebbed, and those not already insane from the Weave's imbalance felt madness crowd close about their minds. Drycha tore her attention away from her duel, saw Be'lakor clutching like a leech at the Oak of Ages. At last, the bitterness of millennia gave way to the realisation of how she had been used. Malekith forgotten, the briarmaven launched herself towards the Oak of Ages, the cage of vines and roots that held the Eternity King collapsing as her concentration was bent elsewhere. She made it two steps before the Eternity King's sword took her head. As Seraphon tore free of the remaining vines and took wing towards Be'lakor, Malekith snorted. Drycha's intent had been plain enough, but he had no desire to embrace such an unreliable ally, even in so dark an hour.

Be'lakor's laughter grew louder as the Weave trembled. Already, he could feel the gaze of the gods drawing towards him, lured by the corruption he wrought. Hungrily, he burrowed deeper, spreading his foul shadow further and faster – too fast, for had the First-damned been about his work more cautiously, he might not have been taken unawares by what happened next.

Suddenly, a brilliant light shone through the Oak of Ages' flesh, a light so powerful that Be'lakor's shadow tendrils withered before it. At once, the Weave fought to rebalance itself, the tremors faded and the skies began to clear.

With a scream, Be'lakor ripped his talons free of the bark, but the light did not fade. Rather, it grew brighter. Steam rose from the First-damned's skin as the light fell upon it, tiny fires raging across his unholy flesh. As the daemon reeled away, the Oak of Ages' trunk unfurled like a blossoming flower. Through slitted eyes, Be'lakor saw a tall-helmed knight framed against the blinding light. For a moment, they stared at one another, the silhouette and the shadow daemon. Then a sword of rippling fire blazed forth against the light, there was a thunder of hooves, and Prince Tyrion charged headlong at Be'lakor.

Many an eye turned to witness what occurred at the Oak of Ages, but few knew exactly what they beheld. The remaining daemonettes sensed, rather than saw, the cleansing light that had come to the battlefield, and felt an unfamiliar fear. At once, they turned and fled, leaving Be'lakor to stand alone. Most others saw a blaze of light surging towards Be'lakor's retreating form. Where it passed, madness fled from the minds of forest spirits and elves, from Wildkin and cultist alike. The former shrank away into the forest, thoughts awhirl with the catastrophe that they had so nearly unleashed. The cultists fell to their knees, begging forgiveness from those they had fought. Alas, repentance was a coin of poor currency that day, and most perished all the same. Hellebron alone felt no remorse. However, seeing only defeat in the moments that followed, she abandoned her throne, fleeing the sacred glade with a vow of revenge upon her lips.

Be'lakor would have fled then and there, had he not heard the laughter of the gods in his mind. Their mockery, and the wrath it awoke within him, drove him to stand his ground against Tyrion. Shadow-magic streamed from the First-damned's fingers, summoning blades to tear at his opponent's flesh, and illusions to assail his mind. It was a fearsome assault, one that would have staggered the Tyrion of old, but the Dragon of Cothique was far more than he had once been.

Before he had died, Tyrion had been consumed by the curse of his bloodline. Now, through the latent magics of Ariel's divine bones and the Heart of Avelorn's magic, he had been reborn – had been reunited with his old sword, and his faithful steed Malhandir. The Flame of Ulric, which Teclis had stolen from Middenheim, gave Tyrion strength. The Wind of Light, whose power Teclis had husbanded until this moment, had transformed him into something more than a mere warrior. Tyrion was now the Incarnate of Light, and his very being was anathema to the servants of the Chaos Gods.

Sunfang blazed bright, tearing through Be'lakor's enchantments, and deep into the First-damned's flesh. Be'lakor caught the second stroke on his shadow-blade, but he knew that the battle was lost. His allies were routed or slain, and he could feel his skin smouldering simply from Tyrion's presence. Spitting a curse that owed as much to humiliation as to pain, the First-damned fled into the shadows, trying to ignore the laughter of the gods as it echoed through his mind.





Victory had been won, but few felt it a triumph. The defenders had suffered greatly. Fully half of those who had taken up arms alongside Malekith and Alarielle had fallen. More would have perished had the Everqueen not walked amongst the wounded for long hours afterwards, giving of her own life-power to restore others. Few of the survivors took satisfaction in the slaughter they had wrought. Save for the vile daemons, the dead had all been kin, either sons and daughters of Aenarion, or children of the great forest. That they had fallen into madness was the greatest tragedy, for their strength would be sorely missed in the days to come.

Prince Imrik led reinforcements to the Eternal Glade soon after Be'lakor had fled. Malekith would have gladly led them in pursuit of the surviving daemons. However, he was amongst those in need of the Everqueen's touch – even his will could not keep the effects of Shadowblade's poison at bay forever. Thus did Imrik harry the daemonettes back to the rift they had used to reach the Eternal Glade. The prince fought as one possessed, furious at himself for having been delayed elsewhere whilst his monarchs had stood on the precipice of defeat. Those who fought at Imrik's side would thereafter tell how the prince's wrath had only deepened when he saw the twisted flesh-gate that had once been Naieth. The daemons were brought to one last furious battle amidst the glade that had been the prophetess' home, and Naieth's remains were burned amongst the ashes of the trees.

There was, however, reason for joy amongst the sorrow. The Weave had stabilised in the wake of Be'lakor's defeat. It was not wholly recovered, or even nearly so, but the tipping point was now further away than it had been for many days. The Oak of Ages too was somewhat recovered from Be'lakor's grasp. The light of Tyrion's rebirth had done much to purge the tree's corruption, and spellweavers laboured long after to cure what remained. As was too often the case in those dark days, they could not entirely undo what had been done, and this small failure sat ill alongside the good they had achieved.

As night fell, Tyrion remained apart from the other elves, and sat alone in a clearing to the Eternal Glade's north. His light had dimmed once the battle had ended, its power drawn once more into his soul until it was needed again. No cheers had greeted Tyrion's return, no welcome for a hero long lost – the wounds he had caused as the Avatar of Khaine went too deep for that. In truth, Tyrion could remember little of the weeks before his death. Every memory was clouded in blood and shadow, leaving only vague and horrible recollections.

Tyrion knew there were hooded figures upon the edge of the clearing, could see the glint of arrows trained on his heart. Once, he would have taken furious offence at being treated thus, but death and resurrection had brought him a calm he had never before known. There was nothing to be gained by conflict with his own kind. So it was that Tyrion waited in silence as his destiny unfolded.

As for Be'lakor, he had vanished into the shadows of the forest, his cunning mind already working to retrieve something from the disaster. Archaon's plan was growing near to fruition, but there was still time for the First-damned to pre-empt the arrogant mortal.

Archaon entered the gloomy chamber for the fifth time in as many days. As ever, a coven of robed cultists were gathered around the warp-artefact. They were muttering incantations that the Everchosen knew to be more theatrical than mystic. Not one of them had noted Archaon's arrival.

'Can we proceed?' Archaon asked, his deep voice echoing from the polished walls.

The cult's sorcerer, his status betrayed by his golden mask, hastened across the carpet of broken stone. Upon reaching Archaon's side, he bowed obsequiously, the hooked nose of his mask almost scraping the rocky floor.

'It stirs to life.' Without looking up, the sorcerer extended an arm towards the centre of the chamber. 'See how it shines.'

Archaon stared directly at the warp-artefact, seeking some change. His mortal eyes saw nothing out of the ordinary, merely a glistening black globe hung between two golden hemispheres. But when he looked with the Eye of Sheerian, he saw colours pulsing across its surface, and strange lightning earthing through the golden metal.

'Can we proceed?' Archaon asked again, allowing a hint of menace to creep into his tone.

The sorcerer jerked his body upright in order to meet Archaon's gaze. 'If the Dark Gods will it.'

Beneath his helm, Archaon's lips twisted into a sneer. The sorcerer was a devout believer, as narrow and blinkered as the Ulricans who had called Middenheim their home. Pathetic.

'Wake it,' Archaon commanded. 'The gods grow impatient, and so do I.'

'An offering of souls will be needed,' the sorcerer warned him.

'Then make it. The excavation is complete, but the slaves can still serve the gods.'

'As can we all,' the sorcerer put in, earning another unseen sneer.

Archaon strode from the chamber without another word. The end was near.

Whilst Tyrion waited beyond the Eternal Glade's bounds, what remained of Malekith's inner council gathered beneath the Oak of Ages. War had taken its toll on the council, just as it had on the forest as a whole. Many had been slain in Athel Loren's defence, but those who remained were amongst the mightiest heroes of Athel Loren. Malekith, Alarielle and Durthu had already been present in the Eternal Glade. As midnight approached, Imrik, Lileath and Alith Anar joined them.

Malekith also instructed Teclis to join the gathering, though there was less honour in the invitation than there was distrust. The mage had emerged soon after Be'lakor had fled – much to Alarielle's obvious delight and Malekith's equally obvious suspicion. Both had thought Teclis lost in the ruin of Ulthuan, but where the Everqueen interpreted his return as a portent of good fortune, the Eternity King saw only confirmation that he had been manipulated by the mage. As soon as the council had convened, the Eternity King demanded an explanation from Teclis.

Malekith's concerns were assuaged only somewhat by Teclis' assertion that Tyrion would make no attempt to claim kingship of the elves, that his brother desired only to fight to preserve his people from the Rhana Dandra. The Eternity King trusted Tyrion's motives even less than he did Teclis', and deemed such assurances to be worthless. In this, he was far from alone. Imrik and Durthu remembered all too well the war fought against the Avatar of Khaine, recounted sins that far outweighed the good that Tyrion had done that day. Even Alarielle, whose beloved consort Tyrion had once been, could bring herself to say little in his defence. She had gifted him the Heart of Avelorn out of love, even knowing that same love would be consumed if the gem's magic were ever called upon. The feelings the Everqueen had once possessed for Tyrion were now naught but dust, and the memories of his deeds in Ulthuan hung heavy on her mind.

Teclis still had his own doubts about the path he had followed, but buried them deep. He explained that it had always been Tyrion's destiny to become the Incarnate of Light. However, had that fate come to pass whilst the Curse of Aenarion was in Tyrion's blood, the power would have been slaved to the will of Khaine, or to even darker gods. Thus it had been necessary to set Tyrion on a path that would allow the curse to exhaust itself. Without the Incarnates, Teclis argued, there could be no chance of victory in the Rhana Dandra.



Those who heard Teclis speak were appalled – all save two. Malekith was quietly impressed that the mage had enacted such a ruthless plan, that Teclis had sacrificed thousands of his kinsfolk – his own niece amongst them – in order to fulfil his goals. It was so audacious as to garner the mage a newfound – and wholly alien – respect from the Eternity King, though Teclis would have been little pleased to learn of it.

Lileath too remained unmoved by Teclis' account, chiefly because the plan he had enacted was hers. Moreover, she knew what Teclis did not: the Rhana Dandra could not be won – the Incarnates existed only to distract and weaken the Chaos Gods so that the Haven might survive. She could still feel its presence beyond the veil of the mortal world, a realm of magic in which her daughter could grow into her divine power, and one day create an existence beyond the reach of Chaos. It was a dream worth dying for – worth sacrificing for – and Lileath would see that those sacrifices were made. The countless thousands who had perished to this point were as nothing to those who would die in the hopeless wars to come. She said none of this, of course, but spoke quietly and calmly of unity. Whatever Tyrion had done in the past, she reminded the council, he would surely be needed again as he had been needed today.

Only Alith Anar said nothing, as was his wont. His presence on the council was neither to advise, nor to serve. He attended only to watch for signs of Malekith returning to his old ways. Tyrion's fate was nothing to him.

Mortal though she now was, Lileath's word still carried weight, even with Malekith. In the end, Tyrion was brought before the inner council and humbly bent his knee to the king and queen. However, even a blind man would have seen the tension that remained. To Imrik, it was obvious enough. Malekith feared that Alarielle and Tyrion would soon conspire to steal his crown, whilst to Alarielle, Tyrion's hands were indelibly stained with the blood of too many friends. Most notable of all, in Imrik's mind, was how few words passed between Tyrion and Teclis. Once the closest of kin, it seemed that the prince had not forgiven his brother's manipulations. For his part, Imrik didn't much care. The dragon prince had long ago placed the defence of his people above all other concerns. The suspicions and wounded feelings of his allies were of little concern.

Neither feasting nor celebration followed the council's conclusion, just a night of fitful slumber. Not all sought rest. Tyrion and Alarielle strayed far from their Eternal Glade, conversing in whispered tones until dawn lightened the eastern skies.

No one ever learned of the words that passed between them that night, although those that encountered the queen soon after their parting marked the tightness about her eyes, and the coldness of her expression.

The next morning, Caradryan led a weary column – the survivors of Esdari Corrin – into the Eternal Grove. Blades were unsheathed and protests uttered at the captain's temerity. To allow humans – and worse yet, dwarfs – into the most sanctified corner of Athel Loren was sacrilegious in the extreme. Dryads crowded close about the intruders, alert for any betrayal that would justify an attack. Arrows were nocked, ready to fly.

It would have taken little for a costly and calamitous battle to erupt. Though not given overmuch to speech, even with his oath to Asuryan lifted, Caradryan had tersely impressed the need for caution upon the Averheim refugees – a sentiment that the Emperor, Gelt and Hammerson had all been quick to reinforce. Jerrod and his knights required no warning. Athel Loren was the stuff of legend to the Bretonnians, and few of those tales ended well for intruders. Thus, despite provocation, swords stayed sheathed and axes shouldered as Caradryan spoke of the battle at Esdari Corrin.

In truth, little needed to be said. Alarielle, Malekith and Tyrion all felt that Caradryan and Gelt now each commanded power not dissimilar to their own. Moreover, they could sense the lingering essence of Azyr mantled upon the Emperor's shoulders. These were three of the four winds that had escaped Teclis' grasp during the Great Vortex's unmaking. That their Incarnates had come to Athel Loren – and so soon after Tyrion's return – lent credence to Teclis' and Lileath's talk of destiny.

For what seemed an age, the elves stared in silence at the dwarfs and humans in their midst. Malekith, sensing events slipping out of his grasp, was gripped by a rare moment of indecision. It was therefore at Alarielle's order that the dryads slunk back into the trees, and the elves lowered their weapons. In a cold and clear voice, the Everqueen spoke of a world greatly changed in a short time, of how old distrusts and enmities would have to be abandoned. She bade that the intruders be welcomed as guests and valued allies, and thanked Caradryan for bringing them to the Eternal Glade. Many of the elves looked to Malekith for confirmation of the Everqueen's words. At first, they saw none. Then the Eternity King, his mood unreadable, gave a stiff nod and affirmed his queen's decision. So enrapt were all at this sight, that none saw the brief nod of understanding that passed between Tyrion and the Emperor. None, that is, save ever-watchful Alith Anar, who wondered what it portended.

Thus was a second council soon held upon the site of the first, one that lasted long into dusk. The Emperor spoke of Averheim's fall, and of the despoiling of the Empire that had preceded it. As shrewd a diplomat as ever, he was most generous in his praise of Jerrod and Hammerson, and spoke at length of the sacrifice made by Ungrim Ironfist and his slayers.

In return, Alarielle spoke of the war that had shattered Ulthuan, and of the perils that beset Athel Loren and the Weave. All of this she recounted in careful terms, never once resorting to falsehood, but sparing all present from certain details. She did not mention Tyrion's role in Ulthuan's downfall, only of the Avatar of Khaine as if he were a separate being. No account was given of the myriad betrayals that had dogged the elves, of which Hellebron's was the most recent. Such matters Alarielle judged too shameful to share with outsiders, and it seemed no other member of the council disagreed with her, for none sought to offer correction.

At Alarielle's instruction, Teclis then explained once again how he had broken the Great Vortex, had sought to create Incarnates mighty enough to oppose the Chaos Gods. Gelt nodded silently at this, as if a long wrestled-with puzzle had suddenly found its solution. The wizard interrupted, asking what had become of the Wind of Death and the Wind of Beasts. Teclis hesitated before answering, then explained that Shyish had been stolen long before he had destroyed the Great Vortex, and admitted that Ghur was lost to his sight. Until they were recovered, or their bearers convinced of the need to oppose Chaos, the power of the Incarnates would remain scattered.

Duke Jerrod heard little of what was said at the council. His attention was given solely to Lileath, whose likeness had struck a chord within him that he could not identify. He did not know that she had once also been Ladrielle, the blessed Lady of Bretonnia. For her part, Lileath made no attempt to enlighten him. Of all those she had used to ensure the Haven's creation, the Bretonnians had suffered the worst, with their entire society fashioned into a weapon to be wielded or discarded at will. As a goddess, Lileath had thought nothing of such manipulations. As a mortal, she was discomfited by what she had done, despite its necessity.

It was one thing, however, to understand the events that had led them all to that point, and quite another to determine what was to be done next. And it seemed that there was to be little opportunity for such discussion. As dusk drew night, swift-winged warhawk riders came from the mountains. They carried word of an unnatural darkness sweeping down from the east, of an army of the dead approaching Athel Loren's borders.

The elves reacted at once. The Weave of the great forest was already imbalanced – were unnatural undead to tread beneath its boughs, the

victory over Be'lakor would have been for nothing. The inner council departed within minutes of the messengers' arrival, taking with them whatever troops were fit to march. Though weary, the Emperor and Gelt accompanied them, and the Zhufbarak, disliking the idea of being abandoned in the heart of an elven stronghold, went also.

Led down hidden paths by silent waywatchers, the six Incarnates arrived on the edge of Wydrioth as the army of the dead approached. Hurriedly, battle lines were drawn. Banners of all colours and designs were raised together, as for the first time in who knew how many generations, elves, dwarfs and men prepared to fight as one.

Before them advanced a bleak host, an army of worm-picked bone and tattered wings, of baleful witchfires gleaming like will-o'-the-wisps in the dark. The dead spilled down the mountainside in silence, every step precise and guided by the same suffocating will that had drowned the mountainside. Nagash had come to Athel Loren.

Mannfred von Carstein made no attempt at concealment as he guided Ashigaroth towards the motley battle line that had formed on the forest's edge. Though he was loathe to admit it, his spells of shrouding would have done little to fool the mages and wizards waiting below. Instead, he would have to trust to his opponents' curiosity, and misplaced sense of decency, to keep him from harm.

It seemed the vampire's faith had not been in vain. Neither arrow, bullet nor spell assailed him as Ashigaroth's talons fixed upon a boulder in front of the line of shields. For a moment, Mannfred revelled in the sensation of hundreds of eyes watching him, of the poorly-concealed fear of the living.

'Speak your piece, abomination, and begone... or be destroyed.' It was Malekith who had spoken, the words rendered strangely metallic by his armour's death mask. There was no fear in the elf-king's voice, no apprehension – there was no prey here, after all.

Mannfred's disappointment mixed with relief. To treat with the living was distasteful enough – to have bargained with prey would have been unacceptable. Even so, when he next spoke, Mannfred could barely keep the distaste from his voice.

'Great Nagash, Eternal Sovereign of all Nehekhara, Lord of the Underworld and Supreme Lord of the Undead...' he paused, the next words sour on his tongue, '...wishes to parley.'







CHAPTER 4

On the Edge of the Abyss

Autumn 2528



A week after Nagash's arrival, a council of the Incarnates was held in King's Glade. It was an uneasy affair, to say the least. However much they might have striven to conceal it from the outsiders, the ill faith that lay between the elven Incarnates still remained. Moreover, none of the elves truly trusted Gelt, or the Emperor. And, of course, no one trusted Nagash.

During that first encounter on the bleak mountainside seven days earlier, it had been obvious that Nagash's army, whilst vast, was no match for the Incarnates and their allies. The banners of the dead had been thick amongst the crags, but by no means thick enough. Furthermore, the Great Necromancer was no longer a preeminent being – too much of his might had been lost with the Black Pyramid. Though the power of death had magnified his might, his was still no match for the six Incarnates arrayed against him. Even taking into account that the Emperor no longer commanded the power of Azyr, it was plain that Nagash would lose the battle, if one occurred.

Of course, Nagash's weakness had been taken by many not as an opportunity for alliance, but as a chance to scour him from the face of the world. Malekith had been forcefully of this opinion, with Gelt scarcely less vocal. Caradryan remained silent throughout, though this surprised no one. Alarielle and Tyrion seemed undecided at first – certainly the latter had learnt much about the relative value of evil in recent years – though neither made any effort to still Malekith's diatribe. Both the Everqueen and her estranged lover knew only too well that Nagash's return had been brought about through the death of their daughter, Aliathra. Only the Emperor had dared interrupt the Eternity King to argue that Nagash's aid was vital to their survival. The last bastions of the uncorrupted world were crumbling, he reminded them all, and there was precious little time to squander through infighting.

Malekith had lapsed into a dangerous silence following the Emperor's words. Teclis, fearing the collapse of his grand design, took the opportunity to remind his allies that it had only been Nagash's theft of death magic that had made the creation of the other Incarnates possible. He stated a belief that the Great Necromancer was as necessary now as he had been then. Yet even Teclis could see that his words had done little to convince the others. The memories of his own betrayals were too recent.

Malekith had countered with the notion that the Wind of Death was all that was truly needed. Nagash could be slain, he suggested, and Shyish bound to another, more tractable creature. Gotri Hammerson, who knew a good many of the grudges the dwarfs held against Nagash, had nodded in slow concord. That was, until he caught himself displaying agreement with Malekith, whose own transgressions could have filled whole libraries.

Teclis countered by saying that no being capable of containing so much death magic would be any more trustworthy than Nagash. Malekith then suggested that Duke Jerrod, as de facto ruler of an obliterated realm, was a more than suitable candidate to mantle the power of death. Jerrod could have struck Malekith down at that moment – or more likely died in the attempt – had not Lileath intervened. The goddess-made-mortal defused the duke's anger with a few simple words, though afterward Jerrod could not recall exactly what she had said.

Lileath too had argued that those assembled should at least allow Nagash the opportunity to prove his trustworthiness. Her words had little more impact than Teclis', but the goddess did not give up. The Haven was an ever-present echo in Lileath's mind, a reminder of what she had fought and sacrificed for. She knew that if the Incarnates did not unite, the Chaos Gods would consume the world all the sooner, then turn their attentions to the Haven. Desperate to gain sway, Lileath invoked her divine heritage as both Lileath of the Moon, and as Ladrielle of the Veil. However, it achieved little, save from a garnering a sharp look from Mannfred von Carstein. A chance study long ago had taught him a secret about Ladrielle, and thus, with Lileath's declaration, one about her also.

Nagash remained silent as the mortals argued over his fate. He found it nothing short of amusing that the elves chose to bicker amongst themselves whilst their armies stood arrayed for war, but made no attempt to speed matters along. None sought to address him, and he made no argument of his own. Nor did he allow either Arkhan or Mannfred to speak for him. The Great Necromancer's pride still chafed that he had needed to seek an alliance at all, but the wound was ameliorated somewhat by the consternation provoked by his arrival. Nagash had possessed every confidence that the living would reluctantly agree to an alliance. It was unthinkable to Nagash that the mortals' own petty principles could possibly be a barrier where his own deathless pride had not. Thus had the Great Necromancer found no reason to argue for his fate. Inevitability had no need for an advocate.

In his arrogance, it did not occur to Nagash that his aloof superiority only made his opponents more determined to see him humbled. As the long minutes crept by, it became clear that Malekith's unstoppable rhetoric was winning over the other Incarnates. Nagash felt a flicker of frustration, but it soon passed. This possibility had been foreseen, and a contingency prepared. Stirring from his silence, the Great Necromancer addressed his fellow Incarnates, and offered them a gift they could not refuse.

'YOUR FEAR IS WITHOUT CAUSE. THE WORD OF NAGASH IS INVIOLATE.'

Mannfred watched as the other Incarnates fell silent at the Great Necromancer's words.

Predictably, Malekith was first to speak. 'Any betrayer would say the same, if it suited his purpose.'

'INDEED. AND SO I OFFER A GIFT, A TOKEN OF MY INTENT.'

The Eternity King laughed without humour. 'A gift granted by one such as you or I can hardly be considered proof of anything.'

Mannfred frowned. Nagash had not spoken of offering a gift. The vampire shot a look at Arkhan, but the liche's expressionless face gave up no secrets.

'INDEED,' Nagash repeated, but this time Mannfred fancied there was a touch of dark humour in the tone. *'I HAVE WRONGED YOU. YET THE INITIAL OFFENCE WAS NOT AT MY INSTIGATION.'*

Mannfred saw Malekith move to speak, then fall silent as Alarielle pressed forward. 'You speak of my daughter?' the Everqueen asked, the stridency of her tone failing to disguise the fragility beneath.

'We will not bargain for Aliathra's soul,' Tyrion stated, his voice laden with threat.

'I DO NOT SEEK TO DO SO. SHE IS ALREADY FODDER FOR THE DARK PRINCE.'

That particular twist of the knife was skilfully done, thought Mannfred.

'INSTEAD, I OFFER YOU THE ARCHITECT OF HER DEATH, TO DO WITH AS YOU WILL.'

Mannfred felt his spirits rise. Arkhan had slain the Everchild in order to bring about Nagash's rebirth. Now he understood why Neferata had been granted rule of Sylvania. Nagash had known that he would have to offer Arkhan to the elves, and intended for Mannfred to become his new right hand.

A moment later, Mannfred felt a sharp pain as Ashigaroth flung him from his saddle. Before he could rise, Nagash uttered a single doleful word, and a glowing amethyst cocoon encased the vampire. Mannfred von Carstein's last thought was to curse himself for a fool.

Nagash's sacrifice of Mannfred had been carefully judged. None of the elves were aware that it had been Arkhan who had actually slain Aliathra, but they all knew that Mannfred had captured and tortured the Everchild. As Nagash had expected, the gift of the cocooned vampire shifted the balance of opinion. Tyrion and Alarielle, glad to gain a measure of justice for their daughter's demise, decreed that they were prepared to give Nagash some small benefit of the doubt. Their decision marked the turning point. Malekith and Gelt reluctantly agreed to consider an alliance of necessity.

Thus was Nagash permitted to walk beneath the eaves of Athel Loren. Only Arkhan was permitted to accompany Nagash – Arkhan, and one other who arrived, hooded and cloaked, a day later. Krell and the remainder of the Great Necromancer's army were forbidden from passing the forest's bounds, and were instructed to wait upon the mountainside where they remained under heavy watch day and night. To do otherwise would have only brought another potentially hostile force into a realm already beset by them.

Nagash was kept on a short leash throughout. Two of the other Incarnates and a heavy escort of sisters of the thorn accompanied him wherever he travelled. However, he made no attempt to break the restrictions placed upon him, and seldom so much as spoke. On one occasion, he rendered a roving beastman warherd to ashen dust before his escort could even raise the hue and cry. Alarielle had offered her reluctant thanks for this deed, but Nagash made no acknowledgement. It had been less a gesture of goodwill, and more a reminder that even the powers of life and death could unite against an enemy that threatened them both.



As for Mannfred, when his cocoon at last faded away, he had found himself held fast in a cage of living roots deep beneath the Eternal Glade. Such were the enchantments placed upon the prison that the vampire could not even muster the smallest of spells. Worse, Mannfred could feel his power draining away as the Oak of Ages fed upon his undead bones, siphoning the magics that sustained him, and transmuting them into new and vibrant growth in the forest above. The process was as gradual as it was agonising, and Mannfred realised it would take many hundreds of years to drain him to a withered husk. Even through his rage at his predicament, the vampire had to admit the cruel ingenuity of Alarielle's revenge.

To Mannfred's surprise, no elf came to gloat over his torment – certainly he would have done so had positions been reversed. He thus had no opportunity to lay the blame for Aliathra's murder on Arkhan – not that anyone would have believed him. He did not spend his days entirely alone, however.

On the second day of Mannfred's confinement, a tall and haughty shadow stole into his root-bound chamber. Vlad offered no word. Instead, he merely held up his right hand so that Mannfred could plainly see the grave-gold of the Carstein Ring, which had restored the elder vampire to life as it had many times before. With a brief smile of satisfaction, Vlad left as swiftly as he had come. Mannfred's howls of rage could be heard in the glade above for many hours afterwards.

Be'lakor was still licking his wounds in the shadows of the deepwoods when he heard Mannfred's wrath upon the wind. The First-damned had recognised that Athel Loren was fast becoming a locus for great events, though what they were, he still hadn't fathomed. Be'lakor was certain that there was something upon the breeze that he could turn to his advantage.

The heavy oaken doors of Middenheim's defiled temple burst open. The sound of splintering wood boomed through the chamber, only to be drowned out by a thunderous voice.

'What callow mockery is this?' Ka'Bandha roared.

One of the Swords of Chaos, trapped at the Bloodthirster's feet by the door's inward swing, tried to crawl free from the timber's dead weight. Ka'Bandha saw the movement and, with a growling sneer, slammed a hoof down, pulping the knight's helm and the skull beneath.

The scrape of steel upon steel rang out across the chamber as black-armoured figures bore down upon the Bloodthirster.

Archaon uttered no word, but simply raised a gauntleted fist. At once, the Swords of Chaos retreated to their positions around the chamber's perimeter, but their weapons remained ready.

'You forget your place, daemon,' Archaon intoned, rising from his throne. He had expected this confrontation. Indeed, it was vital to his plans. 'I am the Everchosen, and your lord's instrument upon this world. Would you approach his throne thus?'

'You are but a mortal speck,' Ka'Bandha snarled. 'I serve you only so long as you lead us to slaughter. I do not stand as overseer to slaves.'

'Those wretches toil in the gods' cause. What is hidden beneath this city will spill more blood than all the axes ever forged. For that, we need slaves, many slaves; unless the great Ka'Bandha fancies the task of excavation for himself?'

'I WILL NOT BE MOCKED!'

The Bloodthirster's axe flashed out, splitting a pillar in two. Stone and dust cascaded down as part of the ceiling collapsed. Archaon stood his ground as Ka'Bandha advanced to the throne, the daemon's rumbling breath rank in his nostrils.

'I am fulfilling your lord's wishes,' Archaon said, driving his full force of will behind every word. 'If you doubt that, then strike me down. We shall see if Khorne rewards or punishes you.'

Ka'Bandha snarled and took a step backwards. He would not kneel, Archaon knew the daemon to be too proud for that, but the Everchosen cared little for such displays. Only obedience mattered – obedience, and victory.

'Blood must flow,' Ka'Bandha growled.

'And so it does. Only the elven forest-realm yet stands, and that matters little.'

'The Emperor escaped you.'

Archaon shook his head, disdain creeping in his voice. 'As a ruler of a realm, he was a threat. As an embodiment of the heavens, he was certainly a worthy foe. Now he is but a man. His power is gone, his armies are gone. He is beaten. The Dark Gods have given me the victory I craved, and now I shall deliver theirs, as I promised.'

'It is a mistake to think him defeated,' Ka'Bandha rumbled. 'His skull belongs to Khorne.'

Archaon laughed, drawing satisfaction from how the daemon's eyes narrowed at the sound. The Bloodthirster suspected mockery, but he doubted that the brute sensed how he was being manipulated. Archaon wanted Karl Franz slain, but he dared not test the Dark Gods' patience by delaying any further. But now Ka'Bandha had broached the topic...

'Very well,' the Everchosen said at last. 'The Emperor's life is yours to take. Khorne may have his skull, but I shall have his flayed skin for my throne. Promise me this, and I will release you from your duties in Middenheim.'

'Your pact is agreed,' Ka'Bandha bit out. Archaon wondered briefly if the other suspected how he had been used. 'The Blood Hunt will ride out.'



Far to the west of Mannfred's prison, the council of the Incarnates continued. After long consideration – and no small amount of persuasion by Alarielle – Malekith had permitted a select number of non-Incarnates to enter the verdant brilliance of King's Glade. Alarielle had argued that power would serve them poorly without wisdom to guide it, and that wisdom was not the exclusive province of the Incarnates. Malekith was growing weary of his every decision being open to question, but acceded nonetheless.

The elves still held greatest sway over that council. In addition to the four elven Incarnates, Teclis, Lileath, Naestra and Arahan were all present. Imrik had also been invited. Indeed, his presence was one of the few that Malekith would have welcomed. However, the dragon prince had curtly pointed out that someone would have to defend the world of today, whilst others discussed the fate of tomorrow, and had departed to do just that. For several days thereafter, the sounds of battle could be heard to the west as Imrik marshalled the elven armies against marauding beastmen.

Other than the elves, there were four non-Incarnates at the council, not counting the denuded Emperor. Arkhan sat at Nagash's right hand, and Vlad von Carstein at his left. Gotri Hammerson represented the Zhufbarak, and thus the dwarfs, whilst Duke Jerrod served as emissary for the handful of surviving Bretonnians. Of these, only Hammerson and the vampire ever had much to contribute.

To a degree, Vlad appeared distinctly out of place in King's Glade, his dead flesh surrounded by the lush and verdant splendour of Athel Loren. However peculiar the vampire might have looked in that setting, he flourished, nonetheless. Vlad's sudden death and resurrection had purged his body of Otto Glott's blight. As a result, the vampire was once more at the pinnacle of his physical and mental acuity, and comported himself in so courteous and elegant a manner that few believed the evidence of their eyes and ears. However, Vlad had always been a creature of the civilised world, and those who were surprised at his refinement had forgotten – or did not know – the life and unlife that had brought him to Athel Loren.

Hammerson, by contrast, was ever gruff and plain-spoken – direct, even to the point of rudeness. The dwarf had readily allied himself with the Emperor and Gelt, but had thrown his lot in with the elves far less readily. To fight alongside the undead? That was a step he was ill-prepared to take. Under other circumstances, the dwarf's manner would have been unacceptable, but he was far from alone in his opinions.



Thus, it was one thing to forge such an assemblage, and quite another to have it agree on a course of action. Teclis and Lileath argued that the fate of the eighth wind should be sought out before any action was taken, but could get no other to concur. Gelt and Hammerson argued that the council's first task should be to make contact with those dwarf holds that had sealed themselves beneath the mountains – an idea that met with Tyrion's open scorn. Time was short enough, the prince said, to waste it on seeking the aid of those who had already abandoned the rest of the world to its fate. Tyrion's own desire – to ride out and challenge Archaon's hordes, and retake the Old World – was soundly dismissed as impractical by Gelt and the Emperor. They alone had witnessed the true scale of the Everchosen's armies, and were certain that such a thing could not be done.

Alarielle advocated infusing Athel Loren itself with the Incarnates' power, so that it might once again echo the splendour of ancient days. Such a course, she argued, would make Athel Loren itself a power equal to the Dark Gods, and one which could be harnessed to forever end the threat of Chaos. Unsurprisingly, Nagash refused to involve himself in any strategy that would leave him powerless, and life more rampant than ever. However, his counter-proposal, of harnessing the power of the six winds to seize control of the mindless dead that had walked the earth since his resurrection, was quickly refused. Malekith favoured attempting to free forever the mortal world from the Realm of Chaos. However, the others saw too much risk in such an endeavour, to say nothing of the catastrophe that would likely occur if magic was removed from the world entirely.

Back and forth the arguments raged, with none of the Incarnates ready to yield to their fellows. In truth, the council's disagreements were grounded in more than strategy. Each Incarnate knew that whatever course of action was taken would tacitly declare which amongst them would lead from that moment on, and not one amongst them was ready to cede that power. Even Caradryan, loyal servant that he was, could not offer his support to one of Malekith, Alarielle or Tyrion, knowing that to do so was to defy the others.

The arguments raged for days, with only the barest recesses to attend to other needs. Sometimes, the Incarnates strove in polite terms, though more often with scarcely-

concealed anger. Weary from the cyclical debates, Jerrod excused himself after the second day, leaving a promise that his knights would serve in whatever way they could, once a decision had been reached. The duke walked alone through Athel Loren's glades, uncaring of the danger he placed himself in. He knew that the Lady was with him still, though her voice spoke seldom to him these days.

Meanwhile, Be'lakor journeyed beneath the Eternal Glade. The shadows lay heavy in Mannfred's prison, and it was a simple enough for the First-damned to evade the guards that had been set about the vampire's cage. Mannfred, who had by now lapsed into a wary silence, recognised the first daemon prince at once. Their paths had crossed before, and they had seldom parted without a wary regard for one another.

Mannfred demanded that the daemon free him from the cage – even now, the vampire would not resort to begging – but Be'lakor merely enquired what reward he could expect for doing such a thing. The First-damned hoped to acquire Mannfred's service, but the vampire was too canny to make a slave of himself, no matter what blandishments and gewgaws the daemon offered. He did, however, have a fragment of knowledge to bargain with – one that he had only learned on his arrival at Athel Loren.

The vampire spoke of a goddess, the last of the elven pantheon, mortal and vulnerable in Athel Loren. Mannfred saw at once that he had piqued the daemon's interest, though Be'lakor tried to conceal it. Despite his time in Athel Loren, the First-damned had not recognised Lileath for what she was, and it was a small, sardonic comfort to Mannfred that his own gaze had proved clearer than the daemon's. This, then, was the information Mannfred traded for his freedom. The roots that held him were proof against their captive's magics, but had no defence against a creature outside their thrall. Lashing out with his shadow-sword, Be'lakor cut the vampire free. Then, leaving Mannfred to find his own way out of the sunken halls, the daemon departed to claim his prize.

So hungry and desperate had Mannfred become in captivity that it would have taken a small army to prevent his escape. Soon he stood in the open air once more, glutted on the blood of the kinband that had been set to guard him, and eager to repay his humiliation. Nagash was beyond his reach – at least for now. But Be'lakor, who had thought to make him squirm and beg... Be'lakor was another matter. Taking care to stay hidden from the eyes of spites and spirits, Mannfred made his way through the great forest.

Unaware of Mannfred's intent, Be'lakor all but drooled at the prospect of capturing Lileath. The blood of a goddess, mortal or otherwise, contained no small amount of power, and the First-damned intended to claim it for his own. Moreover, he knew that thirsting Slaanesh would offer a great reward for the delicacy of Lileath's soul.

Unfortunately for the daemon, he soon learned that Lileath seldom left the council of the Incarnates, and he did not dare try to seize her in the presence of so many beings whose power rivalled his own. Thus did he wait for a lull in the council's arguments, and an opportunity.

Whilst Be'lakor waited, Mannfred acted on knowledge that he had kept concealed from the daemon. Some years ago, a brief alliance with Drycha had yielded up the information that the Lady of Bretonnia was actually little more than the elf goddess Ladrielle in disguise. When combined with the more recent knowledge that Ladrielle and Lileath were one and the same, it offered up a chance for one last malevolence.





Thus did Mannfred seek out Jerrod as he roamed the forest, and came unarmed before him. The duke drew his sword as soon as the vampire revealed himself, but Mannfred was at his most calculating and persuasive. With blessed steel at his throat, the vampire imparted to Jerrod the truth that the Lady – the whole foundation of Bretonnia – was nothing more or less than an elf goddess amusing herself at the expense of mortal men; that, in essence, everything that Jerrod had ever valued was little more than a lie.

The duke had not believed Mannfred at first, had accused him of being a serpent, a liar and worse. Nevertheless, something prevented him from ramming his blade home into the vampire's throat. Mannfred was undoubtedly all the things Jerrod had said of him, and very much more besides. However, on this occasion, his words were honest, and that truth resonated with a feeling that had been growing in Jerrod's soul. Lowering his sword, he bade Mannfred flee and never to cross his path again.

The vampire, who could in truth have slain Jerrod and escaped at any time, did as he was instructed, careful to keep a smile from his face until he was far distant. He had divulged Lileath's deception with little concern for the specific consequences – he simply wanted to prevent Be'lakor from claiming his prize. Jerrod was sure to lure Lileath from the council, in order to seek confirmation of Mannfred's words. It was inevitable that Be'lakor would make his attempt to claim the goddess – if, of course, Jerrod didn't kill her first. Mannfred didn't think that terribly likely – the duke was too infected with honour for that – but it would make Be'lakor's attempt more... interesting.

Even Mannfred recognised the pettiness of the events he had set in motion, but he was content that even this small act of malice would hurt those who had believed themselves

his superiors. Deeming there to be no profit in remaining within Athel Loren, Mannfred fled the forest, employing stealth where he could and savagery when subtlety would not serve. On the mountains west of Wydrioth, he passed unnoticed amongst the ranks of Nagash's waiting army, reclaiming Ashigaroth and heading further westward still. The vampire's destiny had strayed far from the course he had set it. Betrayed by Nagash, and with Sylvania lost to him, Mannfred could see only one possible chance for survival, though he was loath to take it. Cursing the day he had ever thought to resurrect Nagash, the vampire veered northwest, towards despoiled Middenheim.



No sooner had Mannfred departed, than Jerrod went directly to King's Glade, and demanded to speak with Lileath. His intrusion provoked outrage amongst the elves, but Lileath quickly defused the anger by quietly agreeing to speak with the duke away from the council. For a moment, Jerrod was humbled by the goddess-made-mortal's grace in the face of his rudeness. Then he remembered the reason he had come, and his embarrassment was quickly swamped by rage.

Be'lakor, who had eyes wherever a shadow fell, knew at once that Lileath had at last left the council, though he did not know why. The First-damned was wary of a trap, and did not immediately take the opportunity. In many ways, he was wise to be circumspect. Though neither Jerrod nor Lileath had guessed at Be'lakor's presence, it was indeed a snare, if a subtle one. So it was that the First-damned came to hear much of what passed between Lileath and Duke Jerrod of lost Quenelles.

As he reached the shadows of the glade, Be'lakor silently congratulated himself on his patience. The place was empty, save for the knight and the goddess. Easier by far to steal her away from one mortal than from a group of demigods.

Even without the drawn sword, the knight's anger would have been obvious. His posture was that of an animal ready to pounce. From deep within the shadows, Be'lakor could taste the sweet aromas of the Bretonnian's anger and despair. By contrast, Lileath's poise was as cold as ice; calm, collected, and thoroughly unrepentant.

'I do not deny it,' the goddess' icy voice matched her chill expression. 'I am proud of what I made of your primitive forebears.'

'You used us,' Jerrod snarled. 'You pushed us around like pieces on a gaming board, then sent the best of us to our deaths. We thought you were our guiding light, but you were a swamp wisp, luring my people to our doom.'

'There was no other choice,' Lileath replied, shaking her head. 'Prophecy was once my gift. I knew of the End Times almost from the first. I needed an army to keep the dark at bay. Asuryan would never have countenanced the forging of a new race, not after what was provoked by the creation of the elves.' Be'lakor watched her turn away briefly, then snap back to face the knight again. 'I chose your forefathers to serve a greater goal. I gave them purpose. Was that so wrong? Without the codes and laws that I gave them, your ancestors would have wiped each other out, or else been trampled into the mud by greenskins. You all owe me your lives, everything you are. I make no apology for collecting on that debt.'

The knight gave a low, animal shout that was a mix of anger and sorrow. He looked at the sword in his grasp, and at the woman before him, plainly tempted to strike her down. Be'lakor's lips parted in a needle-toothed smile. The human's despair was sweet on his tongue. Not so for Lileath, if her sudden shift of expression were to be believed.

'The world we know is doomed,' the goddess said, her voice sorrowful, pleading, 'but that does not mean that hope is entirely lost. There is a world – a Haven – where life may yet continue. Without Bretonnia's sacrifices, I could not have created it. Surely you acknowledge that is worth something?'

Be'lakor hissed with satisfaction. His bargain with Mannfred had served him well. Not only had it delivered a goddess into his grasp, it had revealed the existence of new world – one he would rule in the name of the gods.

'Listen to me,' Lileath continued, stepping towards the knight. 'This war was never something that could have been won. Your brothers – those who died for the Empire – a part of them lives on in the Haven. After all, what is a knight, but one who makes sacrifices for others?'

Be'lakor saw the knight's empty hand clench and unclench. When the human spoke, it was in a voice summoned from a long way off, and taut with emotion.

'That might be a consolation, had you not been the author of that creed,' he growled.

Lileath knelt, her skirts pooling on the thick bed of leaves behind her. 'If you do not believe me, then kill me for what I have done. I only ask that you hold true to your promise, and fight alongside the Incarnates when the time comes.

In answer, Jerrod took his sword in a two-handed grip, and levelled the point at Lileath's neck.

Jerrod never truly knew whether he would have gone through with his act of murder. Certainly the fury and the sense of betrayal rushing through his blood urged him to do so, but some semblance of honour held him back. The sword wavered, then steadied. It was at that moment that Be'lakor – fearing that his prize was about to be slaughtered before him – burst from the shadows. The sight of the daemon at last forced Jerrod to a decision – or at the very least drove the duke's instincts to take over.

Be'lakor bore down upon Lileath, writhing darkness trailing behind him. Jerrod took a long step to stand between them, dropping his sword down into a guard pose as he did so. Be'lakor did not slow, but lashed out with his shadow-sword, thinking to cut down the arrogant mortal who stood before him. Jerrod's blessed blade gleamed as it intercepted the stroke, shining steel clanging home against a sword of misery and deception. The First-damned swept his wings back, climbing briefly away. Then he dove back down with a sibilant hiss, his shadow-sword outstretched like a spear.

Lileath had regained her feet now, and raised her staff to send bolts of light lancing towards the First-damned. They passed through Be'lakor's form like arrows punching through fog, the daemon's body swirling apart and back together where they passed.

Ignoring the goddess, Be'lakor swept towards her protector. Again, Jerrod parried, turning aside the strike before it could pierce his heart. This time, however, Be'lakor lashed out with his free hand. The talons raked across Jerrod's exposed face, ripping three bloody lines across his skin. The duke slammed into the ground, skidding through the mud. Blood streamed from his wounds, and from an eye that would never see again. Jerrod moaned with pain and tried to stand, but his arms had lost their strength and he collapsed into the leaves.

Be'lakor dropped to the ground beside the twitching duke. The First-damned regarded him for a moment, then brought a clawed heel down upon Jerrod's left calf. The duke screamed as the force of the blow buckled his armour, pulverising the flesh beneath and snapping the bones. Satisfied with his work, Be'lakor swept around and closed once more on Lileath.

The goddess-made-mortal sensed, rather than saw, the daemon bear down upon her. Lileath's eyes were closed, her lips moving silently as she wove a spell of banishment. Spirals of glowing white energy plucked at Be'lakor's charging form, and wisps of his shadow diffused into nothing. But the First-damned was older than any exorcism, and could not be so easily cast into the Realm of Chaos by the young magics of the elves. He came on, his pace scarcely slowed.

The shadow-sword lashed out, cutting deep into Lileath's forearm, and striking the staff from her hands. Be'lakor hissed as droplets of the goddess' blood spattered across his arm, and steam began to rise from where it had touched. Mortal though Lileath now was, traces of her divine power still lingered in her blood.

Defenceless now before the daemon, Lileath backed away. Be'lakor kept pace, and lunged forward to seize her. The First-damned's claws brushed her arm, but did not close, for at that moment Be'lakor lurched forward with a terrible scream of agony. Behind the daemon, Jerrod released his grip on the sword he had thrust deep into the daemon's back, and collapsed once again, this time lapsing into fevered unconsciousness. Be'lakor gave another bellow of pain as he twisted the Bretonnian's sword free, a spill of dark blood flowing from the wound. He turned back to his intended victim, but Jerrod had bought much-needed time. An ear-splitting roar sounded from high above as Seraphon plunged through the canopy and knocked Be'lakor sprawling.

Little went entirely unnoticed beneath the eaves of Athel Loren. Most sights were overlooked, as the spirits of the forest misinterpreted what they had seen. However, Be'lakor's attack was something not easily ignored by even the most obtuse spirit. Even as Jerrod and Lileath battled the First-damned, spites had flitted through the undergrowth, carrying word to Alarielle. The Everqueen knew she could not cover the distance swiftly enough to intervene, but others had come in her stead.

Be'lakor regained his footing, Lileath briefly forgotten as he judged his next move. Arrogant to a fault, the First-damned believed that he could still triumph over one Incarnate and yet escape with his prize. Yet even before the daemon could act on his decision, there was a blur of brilliant white light and a thunder of hooves as Malhandir bore Tyrion into the glade.

At last, Be'lakor realised that he had lost. Two of the Incarnates he had sought to evade were already at Lileath's side, and others would surely be close behind. Accepting his failure for the second time in as many weeks, the First-damned melted back into the shadows, and fled the glade. Or rather, he tried to. With a triumphant snort, Malekith stretched forth his power and tore the First-damned free from his shrouded sanctuary.

Be'lakor gave a snarl of confusion as he realised that his escape route was closed. Before the daemon could recover, Malekith shifted his attention from the shadows of the glade to those that made up the daemon's body. Before Be'lakor realised what had occurred, the Eternity King held him fast, unable even to move. Malekith could have not held the daemon forever – even the Eternity King's will was finite. Yet it was long enough. With Be'lakor thus held immobile, Tyrion wove a net of pure light to shackle the First-damned. Be'lakor, who had thought to seize a goddess, was now himself a prisoner.







Jerrod lived, though without the skill of Athel Loren's healers, he would have surely died. With his immediate hurts tended, the duke was borne like a hero back to the vast glade where his knights and the other refugees from Averheim were encamped. At first, there were voices raised in exultation at Jerrod's deeds. No truer test of chivalry could there be than to stand against a daemon in a damsel's defence – even if that damsel were an elf. However, those voices were quickly stilled as the one-eyed duke recounted what he had learnt of Lileath, and the truth of Bretonnia's founding. As the evening passed into night, the dwarfs and the warriors of the Empire noted a shift in their allies' demeanour, though they did not know what had caused it.

Her own wounds treated, Lileath returned to the council shortly after. Her mind was far afield. In her haste to assuage Jerrod's guilt, she had spoken too freely of the Haven. She did not know whether or not Be'lakor had heard her words, but had to assume that he had done so. With that assumption, a rare paralysis had crept into the goddess-made-mortal's mind. If the daemon escaped, he would act upon what he had heard. If he was slain, his immortal essence would flee to the Realm of Chaos, and there surely parley his knowledge to some advantage. Either way, the Chaos Gods would become aware of the Haven's existence, and all she had sacrificed would amount to nothing. Caught in a dilemma created by her own carelessness, Lileath spoke little.

Had it been left to Tyrion and Malekith, Be'lakor would have been destroyed in the moment of his capture. However, Gelt had suggested that the daemon, if seized, could be interrogated. The wizard had been aware that much of the Incarnates' inability to decide upon a course of action was due to their lack of knowledge concerning Archaon's intent. Despite the good sense of Gelt's suggestion, the elves would have ignored him. They didn't account the wizard to be their equal, despite the power he wielded. However, the Emperor had raised his voice in support of Gelt's idea. This, in turn, had won over Tyrion, and through Tyrion, Alarielle. With his Everqueen thus swayed, Malekith had reluctantly agreed to temporarily spare the daemon from banishment.



However, the Eternity King had made no promise that the daemon's captivity would be without pain. Thus, when an escort of Black Guard dragged Be'lakor before the council of the Incarnates, he was battered and bloodied. The tip of one horn had been sheared off by a sword's strike, and both wings hung limp at his back. Tyrion's net of light had faded, but had been replaced by shackles of silver and starlight, and the First-damned was helpless in their grasp. Alarielle exchanged a long look with Malekith, and then with Tyrion, both of which were indecipherable to most of the council. Gelt took it as a reprimand for the captive's harms, but he was wrong. The wounds had been inflicted at Alarielle's command, as proof of what awaited any lack of cooperation. The Everqueen had no sympathy for the daemon – what compassion she possessed did not extend to the servants of Chaos. Only Nagash recognised the truth, and he relished the fact that so perfect a soul as Alarielle's yet harboured a fragment of darkness.

The interrogation went more easily than any could have expected. Be'lakor had little reason to remain silent. In truth, the First-damned's wounds hurt him little – he was too old a fiend to be overly troubled by physical pain. However, Be'lakor did not doubt that the likes of Malekith and Nagash could conjure up torments that even a daemon could not withstand. Moreover, the First-damned cared little if Archaon's plan became known to his enemies. Indeed, he practically welcomed the opportunity for indiscretion. Twice now, the daemon had sought to pre-empt Archaon's success with his own, and both times he had failed. Be'lakor therefore saw little profit in remaining silent – especially if the inevitable outcome was to be banished to the Realm of Chaos in time to see the Dark Gods raise Archaon up in his rightful place. Better by far, or so the First-damned reckoned, to betray the Everchosen's goal.

Thus did Be'lakor weave a tale that horrified all who heard it. The daemon made no attempt to lie, for no falsehood could have appalled more readily than the truth. With sibilant tongue, the First-damned spoke of how the Chaos Gods were not so directionless as many mortal scholars believed them to be. Archaon did not seek victory through the Empire's destruction. After all, much as the Empire reckoned itself a mighty power in the world, Be'lakor crowed, it was trivial compared to those that had come before it. The First-damned leered at the Emperor, seeking a reaction, but the other simply returned the daemon's gaze in silence.

The gods cared little for the fall of nations, though they dined well enough on the slaughter provoked by such. Middenheim was the goal. Indeed, it had always been the goal. Far beneath the city, deep within the Fauschlag rock, lay an artefact from an earlier age. It was so old that its original purpose had been forgotten long ago. However, this mattered little,

as the gods did not covet the artefact for its created function – they cared only for the power it contained. If the proper rituals were performed, the artefact would detonate, creating a rift to rival those found at the world's poles. This revelation was horrendous enough, for it meant the destruction of not only the Empire, but most of the Old World also. Yet the gods were not content merely with the Old World's destruction. These were the End Times, the Rhana Dandra of elven myth, and their designs went much further than that.

Nagash recognised the implications first, but made no move to speak of them. Instead, it was left to Teclis to explain. He did so in hushed tones, horrified at the meaning of his words. The loremasters of Hoeth, he said, had theorised that the world had survived the coming of Chaos only because the polar rifts had formed a sort of equilibrium between the tremendous forces at play. If a new rift burst into being in Middenheim, with none to balance it on the far side of the globe, the world would be torn apart and dragged into the Realm of Chaos. Were the new rift to be birthed, the end was inevitable. The cataclysm might happen all at once, or it could take years, but the world that all had known up to that point would exist no more.

Teclis fell silent, perhaps contemplating how his theft of Ulric's flame had caused Middenheim to fall swifter than it should. No one sought to fill the void. All trusted the truth of what they had heard, but no one knew precisely what was to be done about it. Middenheim was a long march away, through territory overrun by Archaon's horde. In the past, the elves could have used the worldroots – the conduits that bound Athel Loren to many other forests – to come within striking distance of the city. However, those that led into the Empire had withered and died as Chaos had swept over those lands. Any army attempting to reach the city – let alone capture it in a siege – would have to be many times larger than the forces the council could bring to bear.

It was Lileath who at last broke the silence. The goddess was shaking as she stood to address the council, her face so immobile that it could only be so in order to contain some wellspring of desperate emotion. Her voice hard and cold, she argued that the impossible would have to be accomplished – the Incarnates would have to go to Middenheim and either seize the artefact, or destroy it, before Archaon could bring about the Dark Gods' plan. When Malekith protested that such a campaign would take too long to prosecute, Lileath spoke of using magic to cover the distance. Gelt, who had lately used such sorceries to escape Averheim, pointed out that to transport so many, so far, could not be done – it would require so much magic as to risk opening the very rift they all feared. Nonetheless, Lileath would not be swayed – and no other could conceive a better plan. Reluctantly, the council entered recess, so that proper consideration could be given.



However, one last act was performed before the council dissolved. Be'lakor had wrought great harm upon Athel Loren, had sought to deliver the last of the elven pantheon into the grip of his dark masters. As punishment, the First-damned was imprisoned in a perfect ruby, plucked from Alarielle's crown. There he would languish, unable to escape to the Realm of Chaos until the ending of the world. Of course, unless the Incarnates could find a way to forestall Archaon's plan, that time would not be so far off.

Teclis found Lileath on the northern border of King's Glade. The air was thick with the dry smell of changing seasons, the flowers withering as winter prepared to overtake that part of the forest.

'Will you not tell me what troubles you?' the mage asked, moving to the goddess' side.

Lileath answered without turning. 'I told you that we could win, and we cannot.'

'You did not know.'

She laughed, the notes bitter in the still air. 'I knew from the first. What manner of prophet would I be if I had not?'

Teclis felt a sudden chill. 'Then you lied to me. Why?'

'For the same reason that *you* lied: it was necessary. You told me once that you could not fight without hope. I gave you that hope, because I needed you.'

'Then... everything I have done – the friends and allies I have doomed – was it for nothing?'

Nausea settled in Teclis' gut. For months, he had tried to tell himself it had all been in service of a greater good, and to find out that it had not...

Lileath turned to face him at last. 'No. Not at first,' she was speaking hurriedly, the words clipped and sorrowful. 'By their sacrifice, I wrought a Haven that would have seen the elves continue when all else fell into darkness. And I succeeded.' She blinked away a sudden tear. 'But I cannot feel the Haven any longer. The Dark Gods have found it... My beloved, my daughter, my hope for the future – all have been lost.'

Teclis backed away, horrified.

'I am sorry,' Lileath said, turning away. 'I should have been honest from the first. I only hope that you can forgive me.'

'Perhaps,' croaked Teclis. '...but not today.'

Then he fled, before despair could overwhelm him.

Athel Loren was shrouded in a sombre mood that night, but nowhere was it bleaker than where Lileath trod. Even as Be'lakor had confessed Archaon's plan, she had felt the Haven's presence slip from her mind. For a time, she had clung to the hope that it had merely been her fatigue that had hidden it from her thoughts, but each passing moment had proved that hope a delusion. The Haven was gone, snuffed out like a guttering candle by the all-pervasive dark of Chaos.

The goddess laid the blame for the Haven's destruction at the First-damned's feet – and at Jerrod's. All of her precautions, all of her plans, had been rendered into ash through misplaced guilt. She had raised the Bretonnians up out of barbarism, had given them a purpose and a cause. The mortal knight had no place questioning her.

Yet no matter how she rationalised what had come to pass, Lileath knew that only she was to blame for the evil Be'lakor had wrought. Arrogance had ever been the failing of god and elf alike, so it was of little surprise that it had corrupted her also. Still it was a hard burden to bear.

Besides Jerrod, Teclis was the only other Lileath had told of the Haven, and then only after it had been lost. The mage's bitterness was equal to Lileath's own, his sense of betrayal every bit as deep as Jerrod's. Through blind adherence to the goddess' schemes, he had become as cold and calculating as she, seeing only the destination, and not thinking of those harmed along the way. Had the Haven not been lost, it would still have been a heavy burden to bear. As matters stood, his hopes were dashed, and his mind teetered on the brink of despair.



Elsewhere, a bandaged and scarred Duke Jerrod led the Bretonnians westward through the forest. The Emperor had tried to convince him to remain, but to no avail. Nonetheless, the two had parted as friends, bound together by their similar burdens and the many battles that they had fought and bled in together.

Every heart in the knightly column was full of anger and sorrow, unable to forgive Lileath for her manipulations. Bretonnian society had been founded upon worship of the Lady, upon the tales of Gilles and other chivalric champions. With the lie callously exposed, they were lost, rudderless in the roiling tides of the End Times. The knights were unsure of their purpose – they knew only that they would no longer battle alongside the elves and the goddess who had used them so.

Alarielle could have prevented Jerrod from leaving, could have twisted the paths of the forest back upon themselves, but she did not. The Everqueen did not know what had transpired to alter the Bretonnians' outlook, but knew too well the danger posed by reluctant allies.

Tyrion found the Emperor on the edge of the Winterglade. The other was gazing up through the bare branches, watching the stars as they wheeled their stately way across the heavens.

'They are so certain in their course,' the Emperor said, without turning. 'I wish that I was.'

'Jerrod has gone,' Tyrion said heavily, 'and my brother will talk to no one, not even I. Everything is happening as you said it would. How did you know?'

The Emperor at last tore his gaze away from the skies. 'I didn't, not in detail. But dark days have a way of causing long-buried poisons to seep out, and your race has always been too deeply mired in manipulation.'

Tyrion scowled. 'Those are bold words, for a man wearing a skin not his own.'

'I make no apology,' the Emperor replied evenly. 'We have few enough advantages, and I shall not yield this one – slender though it is – without good cause. My intent is as I claimed – otherwise you would not keep my secret, would you?'

Tyrion said nothing, and the Emperor nodded. 'Good. I spent many lifetimes sealed within that vortex; I would hate to think it was for nothing. At least we know the shape of the Dark Gods' plans. We shall have to hope that we are equal to defeating them.'

'I see little cause for that hope.'

'Meekly spoken, for an elf recently returned from the dead,' the Emperor rejoined.

With an effort, Tyrion brought his temper under control. 'It will take more than clever words to survive the coming doom.'

'Indeed it will. That is why you and I must persuade the others to go to Middenheim.'

'That city lies many weeks' march away, through territory swarming with foes. Do you honestly believe that we can prevail against such odds?'

'I will not sit back and wait for death.'

'Nor shall I,' Tyrion reluctantly allowed. 'To Middenheim, then?'

The Emperor nodded. 'There is no other way.'

When the council of Incarnates reconvened at dawn the next day, Lileath again made the argument that Middenheim was the key, but this time she did so to an assemblage already won over to her point of view. In the still watches of the night, each of the Incarnates had reached the inescapable conclusion that the Fauschlag artefact would have to be neutralised or destroyed somehow – even if it cost the lives of all who made the attempt.

Gotri Hammerson, who had anticipated another day of acrimonious indecision, let out a sardonic cheer, uncaring of the chill expressions this provoked on the faces of the elves. Teclis greeted the decision with a wintery smile. Vlad von Carstein did so with a raised eyebrow, as if the matter was neither here nor there to him. Arkhan, as ever, gave little sign he had even heard any of what had been said.

Durthu, Naestra and Arahan had left before first light, in order to aid Imrik in repelling the beastman warherds that moved closer to King's Glade by the day. Less than a league to the north, he fought his bloodiest battle yet against the encroaching warherds. It seemed that no matter how many of the corrupted creatures the prince slew, there were always thousands more ready to throw themselves onto elven steel. It was less a clash of armies, and more a battle of two nations locked in a doomed embrace. The Silvale Glade stank of blood, and of the smoke from bonfires lit to burn the tainted flesh.

The beastmen were wild with madness, the frenzied bloodlust of the minotaurs spread to every gor and ungor that prowled beneath the eaves of Athel Loren. The elves were weary, but could not – and would not – retreat for the rest they sorely needed. To do so was to surrender King's Glade to the Children of Chaos, and that was too steep a price for a few hours' respite.

For days, the beastmen had hurled themselves into death, a sacrifice of blood and bone meant to attract the favour of wrathful Khorne. Alas for the Children of Chaos, the Lord of Skulls' gaze was fixed ever on Middenheim. However, another had seen their deeds and found a way to bind them to his own purpose. Ka'Bandha, despatched to claim the Emperor's skull, had searched for a path that would carry his Blood Hunt into the heart of Athel Loren. At last, he had found one.

With a deafening thunderclap, a rift burst into being, and the blood-soaked meadows of Silvale Glade ran like water drawn into a whirlpool. Beastmen exulted in crude tongues as they were swept away by the unseen tide, rejoicing at their gods' embrace. Elves attempted to scramble away as the ground plucked and grasped at their feet. Thousands perished in those moments, dragged down into the whirl of blood and darkness than had sprung up at the glade's heart.

The beastman assault was ended in that moment, but now another sprang forth. Horned figures burst from the roiling firmament, hissing crude challenges as they threw themselves at the survivors of Imrik's army. Baying daemon-hounds prowled alongside, snarling and slavering as their powerful strides ate up the distance between them and their prey. And behind all of them came the murderous, winged silhouettes of Ka'Bandha and his lieutenants.

Imrik bellowed orders as the daemons advanced, but his lines were too rent, too disordered to offer meaningful resistance. The Blood Hunt smashed through Imrik's lines like a red wind, leaving savaged dead in their wake. Had they so chosen, they could have torn the dragon prince's forces to ruin in that moment, but they were hunting greater prey. With a triumphant roar, Ka'Bandha urged the Blood Hunt on to King's Glade, and towards the council of Incarnates.



THE COUNCIL OF INCARNATES

It had been many ages since so much mortal power had been gathered in one place. Indeed, perhaps such an assembly had never happened before. Yet for all their might, and purported common cause, it remained to be seen if the council of Incarnates could act with one purpose.



MALEKITH

Even through recent events, Malekith had dared hope that the Rhana Dandra could be averted or, failing that, survived. Like Teclis, each scrap of evidence to the contrary had driven him into an ever-deepening malaise. However, it was not despair that threatened to overwhelm Malekith, but rage. He was haunted daily by the memories of wasted years, and of sacrifices and struggles that would now seem to come to naught. Now, he seemed again more like the Witch King he had been, than the Eternity King he had become.



ALARIELLE

Alarielle, more than any, recognised the full horror of the Blood Hunt's assault. Her connection with the forest had grown deeper as the power of life had wedded itself to her soul, and the manifestation of a Chaos rift within its bounds had hurt her terribly. Yet that same pain had awoken a steely determination within the Everqueen's soul. She no longer had any fear of the Rhana Dandra, just an unending hatred for those who sought to bring it about.



CARADRYAN

In truth, Caradryan did not consider himself the equal of any on the council of Incarnates. He would have gladly given up the mantle of fire, and responsibility for what was to come, had it not been that to do so would have been an act of great dishonour. So it was that he took to the field of battle alongside the Incarnates for the sake of the world.



TYRION

Tyrion was glad of the opportunity for battle. Since his return from the dead, he had seen and heard much that defied belief, or overturned everything he had known in the years before. To be allied with Malekith, whilst at the same time unable to trust either Alarielle or Teclis, was almost more than the prince could bear.



BALTHASAR GELT

Still buoyed by his escape from the influence of necromancy, Gelt was determined to serve the needs of the world however he could. He, alone of the Incarnates, was prepared to trust almost all of his fellows. The wizard had dealt with elves many times over the years, and fancied that he had some measure of their fragile spirits. Nagash, however, was another matter. The Great Necromancer was wholly bereft of the strange nobility that appeared to drive Vlad, and Gelt was ever watchful for his betrayal.

THE EMPEROR

In those dark days, the Emperor alone believed in the possibility of a lasting victory. It was that which drove him on through the council's arguments, and the increasingly desperate portents for the days ahead. The Emperor believed that he could count on Tyrion to do the right thing, for they had walked similar roads to Athel Loren. The others, however, he was ever watchful of. In particular, the Emperor feared that the elves were not ready to make the sacrifices that might be required of them, and that by the time they were, it would be too late.





NAGASH

Nagash loathed that he had been driven into an alliance with mortals – all the more so since Vlad seemed to have accepted this fate so willingly, thus revealing that the vampire would surely at some point turn on his master, as had too many of the Mortarchs. Nonetheless, Nagash's dedication to the cause at hand was total – at least until another way revealed itself.

Malekith, the Eternity King

Alarielle,
Incarnate of Life

Tyrion,
Incarnate of Light

Caradryan,
Incarnate of Fire

Balthasar Gelt,
Incarnate of Metal

Nagash,
Supreme Lord of the Undead

The Emperor Ascendant

Arkhan the Black,
Mortarch of Sacrament

Vlad von Carstein,
Mortarch of Shadow

Gotri Hammerson
Runelord

Teclis

Lileath
Spellweaver

THE BLOOD HUNT

Ka'Bandha took no chances when bringing the Blood Hunt to Athel Loren. Failure would mean not only disgrace before Archaon – which the Bloodthirster could have borne – but also before almighty Khorne, which would likely have led to Ka'Bandha's demotion, or worse.



KA'BANDHA

Ka'Bandha had served the Lord of Skulls for time out of mind, rising from the lowly ranks of the sixth host through many deeds of carnage. He was no mindless slaughterer, having long ago realised that careful strategy could make the blood flow far more freely than random rage ever could. By the time he came to Averheim, Ka'Bandha aspired to the exalted ranks of the second host, and for that he needed to earn Khorne's favour like never before. For that reason, and that reason alone, he was content to feign service to Archaon. There could be no greater gift to the Lord of Skulls than the blood of not just the Empire, but an entire world.

KHORAX

There is no absolute rank in the legions of Khorne, no title or station that cannot be claimed by slaughtering the one who holds it. In his more lucid moments, Khorax longed to supplant Ka'Bandha as master of the Blood Hunt. However, the ever-burning fury that filled Khorax made it all but impossible for the Bloodthirster of Insensate Rage to focus his actions on any kind of coherent challenge. Still, ambition had spurred Khorax to many a reckless hunt, as his heavily-scarred body attested, for he expended what little patience he possessed on awaiting the opportunity to depose Ka'Bandha.





THE SKARADRIM

Ka'Bandha's monstrous lieutenants were Bloodthirsters of Unfettered Fury, warrior daemons of the eighth rank who fought with axe and lash. These daemons had no hosts of their own, for they had known defeat in Khorne's sight, and thus had been stripped of the right to lead. Khorne's favour, once lost, is not easily regained, but the Blood Hunt offered a chance, to those determined enough to grasp it. The daemon who slew the hunt's prey, and took his skull as a trophy, would be guaranteed a fleeting moment in Khorne's gaze – time enough, perhaps, for squandered glory to be savagely reclaimed.



Ka'Bandha
Wrath of Khorne Bloodthirster

Khorax
Bloodthirster of Insensate Rage

The Skaradrim
Fourteen Bloodthirsters of Unfettered Fury

The Huntskards
Fifteen warbands of Bloodletters, one warband of Bloodcrushers

The Hounds
Eight vast packs of Flesh Hounds

The Barbadax
Eight batteries of Skull Cannons

THE HUNTSKARDS

Each Huntskard warband answered to one of the Bloodthirsters, and was driven to claim skulls not for itself, but for its wrathful master. Though they might have appeared to be the handlers of the Blood Hunt's hounds, the Huntskards were merely trackers of a different sort. Their ragged intelligence more than compensated for how dim their senses were in comparison to those of their charges – the Huntskards knew how mortal quarry thought, and could outguess a prey's intentions in a way that no hound ever could.



THE HOUNDS

According to the darkest legend, the flesh hounds of the Blood Hunt were once mortal hunters who had fallen into savagery. Such men no longer sought quarry for survival, or for justice, but did so simply in order to spill blood, and sport the trophies of their kills. The legend goes on to tell that such men lost their minds long before they lost their lives, and dwelled as cannibalistic hermits in the wilderness. Certainly, no trace of intelligence lies behind their coal-black eyes any longer – only a vicious and abiding hunger for pulsing flesh.



THE BARBADAX

Ka'Bandha loathed the skull cannons of the Barbadax, deeming them too slow for a true hunt. Yet the Barbadax had been part of the Blood Hunt since the long-ago times when Khorne himself had guided the pack, and to part with tradition was therefore to challenge the Lord of Skulls himself. Thus Ka'Bandha grudgingly retained the skull cannons as part of his Blood Hunt. Nonetheless, he stubbornly overlooked the many times they had been pivotal in slaughtering a chosen prey, and forever insisted they be allowed to engage the quarry only once the rest of the hunt had squandered its opportunity.

THE BLOOD HUNT UNLEASHED

A ring of elven warriors stood sentinel upon the perimeter of King's Glade, but it was a thin guard, appointed more out of ceremonial need than to meet any other. The fury of the daemon onslaught swept it away in an eye-blink. The leading bloodletters tore through the outer guardians without slowing, leaving beheaded and blood-sodden corpses strewn through the ferns and brambles. Howling their victory, the daemons loped on, hungry for greater foes. Ka'Bandha had warned that no other than he should claim the Emperor's head, but his hunters could smell prey in the glade beyond. There were skulls aplenty to be had. Howling with murderous anticipation, the daemons sprang out of the shadows and into the council glade...

...and hissed their last as Tyrion's cleansing fire burnt them to ash.

The daemons' arrival in Silvale had been accompanied by a rippling wave through the winds of magic. For most, this had manifested as a sudden pressure in their minds. However, Alarielle, tied as she was to the forest's agony, had been overwhelmed. Tyrion had reached the Everqueen's side the moment she collapsed. Though the warning came too late for the sentinels on the glade's perimeter, the council of Incarnates would not be taken so ill prepared. Shouts rang out as the Incarnates called for their steeds, or issued orders to their companions – orders that went largely unacknowledged. Allies though they might have been, none amongst the Incarnates was yet prepared to accept another's authority.

Even before the ashes of Tyrion's victims had settled, a chorus of howls announced the arrival of a second, larger wave of daemons in the undergrowth beyond. This time, the creatures came from all sides, their strides eating up the distance between them and their prey. Black blades glistened as the bloodletters hurled themselves forward, hisses turning to death-screams as the magics of the Incarnates rose to greet them.

Tyrion made his stand next to the Everqueen's unconscious form. A nimbus of searing light played about his head and rippled from his outstretched blade, scouring blood-red horrors from the mortal world wherever it touched. Beside Tyrion, lightning crackled from Teclis' staff. Where it touched daemonic flesh, the smouldering victims were hurled back into the press of their fellows. But still the daemons came. Back to back the brothers fought, their differences of recent years temporarily forgotten, the old instincts as sharp as ever.

To his north, a wall of fire sprang up at Caradryan's call, catching a score of bloodletters mid-leap, and burning them to cinders. Four of the daemons survived their passage. Though their skin was afire, they bore down on Caradryan, swords glinting. The captain held his ground, and the Phoenix Blade swept out, beheading one daemon and hacking deep into another's chest. The surviving pair sprang together, bearing Caradryan to the ground, teeth snapping for his throat. There was a sudden screech from above as Ashtari entered the fray, plunging from the skies like a flaming comet. The firebird's talons locked around both of Caradryan's attackers, tearing them away from their intended victim before pinwheeling them across the glade. Caradryan sprang to his feet as Ashtari swept back around towards him, and he vaulted into the phoenix's saddle a moment later.

Few would have blamed the Emperor and Gotri Hammerson for holding back from that fight. With the power of Azyr stripped from him, the Emperor's might was but a shadow of the godlike beings who battled around him. Hammerson was arguably even more outclassed, never having possessed an Incarnate's power. Nevertheless, the two made no attempt to shelter behind their allies, but fought together in the glade's heart. Hammerson had taken a deep hellblade-wound to the shoulder in the early moments of the fight, but the runesmith fought gruffly on, repaying that injury with every sweep of his staff. Already the Reikland runefang's steel was caked in daemon ichor, the hammerhead of the runesmith's staff flecked with daemonic matter. Deathclaw's plumage was stained black almost to his shoulders; gobbets of unnatural flesh trailed from his talons and beak.

A short distance away, Arkhan the Black watched impassively as another howling pack of bloodletters hurled themselves at the Emperor and the runesmith. Thus far, the Liche King had been relatively untroubled by the daemonic assault. His master, Nagash, had no need of assistance, and if a daemon strayed too close, Arkhan simply urged Razarak skyward, beyond the zenith of even the most desperate leap. The Liche King did not much care for the mortals his master feigned alliance with. He therefore saw little reason to expend his strength in their defence, save for the fact it might otherwise earn Nagash's disfavour. With a ghost of a sigh, Arkhan drew upon the death magic that clustered close around his master, and prepared to intervene.

A knot of howling bloodletters sprang forward, tongues darting as they came. Hammerson knew there were too many for him to fight alone. There was a screech from somewhere above, and the runesmith felt a sudden breeze as Deathclaw swept out a massive wing to scatter the daemons like broken dolls.

Still more daemons charged forward, undismayed by their fellows' fall. As they sprang towards him, Hammerson's gaze drifted up to where the cadaverous liche sat motionless upon his hovering mount.

Hammerson bellowed for Arkhan's assistance, already knowing his words were futile. The undead sorcerer had done nothing to help so far – there was no reason to expect him to act otherwise now. As the runesmith had predicted, the Liche King gave no response. Deathclaw's screeching and the bloodletters' snarls were the only sound. Shaking a fist, the runesmith hurled curses at the liche for his apparent indifference to the dwarf's situation.

Then the daemons were upon him, and what little breath he had was needed for fighting. Hammerson smashed two to the ground before being slammed back himself. The runesmith fell heavily onto the glade's floor, his staff slipping from his grasp. He tried to right himself, but the bloodletters swarmed over him. A blow from a bunched fist sent one of the daemons reeling, but others pinned him down, tongues flicking in anticipation of the blood soon to flow.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant green flash, and a stink of old and musty caverns. Hammerson heard a bloodletter hiss in pain, and felt the weight that was pinning him down vanish. Scrambling to his feet, the runesmith kicked a dying daemon clear, feeling its strangely brittle skin crumble beneath his boot. Hammerson looked up, and found his stare matched by one from Arkhan the Black. The inscrutable liche held his gaze for a moment, then looked away without comment.

Elsewhere, snarling daemon-hounds burst from the undergrowth. They passed effortlessly through the searing shard-blizzard Gelt summoned in their path, their brass collars glowing a dull red, sapping the magic from the air around them. Lileath joined her magics to Gelt's, and the molten storm intensified, overcoming the flesh hounds' defences. Ear-splitting howls rang out as dozens of the beasts were torn apart, but more surged on, flanks streaked with ichor.

One flesh hound burst clear of the shard-storm with a triumphant howl, and loped towards Gelt. The wizard reached desperately into Quicksilver's saddlebags, his straining fingers settling on a small glass vial. The throw that followed was guided more by luck than by aim. The stoppered tube shattered against the flesh hound's forehead as the daemon sprang forward. At once the daemon's triumphant roar changed into a howl of pain, as the corrosive liquid within splashed across its brow. Gelt flung himself across Quicksilver's neck, and the blinded, dying flesh hound passed above him, its lifeless claws tearing his cloak to ribbons, but leaving no mark upon his flesh.

Lileath was faring worse. With Gelt distracted, the shard-storm had ebbed, and the flesh hounds were pressing through. For the goddess Lileath had once been, defeat would have been unthinkable. She could have confronted a hundred such creatures and swept them aside with but the merest of thoughts. However, that time was long past. Even one flesh hound was a dire threat for the mortal Lileath now was. The closest daemon was within moments of pouncing, and dozens more pressed close behind. The goddess swept her staff out, its head slamming into a flesh hound's slavering maw. Splinters of black teeth sprayed from the beast's ruined mouth. Still it came forward, its movements growing slower and more deliberate as it gathered to pounce. Others came behind, glistening from scores of small wounds. As the lead hound's muscles coiled for it to lunge, Lileath tightened her grip on her staff, and prepared for a fight she knew she could not win.





Salvation came from an unlikely source. In the moment the flesh hound pounced, there was a blur of motion to Lileath's right. A clawed hand snatched the daemon out of the air, and dashed it to the ground in one smooth motion. A heartbeat later, Vlad von Carstein's thin blade rammed home through the flesh hound's throat, then ripped clear to cut another leaping daemon in two. At once, a howl rose up as the rest of the pack converged on the vampire, but he was a prey beyond them, as elusive as smoke on the wind. Six more hounds fell to Blood Drinker's precise strikes before Gelt was able to breathe new life into his shard-storm. Not one of the beasts had managed to mark Vlad in return.

Lileath shot the vampire a questioning look, uncertain as to why was he fighting at her side, rather than in his master's defence. Vlad shrugged, and cocked his head backwards. Lileath followed the motion, and she saw Nagash standing alone at the heart of a writhing, amethyst vortex. Withered daemon corpses were strewn around the Great Necromancer's swirling robes; fragments of broken bone and desiccated skin danced upon the unnatural winds he had called into being. Despite herself, Lileath shuddered. Alone of the Incarnates, Nagash needed no assistance from his allies. In that moment, the goddess-made-mortal wondered at the wisdom of allowing the Great Necromancer to seize greater power.

Through it all, Malekith ranted and railed like a madman. Seraphon swooped through the glade, and the Eternity King sent dark fire coursing wherever the daemons clustered. These spells bore as much of Malekith's rage as his voice. Blackfire constructs of the Eternity King's likeness howled across the glade, immolating everything they touched. Two elven realms had been destroyed from beneath his imperious rule, and Malekith was determined not to lose a third. He scarcely noted the fate of his

allies, did not even glance at the fallen Everqueen. A bottomless abyss of rage had opened up beneath him, and the Eternity King teetered dangerously on the brink.

On the Incarnates and their allies fought, undaunted by the savagery of their foes. Mere minutes had passed since the Blood Hunt had first attacked, but already the battle for survival had taken its toll in a myriad of small wounds. The daemons cared nothing for their own battered flesh. Flesh hounds snapped and lunged because they knew no other way. The fury of battle was upon them, and could only be stilled by their deaths, or those of their foes. The Bloodletters of the Hunt fought because fury was in their nature, and because they knew that to slay one of the champions within the glade was to earn favour with Ka'Bandha – and if not with him, then with mighty Khorne himself.

As battle raged, Ka'Bandha and his skaradrim approached. Already, the Bloodthirster knew that he had erred. So focussed had he been on following the Emperor's blood-spoor to Athel Loren, that he had not realised the full extent of the power veiled beneath the forest's eaves. The Blood Hunt had the ferocity to lay low any fortress in the mortal realm, but the presence of the Incarnates made Athel Loren no ordinary bastion.

In truth, Ka'Bandha was not greatly concerned. It had been many centuries since the Blood Hunt had failed to claim a quarry. Not since Magnus the Pious had evaded their grasp at the gates of Kislev had a chosen skull gone unclaimed. Karl Franz would fall, and his head would be taken as a token to Middenheim. If it cost Ka'Bandha hundreds – or even thousands – of his hunters, then so be it. There were other skulls within King's Glade that would more than compensate him for their loss. It was however troublesome that fully half the Blood Hunt still fought along the shoulders of the blood rift, a wall of murderous blades that held the remains of the elf army at bay. Ka'Bandha would gladly turn and slaughter the elves at his back, but only once Karl Franz's severed skull was clasped in his hands.

The Lord of the Hunt held his skaradrim back as his daemons snarled and died at the hands of the Incarnates and their allies. Such was the tradition of the Blood Hunt, to allow the huntsmen and trackers the chance to claim a worthy kill before the huntsmasters took the field. It was not in Ka'Bandha's nature to stand idly by whilst there was blood to be spilt. Every fibre of the Bloodthirster's being yearned to spread his wings wide, bellow praised to his master and slake his growing battle-lust upon the quarry. Yet the Blood Hunt was sacred, its traditions inviolate, and Ka'Bandha contained his fury. He was a Bloodthirster of the third host, not one of the mindless berserkers of the sixth, and he knew that a slaughter deferred could make the blood taste all the sweeter.

The depth of Ka'Bandha's sight went far beyond that of mortals. Even from a distance, he could see the power swirling through and around the Incarnates' bodies. Yet he also saw that they were more akin to mortals than truly divine beings. He had fought such creatures before, and thirsted for the opportunity to do so again. At last, as another wave of bloodcrushers crashed into the glade, the Lord of the Hunt could restrain himself no longer. With a bellow that shook the trees, he took wing towards King's Glade, and the skaradrim came with him.

The skaradrim arrived in the glade like the End Times made manifest. The beating of their wings was thunder, and their fury scorched the very air around them. Lesser beings – whole armies of them – would have quailed before their arrival, but not the Incarnates.

Caradryan met the Bloodthirsters' charge with one of his own. Ashtari plunged forward in a screeching dive that saw the firebird fly true for Khorax Doomhand. Khorne-forged steel lashed out, the heavy-bladed axe slicing down fit to cleave the phoenix and its rider from the air. Swift as the blow was, Caradryan was faster. The Phoenix Blade blurred to deflect the axe. At the same time, Ashtari twisted away from the Bloodthirster and climbed skyward once more. Khorax roared, the sound a mix of fury denied and searing pain as Ashtari's trailing wake of fire washed over him.

The Incarnate and his mount had underestimated their foe's reach, however, and Khorax's monstrous axe slashed into the air after them, catching Ashtari's outstretched wing. The firebird beat his wings furiously, trying to continue his climb, but Khorax was too fast, and struck the phoenix another glancing blow. Ashtari plunged into the glade floor, gouging a fiery furrow through the corpse-choked ground. The impact flung Caradryan from his saddle, the captain a blazing meteor in his own right as he tumbled end over end before slamming into the glade floor. Ashtari's plunge also finally took him beyond reach of Khorax's axe, but it was too late. The firebird skidded to halt, and lay motionless amongst the slaughter. A short distance away, Caradryan hauled his bloodied body upright by bracing his halberd's staff amongst the piled dead. With a roar of triumph that reverberated in the bones of all who heard it, Khorax threw back his wings and dove towards the Incarnate of Fire.

Gelt witnessed Caradryan's plight. He urged Quicksilver towards the fallen elf, then hauled back on the reins, torn by hesitation. The Blood Hunt's lesser daemons pressed close around Vlad and Lileath, and the wizard was loath to abandon them, even for another's benefit. He needn't have worried however – the Mortarch of Shadow was in his element.

The daemons reminded Vlad of the more feral of his own kind, due to their artless fighting style that relied more on brute force than what could be regarded as true skill. The vampire stood amongst a growing pile of corpses, his blade thrusting and darting past the daemons' clumsy guard. None of this dismayed his foes – each body that slumped forward in a spray of ichor only redoubled the survivors' intent. Lileath, too, had found her balance after the initial attack. Cold moonlight shone from her outstretched palm, the purity of its caress causing daemonic flesh to smoulder and flare where it touched. Though surrounded by hissing bloodletters, Vlad somehow marked Gelt's indecision and yelled at the other to be on his way. With one last, backwards glance, Gelt urged Quicksilver onwards.

On Gelt flew, determined to reach Caradryan's side before Khorax could claim his life. More flesh hounds burst from the undergrowth as the wizard travelled. They leapt high, fanged maws gaping wide, but Gelt was ready for them. Scarcely had the daemons' hindquarters left the ground when the Staff of Volans flared in the wizard's hands. With a brittle shout, Gelt loosed a glittering wave that transformed the leaping hounds into motionless gold. Before the lifeless brutes could hit the ground, the wizard uttered a charm of transformation that reshaped the metal into heavy chains. At the wizard's gesture, the manacles flew through the air and fastened tight around Khorax's arms and wings. Overburdened by the weighty metal, the Bloodthirster plunged from the skies, slamming into the glade floor with sickening force.

The intervention had bought Caradryan the time he needed. Kindling the fires of Aqshy, he coaxed new life into Ashtari's battered body. With a screech that set the air ablaze, the phoenix took to the air once more, returning to its master's side at speed.

But Khorax was not yet done. Rising up out of his impact crater, the Bloodthirster bellowed and flexed against the auric chains, the gold warping as the daemon brought his fearsome strength to bear. There was a dull snap as the metal gave way, the ruined and mangled scraps falling beneath the Bloodthirster's hooves. The daemon's wings were mangled, for they had borne the brunt of his impact, but Khorax gave no sign of pain. Whirling his axe, he thundered towards Caradryan once again.

Gelt hammered at the Bloodthirster with gleaming metal shards that tore deep into the brute's thick flesh. Khorax should have retreated at that point, or sought another way to assail his foes, but he was too far gone to battle-rage. With a roar, he charged into the storm, shoulders braced against the fusillade of magic. Ichor dripped from his wounds, but he paid it no heed and forged on. Caradryan called a wall of flame into being in the daemon's path. As the fire took root, the Bloodthirster's strength at last faded. With a final baleful roar, Khorax collapsed into the flames.

Away to the south, two more of the skaradrim converged on Tyrion and Teclis as they stood guard over Alarielle. The first took scant notice of the daemon-corpses strewn around the twins, seeing only two fragile mortals ripe for cleaving. Its bellowing dive turned into an uncontrolled plummet as Tyrion's blast of cleansing light reduced its left wing to ash. The daemon slammed into the glade floor as a bellowing meteor, the sound of its breaking bones like shattering stone. Swift Malhandir was in motion before the beast could rise, and Sunfang's gleaming blade split the Bloodthirster's spine.

The second Bloodthirster fared little better. Slamming his staff into the ground, Teclis drew upon the deep sea of his magical lore, and assailed the daemon with sorceries drawn from the eight winds. Fire and lightning struck from above, whilst thorns and shards of rocks pummelled it from below. Pure starlight and amber spears seared the Bloodthirster's flesh, whilst shadows and ghostly spirits smothered it. Blinded, bleeding and burnt, the daemon crashed to the ground, and did not move. Tyrion saw the creature's fall, and gave Teclis a curt nod of approval. Then, the prince hauled upon Malhandir's reins and sped to the east, where more winged shadows converged on Hammerson and the Emperor.

No sooner had Tyrion departed, than there was another bellow as a third Bloodthirster made its presence know. Perhaps Tyrion had not seen the third daemon, or maybe he deemed his brother able to manage a single assailant. But as Teclis reached into the winds of magic once again, he realised how hastily he had spent his strength in order to regain the approval of a brother he had wronged. Nevertheless, as the daemon drew near to Alarielle's unconscious form, the mage smothered his doubts and rose up to face the new foe.

Uttering a sibilant word of power, Teclis smote the daemon with a bolt of cerulean lightning, hurling it away from the Everqueen. The Bloodthirster regained its balance with a sweep of its smouldering wings, then dove straight for the mage a second time. Again Teclis sent lightning hammering towards the monster. This time the Bloodthirster was prepared, and deflected the crackling energy with the blade of its axe. The daemon slammed to the ground with enough force to knock the mage from his feet, then hacked down to cut Teclis in half.

That would have been the end of Teclis, had the axe landed. Even the mage's protective enchantments would have been hard-pressed to preserve him from an axe-blow driven by a Bloodthirster's fury. However, the blade halted, inches from Teclis' body. The Bloodthirster roared again, this time in frustration. In the moment

before his blow had landed, thick roots had burst from the glade's rich soil, wending their way around his forearm and binding it fast.

Surprised at the sudden reprieve, Teclis rolled wearily away from the axe-blade and searched for the source of his sudden salvation. He did not have to look far. A short distance away, he saw Alarielle risen to her knees, one palm pressed hard against the glade floor, the other outstretched towards the creature that had so nearly been Teclis' doom. The Everqueen's face was lined and pale, the strain of Athel Loren's pain still heavy upon her, but her expression was as unflinching as oak.

With a guttural snarl, the Bloodthirster tore his arm free, but more roots burst from the sod, ensnaring both arms and one of his legs. Muscles bulging, the daemon tore his axe-hand free, then hacked down to free his other limbs. Teclis heard Alarielle utter a curse so vile that he could hardly believe she knew it, then clench her outstretched hand. Before the Bloodthirster could pull free, dozens more roots joined those that already entangled him.

The daemon roared in pain as the roots burrowed deep into his flesh. Ichor spurted in all directions as his massive frame violently convulsed. Teclis moved to Alarielle's side, trying to help her regain her feet, but she shook him away. As the Bloodthirster's roars reached a crescendo, the Everqueen splayed her clenched fingers wide. At once, the roots ripped free of the daemon's flesh, the sudden movement tearing the creature apart. The roots flailed for a moment as chunks of daemon rained down, then they collapsed lifeless to the ground.

Alarielle was not yet done. With one swift look, she took in the full horror sweeping King's Glade. Then, closing her eyes, she reached deep into the grove's living heart.



King's Glade was sacred not only to the elves. In ancient times, it had been the meeting place of the forest's elders. It was here that their councils were held, the silent communion of immeasurably old minds seeking out the best way to guide the forest. Such reckonings had ceased with the coming of the elves, and many of the ancients had slipped away into dream-tossed slumber. They had not awakened in all the long years since, but never before had Athel Loren come so close to destruction. Alarielle could not have torn these ancient guardians from their dreams by herself. However, she did not call them forth alone. The shared mind of Athel Loren, reeling from the horrendous psychic scar of the Blood Hunt's arrival, lent its urgency to hers, forming a summons that only the dead could ignore. Alarielle allowed herself a grim smile, and then sagged, exhausted. Teclis again tried to help the Everqueen to her feet; this time, she allowed him to do so.

A battle cry sounded, one not heard for long centuries. It was deep and sonorous, the rumble of a distant avalanche magnified ten-thousandfold. All around the glade, trees began to move, their roots tearing free of the clammy ground, their bark flexing into half-remembered shapes. In ones and twos, the ancient guardians jarred awake, sleep falling from their sedentary minds. Again the battle cry sounded, and this time more voices took up the call until the ground shook with its fury. The sound faded, but the tremors did not. In a moment of sudden clarity, Teclis realised that it was not the battle cry that caused the quake; rather, it was the result of a forest on the move.

Another foe might have fled in that hour, but not the Blood Hunt. They feared little save the wrath of Khorne himself, and met the onrushing treemen with as much savage gusto as they had every foe so far. It cost them dearly. The ancient guardians converged from all sides, ponderously at first, but faster and faster as their gnarled feet thudded home into the sod. Bloodletters scattered like deadwood in the teeth of a gale, their wiry bodies flung through the air by the bone-crushing impact of the charge. Flesh hounds were kicked aside or trampled underfoot, and juggernauts crumpled like tin.

Only where the treemen met the Bloodthirsters did their onslaught slow. Each of the greater daemons was a shard of Khorne's limitless wrath made flesh. They were mighty beyond mortal ken, and possessed of a determination as endless as Chaos itself. It was a battle not seen since the first Chaos incursion – immortal giants from a distant age fighting for the fate of the mortal world. As the battle raged, bloodletters and flesh hounds were crushed by the score, their fate of no concern to their monstrous masters. The Incarnates and their allies fared little better. Twice, Arkhan was nearly swatted from the sky by the backdraught of a Bloodthirster's wing, and only Malhandir's speed saved Tyrion from being stomped flat by a treeman's mournful collapse.

The Bloodthirsters hacked and hewed at the guardians' thick hides, the daemon-forged weapons searing the treemen's flesh wherever they cut. In return, the guardians smashed at the daemons with massive, haymaking punches, buckling armour and pulverising ruddy flesh with each strike. The ground trembled and shook as each weighty blow crashed home. Treemen toppled as their limbs were hacked apart, bloodletters swarming over their dying forms to claim the kill. Bloodthirsters spat thick black ichor and fell dying, their ribs stove in or skulls fractured by a guardian's hammer-blow.

At last, Ka'Bandha joined the battle. The thunder of his wings was the beat of doom, his roar of challenge the fury of the mountains. He bore down on where Teclis and Alarielle sheltered, his axe raised high, poised for the killing blow. One of the ancient guardians moved to confront the daemon, interposing itself between the Incarnates and their attacker. Ka'Bandha's whirling hammer-flail smashed down with a whistling crack, and the treeman's left arm exploded in a storm of charred splinters. Before the ancient could react, Ka'Bandha's axe hacked deep into the thick bark of its neck, all but severing its head. The treeman uttered a hollow, hooting moan, and toppled sideways, like an oak felled by a lumberjack's axe.

Alarielle reach forth with her healing magics, but she was too weak from her recent exertions. The ancient's mighty soul slipped away into oblivion before she could mend its terrible wounds. So intent was the Everqueen on her task that she would have perished in that moment, had Teclis not hauled her clear of the treeman's falling corpse. As it was, the shock wave of the guardian's fall knocked both elves sprawling. A moment later, Ka'Bandha's hooves slammed down mere feet away.

Teclis called forth the lightning once more. Jagged bolts split the sky, smiting Ka'Bandha across the wings and brow. Hissing magic crackled across the Bloodthirster's armour, and sparks played across his runic crown. However, the daemon did not so much as slow. Flames poured from his nostrils and fanged maw as he strode towards his prey, giving voice to a black and terrible laughter that promised only death.

Two more guardians bore down upon Ka'Bandha from his left and right. Without slowing, Ka'Bandha hammered his axe deep into the leftmost treeman's moss-clad torso, then severed its leg with a second, punishing blow. Fast as he was, the daemon could not turn swiftly enough to face the second guardian. With a deep and foreboding rumble, the treeman locked the fingers of both

hands together, and slammed them down onto the corded muscle of Ka'Bandha's neck.

Ka'Bandha staggered beneath the blow, but did not fall. With a rippling growl, the Bloodthirster span around to face this second foe, paying no heed to the bolts of lightning that Teclis still called down upon him. Again, the daemon's axe lashed out, but this time his opponent was too swift. Vine-laced fingers latched around the Bloodthirster's axe arm as the blow scythed home, binding it fast. Ka'Bandha roared with fury, and lashed out with his hammer-flail. But the guardian had expected that too, and pinioned the daemon's second arm much as he had the first.

For a long moment, Ka'Bandha and the guardian stood almost motionless, each bringing the full fury of their formidable strength to bear against the other. The Bloodthirster growled like storm-torn skies, steam rising from his snout. The treeman uttered no sound, but its heaving limbs creaked and cracked like a forest in the teeth of a gale. At their feet, Teclis shifted tactics. Abandoning his storm-summons, he called out to the Wind of Beasts, imploring it to lend its wild power to the embattled guardian. Compared to the other winds, Ghur blew weakly across Athel Loren that day, but Teclis seized what little there was and bound it to his will. At once, new strength poured into the guardian's limbs and the titanic battle between treeman and daemon began to shift. Ka'Bandha's straining arms were forced back inch by inch. The Bloodthirster's hooves gouged at the ground beneath his feet as he sought fresh purchase.

A low-pitched rumble began somewhere deep in Ka'Bandha's chest. It grew rapidly, and then burst from his fanged maw as a torrent of deep and ruddy flame that washed hungrily over his opponent's torso and limbs. No ordinary fires were these. They were birthed from the dark and wrathful heat of Khorne's forge, and the guardian's flesh instantly set alight wherever they touched. The vines binding Ka'Bandha's arms withered and shrank beneath that fury; the thick bark of the guardian's skin blackened and caught light. With a flame-etched howl of triumph, the Bloodthirster at last wrenched his arms free, the treeman's limbs exploding into charred cinder as he did so.

This time, it was Alarielle who pulled Teclis clear as the fragments of a once-mighty treeman rained down around them. Small fires broke out in the grass where the blazing wreckage landed, the fumes rising from them thick and somehow metallic. Ka'Bandha was a black shadow against the smoke. With a rumbling roar, the Bloodthirster turned towards the elves once more, and sprang forward, wings outstretched.





Teclis froze as the Bloodthirster swept towards him, the wiry shadows of bloodletters running close behind. The mage had fought countless daemons over the course of his long life, but never one so utterly unfazed by his magics. *What more was there to do?* the mage wondered.

'Run!' Teclis heard Alarielle shout from behind him, but the mage made no move.

What was the point, if there was no hope?

Suddenly, he was staggering backwards as the Everqueen hauled hard on his robes. The downdraught of the Bloodthirster's wings was a baleful wind. Alarielle's staff flared. Jagged roots burst from the glade floor, impaling the daemon in a dozen places.

The Bloodthirster uttered a sound that was more sneer than pain. He hacked at the makeshift spears and tore himself free, ignoring the ichor that burst from the ragged wounds.

Something shifted in Teclis' mind as the daemon's hammer-flail smashed down towards them, and he at last resurfaced from his fugue. There was a discordant chime as the hammer-blow glanced off the mage's hastily summoned shield. The enchantment shattered in the same moment, leaving Teclis and Alarielle defenceless once more.

The Bloodthirster raised his hammer for a second blow, then paused as a new voice rang out.

'Let them be, abomination! Mine is the skull you've come to claim!'

Then there was an ear-splitting screech and a blur of feathers, as Deathclaw slammed into the Bloodthirster and bore him bodily away into the smoke.

Alarielle and Teclis would have surely perished had it not been for the Emperor's intervention. So intent had Ka'Bandha been on the elves, that he scarcely saw Deathclaw until it was too late. Back the Bloodthirster skidded through the ruin of his victims. The griffon's talons were sunk deep in his chest, and its powerful beak gouged and snapped at his neck. The Emperor leaned low in his saddle, the Reikland runefang stabbing through Ka'Bandha's armour and into the thick muscle beyond.

The Everqueen silently cursed the Emperor's brashness, even as she whispered thanks for his intervention. Robbed of Azyr's power, the human was no match for the Bloodthirster. Yet Alarielle was determined to ensure his bravery was not wasted. Calling out to the surviving guardians, she bade them retreat to the centre of the glade. The Incarnates alone could not defeat a daemonic host of this size unprepared, but there were armies of elves, men and even dwarfs in Athel Loren. She could feel Durthu's presence less than a league hence, and growing closer all the time, and he was surely not coming alone. The Incarnates merely had to hold out until help arrived – if, indeed, they were able to do so.

All across the glade, the treemen heard Alarielle's call, and moved to obey. Those nearest to the glade's heart locked their limbs together and set their roots deep, forming a living fortress behind whose walls the Everqueen and her allies could shelter. Meanwhile, other treemen bent their efforts to rescuing those who could not rely on the swift wings of dragon, griffon or phoenix. To the north, an indignant Vlad was hoisted into the air as a gnarled fist closed about his cloak. Flesh hounds snapped briefly at the vampire's heels, and then their quarry was gone, carried southwards by a guardian's long strides. Lileath and Hammerson were rescued in similar fashion – the former with rather more grace than the latter. Only Teclis and Alarielle were left to make their way on foot, and then only because Ka'Bandha had slain all the guardians close by.

Elsewhere, Alarielle's fear for the Emperor was swiftly justified. Ka'Bandha soon recovered from the initial surprise of Deathclaw's onslaught. His daemon-axe lashed out, tearing a bloody wound along the griffon's flank. With a screech of pain, Deathclaw let go his grasp on the Bloodthirster's flesh, wings beating frantically as he tried to get clear. The sudden motion hurled the Emperor forward in his saddle. It was well it did so. At the same moment, Ka'Bandha's hammer-flail arced through the space the Emperor had lately occupied, the force of its passage threatening to spill him from the griffon's back entirely.

Ka'Bandha was on his feet once more, laughter rumbling from his cracked and ichor-stained lips. He had weathered the worst of the human's assault, and now the Emperor's skull would be his.

Suddenly, a cloud of roiling shadow enveloped Ka'Bandha. It took the form of a vast, crowned face with eyes that glowed like the winter sun. Each mote of darkness stabbed at the Bloodthirster's flesh like a barbed needle, but that was nothing to the pain that followed a heartbeat later. Even as the billowing apparition swallowed Ka'Bandha, a searing brightness burst into life from the Bloodthirster's right. Through half-blinded eyes, the daemon glimpsed a figure on horseback, closing in on him with impossible speed. Caught between light and shadow, Ka'Bandha sank to one knee, roaring in frustration and fury.

The Emperor experienced a rare moment of hesitation as he saw Malekith and Tyrion transfix the Bloodthirster. He knew he had taken a dangerous chance by engaging Ka'Bandha in battle, but it was not in his nature to let others risk their lives in his stead. Only Alarielle's urgent calls prevented him from the joining the fight once more. Guiding Deathclaw to the south, the Emperor swooped low, the griffon's talons closing around Teclis and bearing him away towards the fortress of trees at the glade's heart. Gelt and Caradryan were there already, borne to safety on their steeds' swift wings. Of Arkhan and Nagash, the Emperor saw nothing. Alarielle, he left behind at her own insistence. As the griffon sped away, the Emperor saw the Everqueen advance on the Bloodthirster, jade light flaring from her hands as she brought her own magics to bear.



A crash of timber in the north heralded the arrival of the last of Ka'Bandha's Blood Hunt. These were no ordinary daemons, but engines of brass and shimmering heat, of thumping pistons and fang-muzzled cannons. The war engines opened fire upon entering the glade. Skulls screamed and whined through the air, contrails of molten metal and immortal fire rippling behind. They crashed home against the living fortress of treemen, tearing deep into their flesh. But it was outside the wall of guardians that the sudden bombardment took the heaviest toll.

Vlad's treeman was struck by six skulls at once. It disintegrated in a storm of thick splinters that cast the vampire to the ground, his undead flesh shredded. Cursing, Vlad lurched to his feet. He was almost crushed flat as Hammerson's treeman, its leg sheared off by a cackling skull, collapsed a hand's breadth away. As the dwarf struggled free of his saviour's ruin, a shadow fell across him. As one, the vampire and the runesmith looked up as a roaring Bloodthirster swooped towards them.

Further east, Arkhan the Black saw his fellow Mortarch's plight, but made no attempt to assist him. Instead, he turned Razarak towards the glowing column of amethyst magic that marked where his master fought, and abandoned the vampire to his fate.

Lileath too saw Vlad and Hammerson's plight as she reached the living fortress, and sent her treeman back to aid them. Yet she could see it would arrive too late. Caradryan and Gelt were faster, turning their winged steeds to the north once more. Another volley of skulls met their charge. Ashtari was swift enough to evade the salvo, picking a path through the blazing wakes. Quicksilver was not so fortunate – a glancing blow shattered his outstretched wing. With a supreme effort, the pegasus managed to glide groundward without suffering further injury, but he would fly no more that day.

When the Emperor and Teclis reached the living fortress moments later, defeat was sliding swiftly into disaster. The Incarnates and their allies were more scattered than ever, with neither sight nor sound of friendly warriors to offer hope. Nagash still refused to accept or lend aid. Worst of all, Ka'Bandha now had the measure of his foes. The magics of light, shadow and life stung at his flesh, but mere pain could not him at bay forever.

Nothing less than a miracle could rescue the situation now. Gritting his teeth, the Emperor sought out Teclis in order to demand one.

‘We’re out of time,’ the Emperor shouted over the roar and whine of daemonic cannons. Without waiting for a reply, he swung from Deathclaw’s saddle and ran to stand between Teclis and Lileath.

‘Use your magic,’ he implored. ‘We must attempt to reach Middenheim whilst enough of us are still whole enough to fight.’

Teclis scowled. ‘I told you before. It cannot be done. Magic springs from Chaos. Even if I could draw upon that much power, the resulting rift would bring about the very doom we seek to prevent.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’ the Emperor demanded. ‘The daemons will keep coming until all of us are dead, and the world will fall soon after!’

Teclis had no answer for that. After years of planning, events were moving too swiftly. Too late, he was realising that not everything could be anticipated.

‘There is a way,’ Lileath said softly. ‘My body may be mortal, but my blood and spirit are still divine. These contain the power you require.’

‘Innocent blood…’ the Emperor muttered, his face lost in recollection.

Lileath shook her head. ‘I am no innocent. Though I did only what the times demanded, I have betrayed those who trusted me. I could not carry those evils into the Haven – it is only fitting that I atone for them now.’

‘But you will die,’ Teclis objected.

‘This is the Rhana Dandra. We are all fated to die. Does the order of our passing matter so very much?’

‘You are the last of our gods. You have been my guide, my light. You cannot ask this of me.’

Lileath reached out a hand, and touched the tips of her fingers to the mage’s cheek. ‘Dear Teclis, you have served me so well, though I have not deserved it. Grant me this last boon.’

Teclis, lost in a world of his own private sorrow, made no answer.

‘He’ll do it,’ said the Emperor.

Teclis rounded on him, furious. ‘You do not speak for me, and know not what you ask.’

The Emperor held his ground, unflinching. ‘If there’s a chance, we have to take it. Like she says, all of us will be dead soon enough, whatever happens.’

As if to confirm his words, one of the ancients that formed their shelter was struck by skull cannon-fire. The giant’s torso was blown apart, scattering blazing bark across those who sheltered beneath him.

Teclis’ thoughts were racing, but the wisdom of the Emperor’s words closed about him like a vice. Numbly, he accepted the dagger that Lileath pressed into his hands. The goddess sank to her knees, and beckoned Teclis to face her.

‘It cannot be a swift death,’ Lileath said. ‘When my spirit passes, my divinity will pass with it, and your moment will be lost.’ She placed both of her hands around Teclis’, guiding the dagger’s point until it rested a little to the left of her breastbone. ‘There,’ she said, with a wan smile. ‘The perfect spot. Are you prepared?’

‘No,’ Teclis replied. Then he thrust the dagger home before his nerve could fail him.

Lileath’s back arched as the blade slid between her ribs. She gave a strangled, gasping cry. Teclis let go of the dagger’s hilt, and the dying goddess fell forward against him. Her breaths, shallow and rasping, were loud in his ears; her blood pulsed over his hands.

Teclis closed his eyes, and tried to ignore Lileath’s small, choked sounds. Blood ran down the mage’s arms, seeped through his robes, warm and slick against his skin. The goddess’ fading divinity danced across the landscape of Teclis’ thoughts like a brisk wind, begging to be unleashed. Teclis tried to seize that power, but it slipped from his grasp like smoke. Again and again he tried, as Lileath’s breathing grew slower and more erratic. Fear of failure thickened like bile in the mage’s throat, and desperation threatened to overwhelm him.

Then a voice whispered in Teclis’ mind, calming and confident. At first he thought it was Lileath’s spirit, but then he realised the voice was deeper, stronger. A golden light shone suddenly in the darkness of the mage’s mind, and this time Lileath’s divinity did not evade his grasp. Teclis heard the goddess-made-mortal utter one last, croaking cry, felt her body convulse one final, terrible time, and then fall still.

Lileath was dead, but Teclis had her last divine spark in his grasp. The mage was overwhelmed. His mind soared high above Athel Loren. Far below, he saw the embattled mortals as bright pinpricks of light against a dark tide, the Incarnates almost blinding in their brilliance. He witnessed the battles raging across King’s Glade, their details clear even from that seemingly incredible distance.

The guardian ancients had been almost overrun, the strewn wreckage of bark and tree-flesh testament to their opponents’ savagery. Gelt was trapped beyond the safety of the living fortress by Quicksilver’s mangled wing, sheltering beneath a golden dome. The wizard’s arms were spread wide in effort, and shuddered with each axe- and hammer-blow upon the glittering shield.

Ka’Bandha snarled and raged as he forced his way free from the combined magics of Tyrion, Malekith and Alarielle. Hammerson and Vlad held their ground against another Bloodthirster’s berserk charge, the vampire’s strikes as swift and precise as the dwarf’s were heavy. Nagash, who alone amongst the Incarnates shone almost as darkly as the daemons he fought, seized another Bloodthirster in an amethyst grasp, and crushed the creature’s bones to powder.

Teclis saw his own blood-soaked body, deep within the ring of surviving ancients. It was still, almost as lifeless as the corpse he held in his hands. He saw the Emperor kneeling behind him. The man too was almost as motionless. One of his gauntleted hands rested on

Teclis' shoulder. At first, the mage took it as a gesture of support. Then he remembered the golden light that had come to his aid, and he suddenly knew much that had been hidden from his sight.

Even as Teclis took in his allies' plight, his mind danced across the winds of magic with a deftness he had never before known. With Lileath's divinity serving as his loom, he wove the threads of magic into a spell far greater than any he had thought possible. Even Teclis, as its creator, did not understand the full scope of his labours. Each step was driven by an instinct he had never before possessed.

Then, as swiftly as it had arrived, the last spark of Lileath began to fade, and Teclis' certainty dissipated with it. The mage's thoughts began to throb with a sudden pain, as the magics he had harnessed threatened to overwhelm him. He worked feverishly, trying to complete his work before the knowledge left him entirely. There was no time for delay. The spell was unravelling faster than it had been woven.

Teclis reached out for pinpricks of light that were the Incarnates, gathering them up in the tapestry's folds. He knew that they would not be enough, not against the forces that awaited them. Even though the spell was slipping from his grasp, the mage reached out a second time, gathering up as many of Athel Loren's defenders as he could. Then, in the moment that the last skeins of the spell tore loose, Teclis flung all those he had gathered towards Middenheim, and whispered a prayer to the goddess he had slain. Only then did he succumb to the pressure in his mind, and collapse into darkness.

Teclis awoke face-down against cold stone, his head throbbing with pain. The only light came from guttering torches somewhere above his head, and the metallic tang of blood was thick upon the air.

Teclis tried to stand, but iron manacles bit into his wrists. The best he could do was to hunch into a kneeling position. The mage felt no fear – his heart was too heavy with the bitterness of failure to accomodate any other emotion.

'He stirs, lord.' A hooded figure loomed out of the shadows, the twisted metal of his mask gleaming in the feeble torchlight. His voice was obsequious, his posture locked in a permanent half-bow. As his weary eyes grew used to the darkness, Teclis saw that the sorcerer bore his own stolen staff and sword.

Teclis followed the sorcerer's gaze through the shadows, past the pit of seething, hissing blood to the throne of skulls that lay at the chamber's far end. A heavily armoured figure, more imagined than seen in the darkness, rose from the throne, the empty eyes of his golden helm unreadable.

'You have journeyed a long way to die, elf,' intoned Archaon. 'But do not despair. The world shall not long outlast you.'













Teclis' spell had been more successful than he first realised. In the last moments before Lileath's divinity had faded, he had indeed transported the Incarnates – and many of their followers – to storm-lashed Middenheim. Unfortunately, the spell had slipped from the mage's control in the last moments, and the magical vortices had scattered his allies all across the Chaos-held city. None amongst the Incarnates knew for certain that the others had survived. This was ill-fortune indeed, but it was leavened by two factors. Firstly, even whilst the energies of the spell collapsed, Teclis had maintained enough control to ensure that each Incarnate arrived alongside allies. In some cases, these were potent warbands – in others, full-fledged armies. Furthermore, the Incarnates' sudden arrival in the Chaos-held city was something that none within its walls could have foreseen – save perhaps Kairos Fateweaver, slain at Archaon's hand some weeks before.

There was little time for the Incarnates to bring order to their forces, and none at all for explanations. Each led through example of courage and purpose, and trusted to their warriors to follow. All save Nagash, that was. As ever, the Great Necromancer's command over his minions was absolute. From the fire-blistered ruins of Westgate to the Neumarkt slave pens, the invaders fell mercilessly upon Archaon's horde. Surprise was theirs for the moment, but all knew that the Everchosen's superior numbers would quickly tell.

Thus, as an angry red dusk fell upon the Fauschlag, and lightning seared the sky, Middenheim erupted into slaughter. Each of the Incarnates fought with the same goal. All had glimpsed the scar of the great excavation, or else the spoil heaps and death-pits that marked its perimeter. All knew that the battle for Middenheim – the battle for the world – could not be won in the ruined streets. Thus they drove their followers hard for the centre of the city, to the chasm that Archaon had torn in the Fauschlag rock.

Of all the Incarnates, Caradryan was pitched into the direst of situations. His army had emerged upon what remained of the Ulricsmund, on the very edge of the great excavation. There was no time for words, even if the Incarnate had been much given to uttering them. Scarcely had the storm of magic ebbed when Caradryan's elves found themselves assailed by axe-wielding Skaramor, and black-armoured Kurgan tribesmen. The yawning chasm of the great excavation lay to their back. There could be no retreat, and if help did not arrive soon, Caradryan knew that even the power caged in his body would be no guarantor of survival.

In that moment, the burden of Aqshy felt even heavier than it had before, and Caradryan realised that therein lay his salvation. Unlike the other elemental powers of magic, fire did not diminish as it was divided, but grew stronger as it spread. As the black banners pressed in against his lines, the Incarnate of Fire reached into his soul and split the power of Aqshy a thousand fold. The largest part he kept for himself, and the rest he cast like seeds across his host. At once, flickering flame burst into life along keen blades of ithilmar steel; bodies blazed with new strength and spirits rose with purpose renewed.

Kurgan chieftains – many of whom had been surprised out of sleep – bellowed orders, driving their warriors to the excavation's edge. The northlanders made a ragged attempt to trap the new Host of Fire against the edge of the abyss, to crush them like the weaklings they believed them to be. But the advantage of surprise remained with Caradryan. He did not wait for his foes upon the cliff face, and instead loosed the Host of Fire in a headlong charge against the heart of the onrushing horde.

The elves struck the leading Kurgan warbands like a searing wind. A tidal wave of flame was their herald, roaring and angry. Flesh blistered and armour fused where it struck, the screams of the dying melding with the sizzle and crack of burning skin. Flames streamed behind the axes and halberds that hacked the northlanders apart. The leading warbands were swept away in moments, consigned to oblivion by elves seemingly made more of fire than mortal flesh. Other northmen threw down their weapons and fled, ready – in that moment, at least – to risk the Dark Gods' disfavour in place of the wrath of the flame-wreathed elves. Further down the slope, however, the Skaramor saw the Kurgan break apart and sneered at their weakness. Let the elves invoke whatever power they wished, so long as they bled.



Malekith saw the fires leap into the sky, but spared little thought for what they portended. The Eternity King's host fought southeast of the Ulricsmund, where the skaven had made a squalid nest of the Wynd's tangled streets. Shadows billowed like smoke on the wind, and frenzied chittering split the air as the elves fell upon the unprepared skaven. In the streets' tight confines, the ratmen could not easily bring their advantage of numbers to bear, and few amongst the swarm wished to face the Eternity King's fell-handed warriors without a claw-band of spears at his back. Only one warlord, drunk on warpstone snuff and ambition, had dared face Malekith blade-to-blade. His mangled remains now languished in Seraphon's gullet, and the horror of his dying moments – rather than his courage – dictated his survivors' behaviour.

Further to the north, Nagash brought his gift of death to the northlanders encamped in Neumarkt. Teclis' spell had reached to Athel Loren's eastern border – and even beyond, though few yet knew it – and dragged the Great Necromancer's army to his side. The fur-clad northmen had thought themselves safe in Archaon's new fortress. They were heavy with sleep and ale, and thus died swiftly. Krell and the Doomed Legion showed no mercy to those who had once been their kinsmen. Cursed grave-steel chopped down through greasy fur and crude armour, and the Host of Death marched on.

Arkhan and Nagash advanced in the Doomed Legion's wake, their sorceries breathing new life into the slain. Few buildings stood in this region of the city, and those that did had been repurposed to serve as slave pens. The captives were clad in the ragged and faded uniforms of a dozen states, their fate to have survived whilst more fortunate companions had perished beneath northland axes. Now the slaves saw desperate northlanders flooding past their cages' ramshackle gates, and felt a long-forgotten hope. They shouted and cheered as their fear-stricken captors poured towards the city's heart, believing that their moment of freedom was nigh. But cries of hope turned to screams of abject terror as the slaves saw that the northlanders fled not from an army of the Empire, but a vast tide of the undead.

Malekith would have ignored the slaves, had chance brought him to Neumarkt. He would have seen only miserable wretches, fit for nothing save the lash. Gelt, Caradryan and Alarielle would have taken pity and set the captives free. Tyrion and the Emperor would have looked upon the slaves as an army, ready to seek their vengeance against those who had trampled their land and slain their kin. Nagash, however, gazed across the stinking slave pens, and saw only raw materials. The Great Necromancer reached out a hand, and amethyst fire washed across Neumarkt, choking the life from all it touched. The screams reached a fever pitch, then died away to nothing.

Nagash's army had doubled in size at a stroke, and it pressed on through Neumarkt, into the fire-scorched wasteland that had once been the Great Park. There, amongst the burnt-out trees, the Great Necromancer met the first serious challenge to his advance. Thick ranks of steel shields lined the park's eastern overlook, the close-helmed warriors chanting and singing to drown their fear of the undead. Sorcerers traced forbidden sigils in the air. The shapes glowed and sparked for a heartbeat before bursting into sudden fire that seared through the oncoming dead. Nagash's recently-resurrected zombies burned and blistered beneath the sorcerous assault. Neither Arkhan nor the Great Necromancer spared even a fragment of concern for their fate. All who marched in the Host of Death were expendable, and the zombies were more so than most.

Shuffling corpses collapsed as the flames overtook them. From the overlook, it seemed as if the greater part of the undead army was ablaze, and so it was. But Arkhan laboured to ensure that the magic driving the fires was smothered before the flames took root in the morghast host, or the wights of the Doomed Legion. In the meantime, Nagash's cold gaze swept across the overlook. He sought out each of the northlander sorcerers in turn, snuffing out their souls with twists of his bony fingers.

These subtleties were missed by many of the northlanders who mustered on the overlook. They saw only the undead horde consumed by Chaos-fire. Horns and war-cries rang out as chieftains grew resentful that the sorcerers were claiming all the battle's glory. Clouds of ash were hurled skyward as thousands of running feet pounded down through the fire-twisted trees, the noise of their footfalls lost beneath bellowed oaths and battle cries. Knights put spurs to the flanks of their murderous steeds. Great mutated beasts of the north were loosed from their chains and charged roaring down the slope. Northlanders crashed into the charred and fleshy mass, barging zombies aside. Axes swung and hacked, felling the fire-marred dead by the score. Soon, the last of the zombies had been cut down, or else trampled underfoot. With a thunderous clang, the northlanders' shields met those of the Doomed Legion, and the true battle began.

Whilst Nagash strove in the ruins of the Great Park, Vlad walked unseen to the north. The vampire had been separated from his master through some caprice of Teclis' desperate spell, and had been cast into the Palast District. Vlad knew Middenheim well, had walked its streets many times under night's cool veil. Nevertheless, little remained for him to recognise. The gardens and mansions of the Palast, once the finest in Middenheim, were now lost beneath charnel and torture.

The fugitive Blood Queen, Hellebron, had made the Palast her new temple. Many of the Skaramor amongst Archaon's horde had recognised her madness as a gift from Khorne, and worshipped her as they had once worshipped the Gorequeen, Valkia. The blood of allies and enemies had flowed in these gardens as nowhere else. Lacerated offerings hung from gore-slicked trees, or lay chained in pools of bubbling blood. Bodies hung from gibbets and crows-cages, or were impaled on fire-blackened spikes. Some of the victims still lived, mewling pitifully. Their eyes had been taken for sport by Hellebron's worshippers, their myriad wounds crafted to prolong their sweet agony. Others had been dead for days, their skulls claimed for Khorne and their hearts devoured by the Blood Queen or her handmaidens. Even Vlad, steeped in blood though he was, found the sight distasteful. There was no artistry, no discernible purpose to the slaughter, which made it wasteful in his eyes.

The vampire passed through the blood-sodden gardens like a ghost, cloaking himself in shadow so as not to be glimpsed. Sounds of battle were echoing through the ruddy skies, and every figure the vampire observed – be it plate-armoured northlander, or feral witch elf – was running south through the gardens. So fixed were the cultists on joining the slaughter, that few had eyes for the shadows beneath the blood-smeared walls. It therefore took Vlad little effort to conceal himself, which was all to the good, as far as the vampire was concerned. Confident in his skills though he was, Vlad was little inclined to confront an army all by himself. With no other option at hand, he followed the tide of berserkers and cultists south, sure that he would find allies – even if he was uncertain that they would be in any state to aid him.

Vlad's assumption was correct – allies did await him south of the Palast District. In the heart of the Middenplatz, Alarielle's Host of Life was beset by a howling tide of beastmen and blood cultists. The Host of Life was badly overmatched, surrounded on every side by roaring beasts. Treemen traded booming blows with four-armed giants. Braying gor-bands hewed at dryads with crude-edged axes. Whistling arrow volleys arced across the ruddy skies, thudding into horned skulls and mutated flesh. Hellebron's forces too had joined the fight. Witch elves darted through whatever spaces showed themselves, eager to carry their wicked blades against the Everqueen's forces. The skullreapers were more direct, hacking down their own bestial allies to reach the enemy beyond. And in the thick of the seething, blood-slicked bodies, Hellebron herself screeched and screamed her hatred at the Everqueen who had slighted her.

Alarielle stood at the battle's heart. Jade life-magics flowed from her hands, reknitting wounds and restoring her fallen warriors to fight anew. She had given much of herself during the battle for King's Glade, and that sacrifice now cost both Alarielle and her followers dearly. It was plain to Vlad that Alarielle's power was fading fast. Even from his perch atop the Middenplatz's northern gatehouse, the vampire could see how pale and drawn the Everqueen appeared. She would have fallen long ago, or so Vlad suspected, had not the indomitable Durthu stood like a breakwater against the howling tide that lapped around her. The treeman's mighty fists and gleaming sword brought death upon any who sought to cause the Everqueen harm, but his fury dissuaded none amongst the foe.

Vlad had fought many battles, and witnessed many more. He knew a forlorn cause when he saw one, and saw little reason to throw his life away in service of the one playing out before him. An army was needed to alter Alarielle's fate. One warrior alone – even one of Vlad's skill – would change nothing.

No sooner had the thought formed in Vlad's mind, than there was a roar of cannons, and the entire eastern wall of the Middenplatz blew apart. Jagged boulders flew across the square, trailing dust and shards of stone. Beastmen brayed and screamed as they were crushed beneath falling masonry, or pulverised by defaced statues of Ulric that had graced the summit. Before the stones had come

to rest, sharp cracks of gunfire cut through the tumult. Bullets spat through the spiralling dust, and gromril armour gleamed in the murk. New voices sounded beyond the wall's ruins, their Khazalid battle cries dour and dolorous.

Vlad watched as the dwarfs began their charge, saw the golden gleam of Gelt's mask amongst the runic banners. An army had been needed, and now an army there was. Shrugging his acceptance, the vampire prepared to slip from the gatehouse to join the battle that was raging below, unaware of the eyes that tracked his every movement.

Mannfred von Carstein had arrived in Middenheim a few days earlier, all but recovered from his trials in Athel Loren. Archaon had accepted the vampire's allegiance readily, but had since then missed few opportunities to remind the vampire of his place. Mannfred's comfort in his new station would have been shaken further had he realised that Archaon's plan was not merely the world's domination, but its destruction. However, the Everchosen had shared his true intentions with few beyond his inner circle, and had been in no hurry to speak of his goals with a turncoat such as Mannfred.

All told, Mannfred was already regretting his decision. He had no use for the Chaos Gods – no star shone brighter in the vampire's personal firmament than his own – and servitude to a northlander warlord was little better than labouring beneath Nagash's ungrateful gaze. However, catching sight of Vlad amongst Middenheim's ruins had reminded the vampire of the true architect of his woes. His sire had always cast a long shadow, and Mannfred was tired of dwelling in it. Before, the Great Necromancer's patronage had caused the younger von Carstein to hesitate over plans to eliminate his elder. Now, Mannfred had no such qualms.

Elsewhere, fate – or at least, the vagaries of Teclis' spell – had brought Tyrion and the Emperor beneath the shadow of the western wall. The two Incarnates materialised almost within sight of one another, and certainly close enough for the Emperor to recognise the proud banners of Caledor and Lothern flying at Tyrion's side. Between them, squealing skaven boiled forth from their filthy nests in the wall's barrack rooms and magazine tunnels. Lumbering, armoured rat ogres towered over scurrying slaves, vile oils seeping across lank fur as their prosthetic weapons began to whine and spark.

The Emperor had seen such twisted beasts before, had fought them altogether too many times upon the walls of conquered Averheim. Tyrion had not, but he recognised at once the evils the weaponised rat ogres could wreak. As one, the Incarnates hurled their knights against the disordered mass of skaven.

As yet, the ratmen didn't fully appreciate their plight. As far as they were concerned, they were deep in safe territory, with many thousands of allies within the immediate vicinity. The converging hosts of knights were no great threat; they were massively outnumbered, destined for the bone-pot and scavenge-pile. Just as it ever had, the thought of plunder brought the skaven courage, and they levelled their spears as they scurried to meet the charge.

However, from the centre of the anarchic spear-wall, Visretch, the Verminlord whose opportunist will held sway over that motley collection of clanrats, recognised a danger beyond that of steel and fury. It was not simply that he had felt the pressure of Teclis' spell upon the winds of magic. He had, and it had caused the rat-daemon a moment of blinding pain. It was the taste of something more than mortal amongst the galloping ranks of the foe that seized his attention.



Too late, the Verminlord recognised Tyrion for what he was. Visretch realised the Incarnate's nature only in the instant before a brilliant white light swept out from the elf's upraised blade. At once, skaven war cries collapsed into screeches of panic and pain as clanrats clapped their paws to sightless eyes. The ratmen nearest the oncoming knights tore at the clawbands behind them, desperately trying to escape the terrible thunder of hooves. Rat ogres, their handlers struggling with the sudden sensory overload, fired wildly into the dusk.

Warpstone bullets and great gouts of sickly emerald flame tore through the air. A few found their targets amongst Tyrion's knights, and princes of Caledor were hurled from their steeds, or vanished in clouds of warpfire. However, by far the greater part of the barrage wasted itself on empty air, or spent its fury within the skaven ranks. Huge gaps opened up between the ragged banners, and Tyrion – who had somehow been untouched even though he rode at the charge's forefront – ordered his knights to strike against those weak points.

On the far side of the skaven swarm, the Emperor's knights had not fared nearly so well as Tyrion's. Here, the ratmen had mostly kept their nerve. Rat ogres and jezzail teams poured their fire into the Imperial knights. Their efforts were marred only by occasional – and spectacular – failures within firing mechanisms, and their own thick gunsmoke which the thermals gusted to hide the targets. Thus was the Emperor's charge marked by empty saddles, and slewing, screaming horses, but the losses served only to fuel the survivors' determination. Alone of the warriors Teclis had brought to Middenheim that eve, they fought to avenge the city as much as to any other purpose. Slain fellows and the slighted buildings were all the spur they needed to crush their fears and charge home through the stinking powder smoke.

On the battles raged, and on the Incarnates fought, through odds heavily stacked against them. Fresh northlanders came screaming to the fight, reinforcing shield walls that already outnumbered the foe several times over. Skaven poured from their lairs in the Fauschlag's depths, sensing victory and plunder. Daemons were drawn through the thin veil of reality, and brought fire and death to a night already heavy with both.

Heroes were forged in those twilit hours, their legends carved in a moment of supreme need, and then forgotten forever as their deeds were surpassed. The champions of the north earned glory as never before, their forms rippling and changing as the Chaos Gods favoured them with new gifts. The Dark Brothers of the void had seen no finer entertainment in many a millennia. They drank in its heady brew, unconcerned that their plan of ages would stand or fall with the battle's outcome.

As night fell, and the solitary moon rose, the Emperor looked up to see the stars shining brightly overhead. He was wearier than the other Incarnates, for he no longer had the power of Azyr to lean upon, but sight of those ancient, enduring celestial bodies gave him fresh strength. In truth, the battle was going far better than he had expected. He and Tyrion were making slow and bloody progress towards the Temple of Ulric and the great excavation, but any progress was welcome. Each step, each crossroad, was won only at great cost, but the resistance was somehow weaker than he had expected. The Emperor took heart from this, assuming that it could only be because other Incarnates still fought within Middenheim's walls. In this, he was correct, but even he did not yet understand the full meaning behind his assumption.

The Emperor had forgotten that eight winds had been freed from the vortex, eight winds that had sought mortal hosts to contain their power. No one in Middenheim had guessed what had happened to Ghur, the Wind of Beasts. They knew only what Teclis had told them, that it had escaped far to the east during the great vortex's collapse, and that it was too distant to be recovered. But there was nonetheless an eighth Incarnate in Middenheim, and an eighth army – unwittingly gathered up by Teclis' desperate enchantment – and the rubble of the Merchant District shook to its fury.

The eighth army, the Beast-Waaagh!, did not know what had brought it to Middenheim, nor how the world teetered on the brink of oblivion. It did not fight for a material purpose, for honour, or even in defiance of an encroaching doom. It hacked, thumped and butted its way through the city's ruin out of no cause other than the joy of the fight. With every foe that fell beneath its onslaught, the eighth army's battle cry grew louder. It began in the pit of the stomach, a deep and feral rumble that rose to echo from the half-collapsed buildings. It snuffed out the northlanders' war cries as if they were nothing, and drowned out the maddened screeching of the skaven.

WAAAGH!

Orcs spilled through the streets of the merchant district like a green tide, and northlanders beyond counting drowned beneath them. Nowhere in that night of blades was the slaughter deeper than where the Beast-Waaagh! surged. Crude blades hacked down through fur-draped shields and steel helms, the spittle-flecked furore of the northmen met and overwhelmed by greenskin war-lust. Orcs hacked at their foes until their choppas broke, and then hammered at them with bunched fists.

The greenskins' warlord fought at their head, a massive broken-toothed black orc whose axe danced a bloody

whirlwind through the foe. Where he strode, shield-walls split apart, northlander champions collapsed headless, and the monstrous beasts of the north fell dismembered amongst their own stinking fluids. He was tireless, and as wild as the mountains. The warlord was furious at having been snatched unceremoniously from his granite throne, and that wrath lent further weight to his already punishing blows. He did not truly understand the power flowing through him, believed only that Gork's favour was upon him. In truth, the source of the power – and indeed, its very presence – mattered little. Grimgor Ironhide never walked away from a fight.

The power of Ghur rippled outwards with Grimgor's every axe-stroke, a portion of his earth-shaking might shared with those who fought with him. There were not just greenskins in Grimgor's ranks, but ogres too. Their tribes had been conquered months before, and they now fought for the orc as readily as they had ever battled for their overtyrant. Food and fighting were the twin spurs set against every ogre's uncomplicated soul, and Grimgor had provided both in ever-increasing amounts.

Hundreds upon hundreds of northlanders and skaven flooded into the merchant district, but still the orcs could not be contained. Where the armies of the other Incarnates fought with desperation, there was something boisterous, even joyous, in the Beast-Waaagh!'s war. Their confidence doubled and redoubled with every enemy banner that toppled, and every northlander chieftain hacked down beneath Grimgor's axe. Their own casualties mounted just as a swiftly as those of their foes, but neither orc nor ogre paid the dead any heed.

Thus did the Beast-Waaagh! draw the attention of a vastly disproportionate amount of the Chaos horde. To begin with, none of Archaon's lieutenants recognised the aimless manner of Grimgor's advance. Not realising that greater threats to their master's plan fought elsewhere, they met its fury with whatever they could muster. Only Darkh'dwel, sly Verminlord of the shadows, recognised the opportunity at hand. He correctly guessed that the orcs were not yet of common purpose with the other invaders, and would fight them with as much gusto as they battled the Chaos horde.



Mustering several skaven warlords whose naked ambition or snivelling failure had displeased him, Darkh'dwel ordered an assault on the Beast-Waaagh!'s eastern flank. As Grimgor's ragged advance shifted to meet the new threat, so too did its course through the city veer towards the Wynd, and the Host of Shadow. Darkh'dwel watched the battle shift from atop a temple-spire, pleased with his machinations. It was well worth the sacrifice of a few hundred clanrats to set the elves and orcs at one another's throats. With a chittering laugh, the Verminlord decamped from the spire, and went in search of biddable troops. He would let the invaders tear and gouge each other to the point of mutual destruction. Only then would he seize victory in the Horned Rat's name.

Grimgor was not the only being to have been unintentionally drawn into Teclis' enchantment. The Bloodthirster Ka'Bandha, bound by the triple-magics of life, shadow and light, had been borne up into the ether by the same spell that had claimed his captors. For what had seemed like an age, the daemon had been buffeted through the roiling winds of magic, tossed dizzyingly between the mortal and immortal realms.

As Darkh'dwel began to draw off the Beast-Waaagh! in Malekith's direction, Ka'Bandha at last tore free from the sorcerous hurricane. The Bloodthirster blazed through the air like a falling star, his impact bringing fresh ruin to the shattered dwellings of the Grafsmund. Northlanders, expecting some new assault in that night of harsh surprises, charged towards the crater with weapons drawn, only to fall forward onto their knees in worship as Ka'Bandha rose from the broken ground.

Rubble spilled from the Bloodthirster's fire-scorched flesh as he dragged himself upright. Ka'Bandha was grievously wounded from the Incarnate's magics and the crushing impact of his fall, but the pain troubled him not. The shame of failure, of a skull unclaimed, burned within the daemon's black heart. Only the Emperor's blood could wash that stain away; only his skull could forestall Archaon's dark mockery and Khorne's unbridled rage.

Roaring with frustration, Ka'Bandha lashed out with his hammer-flail, pulverising a score of the kneeling northlanders. As if in response to that wrathful offering, the wind shifted. Amidst the reek of smoke, of filth and of death, the Bloodthirster caught the scent of the Emperor's blood. Ka'Bandha roared again, a gut-wrenching bellow that shook the unseated stones about him. The kneeling northlanders felt the daemon's bloodlust flood thick and hot through their veins. Throwing back their heads, they howled in response, the cries ragged in the dark as their humanity slipped away. As Ka'Bandha strode away, the northlanders followed, running on all fours as often as upon two legs. The Blood Hunt was not yet over.



Archaon knew his city was under assault – such was the clamour, it would have been impossible for things to be otherwise. Yet the Lord of the End Times made no move to join the fighting. Middenheim had all but served its purpose, and its defenders, if they did but know it, were close to outlasting their usefulness also. The Empire was done, its childish creeds and make-believe gods proven as the lies they were. All that remained was the ritual, and the final glory of the Chaos Gods.

Yet Archaon was not so foolish as to take victory for granted. He had no desire to answer for the ritual's failure if the invaders somehow breached the chambers beneath the Fauschlag. Nor, it seemed, did the Chaos Gods want to see their plans fail, for they gathered champions to reinforce the Everchosen's horde.

These newcomers mustered at the Temple of Ulric, awaiting the Everchosen's order. Preening Sigvald and brutish Throgg had been plucked from distant lands at the gods' whims. Isabella von Carstein had no choice. With the daemon Bolorog bound to her soul, she was a slave to Nurgle's commands, though there was little sign that this concerned her in the slightest. As midnight approached, these champions of Chaos spread out across the city at Archaon's command. Daemonic legions followed close behind the new arrivals – numbers would overwhelm the invaders, if skill did not.

Archaon rose from his throne of skulls, the Swords of Chaos silently gathering to his side. With a last sneer at Ghal Maraz, the Everchosen left the Temple of Ulric behind, and marched out into the battle-wracked city.

The final hours were nigh.

The manacles were heavy, and Teclis' wrists were already chafed raw by their rusted loops. As the mage staggered up the slope of the Ulricsmund, a sudden sharp tug on the chain's distant end made him stumble forward, all but losing his footing on the hill's broken cobblestones.

Around Teclis, mocking laughter echoed out from black-visored helms as the knights took amusement from his humiliation. With either his staff or sword to hand, the mage would have stilled their laughter, even at the price of his own life, but both were far away, stolen by the magister who led the ceremony in the caverns beneath the Fauschlag.

Another sharp tug brought Teclis staggering to Archaon's side. The Everchosen was staring out into the night, watching the blaze of light and shadow playing out across the stolen city.

'Come, mage,' Archaon said, winding the loops of chain tight about the pommel of his saddle. 'Tell me what you see.'

Teclis' gaze followed the arc of the Everchosen's outstretched hand. In truth, he could glean little from the sight that his captor did not already know. Even without his staff, the mage could sense the ebb and flow of magics, could read the winds well enough to know that his conjuration had worked – albeit in a more haphazard manner than he would have wished. Grimgor Ironhide was a particular surprise, though in hindsight Teclis realised how inevitable his arrival had been. However much they might have disliked it, the Incarnates were tied together by bonds of magic. Fate, as much as Teclis, had delivered them here, but the rest would be up to them.

However, Teclis sensed that Archaon wasn't truly interested in the answer. The warlord's tone had carried the dryness of rhetoric – he was making a heavy-handed point, nothing more. Not that Teclis had to play the Everchosen's game.

'I see the end of all you have planned,' Teclis replied, 'and the fall of your Dark Gods.'

Archaon laughed, a heavy and hollow sound. 'Such defiance, even now. Have you truly no fear of me?'

Any other would have made a threat of those words, thought Teclis, but the Everchosen's voice contained only honest enquiry. The man was an enigma. He cloaked himself in unyielding brutality, but there was a facet to his soul that reminded Teclis of his own twin brother's. Archaon made no gesture without cause and uttered no words without purpose. He was a black fire blazing at the heart of a world-consuming inferno, and yet Teclis could not shake the feeling that the man who had become the Everchosen would have been one of the mortal realm's greatest heroes, had his path been but a little different.

'What would it matter?' Teclis said. 'My life and death are irrelevant now.'

How easily those words came, he thought. Was this the same calm that Lileath had felt as she guided the dagger between her own ribs?

Archaon stared down at Teclis. The eyelets of the Everchosen's helmet were as black as the night, limpid pools of darkness that laid the mage's soul bare.

'Let me tell you what I see,' Archaon said. 'I see a battle already won, and the dying spasms of an age that is already ended.'

He hauled on the chain once again. This time, Teclis was unable to keep his balance, and fell heavily onto his knees before the Everchosen.

'But maybe I am mistaken,' Archaon mocked. 'Does one of your allies have the power to defeat all my armies? For that is what shall be needed.' He leaned low in his saddle, his voice suddenly low, conspiratorial. 'Your brother, perhaps?'

'Armies are not the only expression of strength,' Teclis said, shaking his head. 'And it will be the Emperor, not my brother, who brings about your doom.'

Archaon laughed at that, the booming tones soon taken up by his entourage. The Everchosen let the sound ring out for a few moments, then cut it short with a chop of his hand.

'Karl Franz is a weakling,' he said dismissively, and turned his steed away.

Teclis lurched to his feet as the chain between them went tight once more. 'He is not Karl Franz,' he said, the words strangely clear above the distant din of battle.

Archaon swung around, his voice low and dangerous. 'What did you say?'

Teclis met the Everchosen's empty stare without flinching, his thoughts drifting back to the golden presence at his side in King's Glade. 'He is not Karl Franz, not any longer – he is Sigmar. Did you really believe that the Heldenhammer would do nothing as you razed his Empire?'

'SIGMAR IS A LIE!' roared Archaon.

Teclis staggered as the back of the Everchosen's gauntlet smashed into the side of his mouth. He would have fallen had not the chain suddenly gone taut.

'We shall see,' Teclis said calmly, recovering his balance. He spat a broken tooth onto the cobbles, and wished that he felt as confident as he sounded. He spoke no other word as the column of knights descended into the blackness of the great excavation.









THE HOST OF HEAVENS

The Emperor
The Reiksguard
One brotherhood of Reiksguard Knights
The Knightly Orders
One regiment of Knights of the Blazing Sun, one regiment of Knights Panther
The Knights Griffon
One brotherhood of Demigryph Knights
Corber's Bordermen
One company of Outriders, one company of Pistoliers

THE HOST OF DEATH

Nagash, Supreme Lord of the Undead
Arkhan the Black, Mortarch of Sacrament
Krell, Mortarch of Despair
The Doomed Legion
One warband of Black Knights, one warband of Grave Guard, one warband of Skeleton Warriors
The Silent Legion
One host of Morghast Archai
The Hollow Legion
One host of Morghast Archai
The Bloodmoon Legion
One host of Morghast Harbingers
The Forsworn Legion
One host of Morghast Harbingers

THE THRONG OF METAL

Balthasar Gelt, Incarnate of Metal
Gotri Hammerson
Runelord
The Zhufbar Firebores
Three throngs of Thunderers, one of Dwarf Warriors, two batteries of Cannons, one battery of Organ Guns
The Ironclads
One throng of Ironbreakers, one throng of Irondrakes
The Holzengard
One throng of Hammerers
The Blackwater Squadron
One squadron of Gyrocopters

THE HOST OF FIRE

Caradryan, Incarnate of Fire
Varandi
Anointed of Asuryan on Flamespyre Phoenix
The Flamehearts
One regiment of Phoenix Guard
The Eataine Guard
One legion of High Elf Spearmen
The Cinderrain
One regiment of High Elf Archers
The Tower's Lament
One regiment of Swordmasters of Hoeth
The Last Pride
One regiment of White Lions, one White Lion Chariot
The Crimson Draichs
One cult of Executioners
The Shrine of Sanguine Repentance
One Bloodwrack Shrine
The Guardians of the Hidden Flame
One kinband of Deepwood Scouts
The Talsyn Hearthwardens
One kinband of Eternal Guard
The Dance of Flames
One kinband of Wardancers



THE HOST OF SHADOW

Malekith the Eternity King
The Eternity Guard
One tower of Black Guard, one legion of Phoenix Guard, one kinband of Wildwood Rangers
The Winterborn
One kinband of Sisters of the Thorn
The Chaindancers
One troupe of Sisters of Slaughter
The Ravenspears
One vanguard of Dark Riders
The Krakensides
One crew of Black Ark Corsairs, three Reaper Bolt Throwers
The Shadows of Naggaroth
Two regiments of Darkshards
The Revenants of Khaine
One regiment of High Elf Spearmen, one regiment of High Elf Archers
Raema's Vengeance
Two War Hydras, one Kharibdyss

THE HOST OF LIFE

Alarielle, Incarnate of Life
Durthu
Naestra and Arahan
Skarana
Treeman Ancient
The Everguard
Two Handmaidens of the Everqueen, one regiment of Sisters of Avelorn
The Ashenhawks
Two kinbands of Glade Guard, one kinband of Deepwood Scouts, one kinband of Glade Riders
The Gnarled
One war-grove of Tree Kin
Sisters of the Eternal Grove
Three war-groves of Dryads
The Oathkeepers
One kinband of Wild Riders of Kurnous

THE HOST OF LIGHT

Tyrion, Incarnate of Light
Imrik, Crown Prince of Caledor
Prince Daenyl the Unbowed
Prince on Dragon
Ellyrian's Vengeance
Two regiments of Ellyrian Reavers
The Echo of Hoofbeats
One regiment of Tiranoc Chariots
The Sun's Last Rays
Two Lothern Skycutters
The Knights of Alabast
One regiment of Silver Helms
The Darkblade Guard
Two regiments of Cold One Knights
The Spears of Talagand
One regiment of High Elf Spearmen

THE BEAST-WAAAGH!

Grimgor, Incarnate of Beasts
Da Immortulz
One vast mob of Black Orcs
The Mawseekers
Two regiments of Ogres, one regiment of Ironguts, one regiment of Leadbelchers
Da Bigladz
One horde of Boar Boy Big 'Uns, two hordes of Orc Big 'Uns
Rolling Death
Three Ogre Ironblasters
Mog Maglog
Giant

THE EVERCHOSEN'S HORDE

Archaon Everchosen

The Swords of Chaos
Three dark brotherhoods of Chaos Knights, three warbands of Chaos Warriors, two warbands of Chosen

The Tribes of the North
Five warbands of Chaos Marauders, three warbands of Marauder Horsemen, four packs of Chaos Warhounds

The Ironclad Avalanche
Two regiments of Skullcrushers

The Bringer of Glories
Chaos Warshrine

The Everdamned
One great swarm of Chaos Spawn, two Slaughterbrutes, one Mutalith Vortex Beast

The Crimson Wheels
Three Chaos Chariots, two Gorebeast Chariots

THE COTERIE OF PERFECTION

Sigvald the Magnificent

The Glorious Host
Two courts of Daemonettes, three courts of Seekers

The Perfumed Death
Two courts of Daemonettes, two courts of Seekers

The Beautiful Kyn
Two packs of Fiends

The Squealers
One pack of Fiends

The Silkrip Slaughtercade
One Exalted Seeker Chariot of Slaanesh, three Seeker Chariots of Slaanesh

THE ARMY OF BLIGHT

Isabella the Accursed

The Legion of Corprust
Three tallybands of Plaguebearers, one tallyband of Plague Drones

The Cacklerattles
Three swarms of Nurglings

The Effulgent
Five Beasts of Nurgle

THE MONSTROUS HORDE

Throgg

Wintertooth's Bite
Three warbands of Chaos Trolls

The Devolved
One regiment of Forsaken

Hunger's Sons
Two warbands of Chaos Ogres

The Sons of Krakanrok
One Dragon Ogre Shaggoth, two warbands of Dragon Ogres

The Fangmaws
Three Chimeras

The Last Stampede
One Doombull, three warherds of Minotaurs, three Ghorgons

Rhorgos the Deformed
Slaughterbrute

Dhorburk Drugk
Chaos Giant



THE MURDERCULT

Hellebron

Karan'gar
Bloodthirster of Unfettered Fury

The Cult of the Blood Queen
Two warbands of Witch Elves, one regiment of Executioners, one regiment of High Elf Spearmen, one flock of Harpies

The Whipsisters
One regiment of Sisters of Slaughter

The Bloodwake
One warband of Wrathmongers

The Red Tide
Two warbands of Skullreapers

The Goremongers
One warband of Skullreapers

The Skullrage
One regiment of Skullcrushers

The Darkling Herd
One Wargor, three vast warherds of Gor, two warherds of Minotaurs, three regiments of Ungor, one regiment of Centigor

THE BLOOD HUNT

Ka'Bandha
Wrath of Khorne Bloodthirster

The Huntskards
Three warbands of Bloodletters, one warband of Bloodcrushers

The Hounds
Two packs of Flesh Hounds

The Barbadax
Two batteries of Skull Cannons

The Feralkin
One vast warband of Chaos Marauders

The Skulltaker Hounds
One colossal pack of Chaos Warhounds

DARKH'DWEL'S GRAND CLAWPACK OF DEVIOUS DECEIT

Darkh'dwel
Verminlord Deceiver

Clan Skritt
Warlord, two clawpacks of Stormvermin, four clawpacks of Clanrats

Clan Vrrtkin
Chieftain, one clawpack of Stormvermin, two clawpacks of Clanrats, six clawpacks of Skavenslaves

The Longbite Killers
Two clawpacks of Jezzails

The Kill-sneak Slicers
One clawpack of Gutter Runners, one clawpack of Night Runners, Warp-Grinder Weapon Teams

Greevik's Wonderweapons
Three Warlock Engineers, three Warp Lightning Cannons, two clawpacks of Poisoned Wind Globadiers

The Lumber-smash Beasts
Three packs of Stormfiends, two packs of Rat Ogres

The Scurryswarms
Two packs of Giant Rats, three large Rat Swarms

THE FALL OF SHADOW

On the edge of the Wynd, the skaven horde was in full retreat, the slow trampled by the swift as they sought to escape the Host of Shadow's vengeance. Clawed and murderous shadow-things, called into being by Malekith's wrath, swept over those who lagged behind. The blackfire constructs left only bloody and lacerated flesh in their passing, and the Eternity King's mortal vanguard advanced unopposed over skaven corpses. The ratmen spilled over the rubble of the looted and half-collapsed engineer's guildhall, and out onto the wasteland that bordered the great excavation. Only there did a line of stormvermin hold their ground, more afraid of the looming shadow in their own ranks than those that howled upon the wind.

The Eternity Guard bore the brunt of what little fighting there was. Malekith's cavalry was at its most vulnerable in the tightly-packed streets of the Wynd, and had been ordered to hang back until the Host of Shadow breached Middenheim's broader thoroughfares. Their absence had made little difference thus far. Casualties had been light, and each victory had come swifter than the last. There were those in Malekith's ranks who believed this their just due, for were they not the finest warriors of elfdom, come to war in righteous cause? However, the Eternity King knew disquiet. Arrogance had led Malekith astray many times over the course of his long and wayward existence. With the fate of the very world at stake, he was minded to be more cautious. The battle for the Wynd had been too easy. A trap was brewing – Malekith could feel it pricking at his skin.

Thus, as the Host of Shadow approached the guildhall ruins, and the dull red stormvermin shield wall, the Eternity King gave orders that his increasingly strung-out army should gather itself tight once more. Ignoring the sling-shots and throwing stars that flickered out of the darkness, and with a swiftness and poise that only elves could have managed in that corpse-choked rubble, the Host of Shadow reformed into the *elcroi* – the hunter's spear. The infantry formed the spearhead; the other forces, Malekith included, served as the elcroi's staff – all save the sisters of slaughter, who roamed freely as they had since the battle's start. The gladiatrixes submitted to no other will – not even their king's.

From within a pall of shadow at the centre of the stormvermin, the Verminlord Darkh'dwel sneered. The elves had been so predictable. Even now, weapon teams were moving into position amongst the soot-stained buildings to the east of the advancing column. Utterly taken in by Darkh'dwel's feigned retreat, the elves had not even thought to search the ruins, and instead marched blindly against the only obvious threat. Not for the first time, Darkh'dwel pondered why the elf realms had proven so resistant to domination over the millennia. For a moment, the Verminlord was tempted to undo the second little surprise he had prepared. Then his sensitive ears picked up the sound of panicked scurrying – and, more importantly, bellowed cries of *Waaagh!* – to the west. Darkh'dwel shrugged, the gesture invisible to those outside the pall of shadow. It was too late now.

The elves heard the commotion to the west a heartbeat after Darkh'dwel. At first, they missed the significance. All of Middenheim was in uproarious battle, and one chorus of desperate skaven sounded much like another. A few of the elves – Malekith included – heard the booming orc voices, but these sounds too had fallen and risen with the squalling wind, and none thought them at all remarkable.

Moments later, a swarm of shrieking skaven burst through the ruins of the guildhall's western workshops. They scurried just as desperately as those who had fled the elves' advance – even more so, in fact. Malekith marked the danger at once and shouted orders through the sudden uproar. None needed them. The elcroi was not merely an assault column, but one employed if an ambush threatened. Horns blared, and the western half of the elcroi's haft made a half-turn, spears and halberds steadying against the charge.



As the elves snapped into position, the first greenskins charged into view amongst the workshop ruins. They came over the rubble at a lumbering run, crude totems of bone and ragged cloth flying high above, their armour and shields already stained red with skaven blood. They thundered forward with battle-mad abandon, the already indistinct lines of the mobs blurring and shifting as orcs vied with one another to reach the fight first. Only where the black orcs marched was there any sense of discipline. Those thickly-armoured warriors did not so much as break step as they advanced. They strode on in perfect order, somehow keeping pace with the other rampaging greenskins, who got in one another's way as often as not.

Trapped between greenskin brutes and the shining blades of the elves, the skaven went berserk. In their doomed ferocity, the ratmen tore at one another, at the orcs and at the elves. They howled and screeched,

mouths foaming and eyes wild. Elves collapsed as chisel-teeth tore their throats away. Orcs roared and died as a dozen gouging, thrusting blades tore them apart. But for the most part, it was the skaven who did the dying. Their desperation could never match the icy discipline of the elves, or the battle-lust of the orcs. For every foe the ratmen brought down, a score of their own number fell dead.

Grimgor Ironhide was lost in the thick of battle. He ignored those skaven who fled, instead, shouldering his way through to those rare areas of resistance where a skaven warlord had succeeded in rallying a desperate band of spears against the rout. One such challenge loomed now – a motley band of clanrats and stormvermin sheltered amongst the three remaining walls of an ammunition store. Orc and skaven dead lay ringed upon the cracked flagstones, the coughs of ratling guns betraying that bullets, not blades, held the greenskins at bay. As Grimgor advanced, he saw dirty green smoke blossom from amongst the wattle and brick, heard the crack and thud as the warpstone slugs tore through shields and into the greenskin flesh beyond.

With a roar of challenge, Grimgor hurled himself forwards, his heavy footfalls thudding down amongst the dead. The Immortulz, each a black orc almost as fearsome as the warlord, picked up the Waaagh!-cry and barrelled in behind him. Bullets cracked and whined as Grimgor charged through the smoke, but the warlord had chosen his approach well, and one of the storehouse's remaining walls shielded him from the worst of the fire. Even so, several bullets ricocheted from Grimgor's lucky armour, and another creased his already battle-scarred scalp. Behind him, an Immortul gurgled and died as a salvo shot his guts away. Ahead, the storehouse was lit with a sudden green fire as one of the ratling guns jammed at an inopportune moment. Emerald lightning sparked from within the storehouse, scorching Grimgor's left side, and leaving two more Immortulz dead. But the warlord was almost at the wall, and nothing short of death could have slowed him.

Grimgor gave a last bellowed shout, felt the fury of the wild rise, and rammed his shoulder against the storehouse's battered brick. The wall, already weakened by fire, collapsed in a shower of dust. Two massive slabs of bonded brickwork hinged open where the black orc's shoulder struck, then slammed down, crushing the skaven who had used the wall as shelter moments before. Ignoring the sounds of desperate squeals and crunching bone, Grimgor charged on through the dust, dislodged tiles clattering off his armour. He thudded across one of the fallen brickwork slabs, his trusty axe Gitsnik whirling in bloody arcs as he travelled. A skaven fell dead with every hack and cut of that massive blade, slaughtered by an instinct honed on more battlefields than Grimgor could count.

The skaven were quickly finding that their haven had become a tomb. A ragged wall of shields disintegrated beneath Gitsnik's brutal edge, their bearers hurled bleeding and dying into the skaven that came behind. The skaven warlord shrieked a command, and a second, tighter wall pressed forward, but the Immortulz had reached their warboss' side, and this wall disintegrated beneath the black orcs' heavy blades.

Grimgor bore down on the warlord, but the skaven had one last trick to play. As Gitsnik arced down, a sudden shrieking howl sounded from the warboss' right, and a rat ogre's massive, knuckled fist slammed into the side of his head. Grimgor staggered under the blow, and the rat ogre lashed out again. The skaven warlord – seeing his opening – lunged his saw-toothed blade at the black orc's belly.





Neither blow landed. With a savage bellow, Grimgor butted the rat ogre full in the face. The beast's teeth splintered under the impact, and it reeled back in sudden pain. In the same moment, the black orc's gauntleted fingers closed around the warlord's weapon hand. Grimgor wrenched the skaven off his feet, whirled the ratman through the air, and slammed him down onto the rubble in front of him. Before the warlord could regain his footing, a heavy boot crashed down onto his skull. There was a sharp crack, a brief squeal and then the warlord lay still. With a roar, the rat ogre hurled itself forward to avenge its master, then fell dead as an underarm blow from Gitsnik split the hulking beast from crotch to sternum.

Grimgor! Grimgor! The Immortulz saw their warboss' triumph and bellowed his name as they slaughtered the remaining skaven. The shout echoed through the guildhouse ruins, and was then taken up by hundreds of other voices. As the chant grew in volume, the orcs barrelled forward with redoubled strength, hacking apart and stomping flat the last bastions of skaven resistance. Most were disappointed – the ratmen had died too easily. Then the leading greenskins caught sight of the Host of Shadow, and they bared their fangs in anticipatory grins.

Grimgor! Grimgor! Malekith heard the chant rise, and knew it boded only trouble. The Eternity King had allowed himself a moment of self-congratulation as the new threat swept out of the west, but only a moment. The skaven were of little threat – those that were not already dead would perish soon enough, he had no doubt about that. However, the orcs were another matter. The Eternity King had no idea what had brought the greenskins to Middenheim, but the why of things hardly mattered. Malekith perceived the power of Ghur flowing amongst them, but he had fought greenskins often enough to

know that their belligerence would easily overcome any form of common cause – if indeed the orcs even recognised that one existed.

Deeming that a wasteful battle was nigh, Malekith ordered the eastern formations of the elcroi to turn westwards. The Eternity King would meet the inevitable greenskin charge with every blade at his command.

To the north, Darkh'dwel's ominous presence held the line of stormvermin in check. The Verminlord knew that the orcs would likely need no further encouragement to carry their battle on into the elves, but he was not the kind to leave anything to chance. At a gesture from Darkh'dwel, nightrunners slipped through the shadows of the eastern buildings, and concealed weapon teams opened fire.

The skaven artillery fire began haphazardly at first, as different teams received their instructions at different times. Some didn't even wait for their orders, but simply began firing as soon as they heard their neighbours do so. The torrent of fire soon thickened, with the angry sizzle of warp lightning joining the bass thud of Skryre mortars and the sharp cracks of jezzails.

Those first shots could have torn the elves bloody, had they been aimed into Malekith's ranks. However, Darkh'dwel's orders had been quite specific, and none of his gunners had the courage to disobey. Thus, the bolts of lightning, gas shells and warpstone bullets whistled over the Host of Shadow, and struck home in Grimgor's anarchic ranks.

Crackling bolts of energy gouged through the greenskins, flinging charred corpses high in the air. Murky green smoke burst from shattered globes, orcs gasping their last as the vapours liquefied their innards. Heavy bullets punched through armour, flesh and bone. Almost as one, the orcs looked up to see where the shots had come from. In the middle-distance, they saw the muzzle-flares of jezzails and warp lightning cannons, and before them, the line of elves. There could be only one response. With a bellow that shook the ruins, the leading edge of Grimgor's horde surged towards the elves.

WAAAGH!

Had Malekith not reinforced the eastern half of the elcroi with regiments from the west, the elves would have been swept away by the ferocity of the greenskin assault. As it was, the line held, if just barely. Choppas hacked down, splintering shields and driving aside halberd blades. Helms split asunder beneath the punishing blows, severed limbs flopped to the ground, but the Host of Shadow held. Their response was no less fearsome. Spears punched through thick leather or penetrated the weak-points in steel armour. Woodland glaives clashed with choppas and knocked them aside. Gouts of reddish-black flame seared the air as Malekith's two hydras entered the battle. Spurred on by the lashes of their masters, the scaly beasts lumbered into a press of orc boyz. Fin-crested heads snapped and darted, plucking greenskins skywards, sometimes fighting amongst one another for the spoils, and tearing the screaming brutes apart in the process.

Seeing his infantry overmatched, Malekith ordered his cavalry into the battle. The Eternity King would have given an eye for some knights of Hag Graef or Caledor, but Teclis' spell had denied him such things. He had only light cavalry – dark cloaked raiders from northern Naggaroth, and cold-hearted huntresses from Athel Loren. These were no shock troops, and could not hope to break the greenskin horde, but they served well enough. Enchanted javelins and crossbow bolts rained down on the orcs' southern flank, each guided by a keen eye and a sure hand. Many a greenskin roared his last and fell dead as the whickering missiles struck home. With each salvo, sharp elven voices accused the orcs of being weakling cowards.

The greenskins instinctively recognised the insults for what they were, and these struck home within even more force than the javelin and bolt volleys. Soon, several warbands broke off from the assault on the main elven battle line to run the jeering cavalry down. However, no orc alive could match the pace of an elven steed – even in the tangled confines of the Wynd – and the greenskins were quickly outpaced by their tormentors. Again and again, the elves spurred away, halting only to taunt the greenskins with barbed words and barbed javelins anew.

Only then, with the greenskins and elves fully engaged, did the concealed weapon teams shift their fire, raining shot after shot indiscriminately into the close-fought melee. For the elves, the sudden shift was almost disastrous. Jezzail rounds thudded into their ranks, gouging bloody trails of dead and wounded at the very moment when every blade was sorely needed. Phoenix Guardsmen shuddered and collapsed as bullets struck home, and bursts of lightning seared through tightly packed ranks of darkshards and corsairs, leaving them smouldering corpses.

Two poisoned wind mortar shells were all it took to bring about the Krakensides' doom. Already beset by roaring black orcs, their formation collapsed when clouds of poison gas burst into its heart. Sea dragon scale was of no defence against that vile weapon. Dozens of the corsairs quickly succumbed, and those who did not were overwhelmed and hacked apart. That alone could have brought Malekith's host to ruin, had not the Revenants of Khaine pressed forward into the gap, braving the thinning clouds of toxic gas to stall the black orcs' offensive.



With his battle line so thickly beset by the greenskins, Malekith had few troops he could spare to clear the weapon teams from the eastern buildings. Taking to the skies, he urged Seraphon against the nearest cluster of ruins.

Lightning spat out from a collapsed archway and crackled across the dragon's mighty chest. Seraphon roared in pain, but she was a harder foe to fell than the elves and greenskins that had been the skaven gunners' intended victims. Diving hard, she struck the ruins with enough force to send debris raining onto the streets below. Quick as a snake, Seraphon's head darted through the collapsed archway, thick black smoke spewing from her jaws. Dozens of skaven collapsed as the noxious fumes flooded their lungs, their arcane weapons falling from their dying hands. Others attempted to flee, but Seraphon's snapping mouth caught them before they made the safety of the street beyond.

One ruin had been cleared of weapon teams, but fire rained down from at least a dozen more. Abruptly, the southmost ruin went silent. Malekith caught a glimpse of golden murder-masks amongst the darkness, and a sudden fever-pitch of shrieks that rang out even over the bellowing of the orcs. The Eternity King gave a cruel smile beneath his helm, and silently wished the chaindancers the joy of their hunt. Let the sisters of slaughter practise their skills upon the skaven weaponeers – there was work enough for Malekith elsewhere.

Turning Seraphon about once more, the Eternity King dove back towards his embattled army. The dragon's talons raked a mob of black orcs. Malekith's blackfire constructs tore in close behind, great shadowy pendulum blades that swept through those greenskins too slow to escape.

On the ground below, Grimgor marked the Eternity King's arrival into the fray, and knew at once that this was the foe he had to defeat. The warboss wasn't sure where the elves had come from, nor did he particularly care. All he knew was that there was a fight, and where there was a fight, there was a need to prove that Grimgor was the best! The warboss bellowed insults at the sky, daring the elf to face him, but the winged shadow remained airborne, unwilling – or unable – to face him. Grimgor decided to seek the elf's attention in a manner that could not be ignored.

Grimgor stomped across the battlefield with his retinue of Immortulz close behind. Malekith's refusal to meet his challenge had left the warboss in a black mood, and it was woe for anyone – friend or foe – who stood in his way. Word of Grimgor's temper spread rapidly after he cut down a dozen of his own lads for the crime of barring his way, and the greenskin lines quickly parted to allow their warboss into the very heart of the battle.

The warboss' arrival was dramatic, to say the least. A vast hydra, its flanks stained with orc blood, issued a booming hoot and lurched towards Grimgor. Gitsnik flashed out, and two of the beast's heads fell severed to the ground. The rest roared once in rage and pain, then lunged for the black orc, but too slow. Gitsnik came down in an overhead arc, crunching deep through the monster's ribs and splitting its heart in two. The remaining heads thrashed briefly and then fell limp, one crushing an Immortul to Grimgor's right. Spitting on the hydra's corpse, the warboss charged past the two beastmasters – who had been stunned witless by the swiftness of their pet's demise – and flung himself headlong into the ranks of Phoenix Guard beyond.

Gitsnik's first blow slew three of the Phoenix Guard. The heavy axe blade razored through the air, hacking through three necks, and a halberd staff raised to fend off the blow.

Grimgor's next strike severed an elf's arm, and his iron-shod boot lashed out to kick the unfortunate back into his fellows. The Immortulz crashed in behind their warboss, their weighty choppas crunching through elven plate. Still the Phoenix Guard held their ground, firm of heart and strong of arm, despite the crushing odds piled in against them.

On the edge of the great excavation, Darkh'dwel snickered foully as the two invaders slaughtered each other. Though the fire from his weapon teams had become increasingly sporadic – a sure sign that not all was well in the eastern ruins –not so much as a single elf had yet approached the line of stormvermin. At every minute the Verminlord had to resist the temptation to send his own forces down into the fight, to lead the warriors of the Under-Empire to a victory over both elves and orcs. This was what the Horned Rat demanded, and it was therefore Darkh'dwel's dream, but the reality of the situation was not lost on him. His few hundred stormvermin could not crush both armies – better to let the fools whittle each other down further before he claimed a glorious victory.

Malekith could see that the battle was not going well for the Host of Shadow. The greenskins were simply too many, and the elves too few. Furthermore, it was plain that the orcs were infused by the power of Ghur, making an already ferocious and hardy breed all the more formidable. The Eternity King saw the skaven lurking to the north, but he could do nothing about them – not yet. First, he would have to make an example of the orc warlord. Malekith had fought greenskins many times, and he knew that if he humbled the warboss, the Waaagh! would flee or splinter. Either would suit his purposes now.

Warned by some primal instinct, Grimgor flung himself aside as Seraphon roared overhead. Even then, he had almost been too late – the dragon's talons scored deep grooves in his armour. The Immortulz were neither so swift nor so fortunate. Nearly a dozen went down in a bloody smear from the talon-strike alone, and as many again perished to the dragon's fangs, or the chill blade of her rider.

At once, Grimgor lost all interest in the surviving Phoenix Guard. He had finally drawn the elves' warlord into the fight. Seraphon turned to face him, and Grimgor ran directly at her. Thick black smoke issued from the dragon's maw. All around Grimgor, black orcs choked and died, but the warboss came on, his one good eye closed and his lungs pounding as the smoke swirled about him. Only at the last moment, when the snorting of the dragon's nostrils was loud in his ears, did Grimgor open his eye, and his final lumbering step became a mighty leap. A moment later, the black orc's armoured boots crashed down on Seraphon's horned head. Grimgor skidded, but momentum carried him up the spined ridges of the dragon's neck and face-to-face with his foe.



So surprised was Malekith at the orc's audacious approach that he barely brought his own swords up to block Gitsnik's murderous arc. There was a flare of light as the two blades clashed, and such was the force of the impact that the Eternity King was nearly toppled from his saddle. Yet Malekith lashed out, the talons of his clawed gauntlet sinking deep into the thick muscle of Grimgor's upper arm. The black orc bellowed in pain, then slammed his heavy brow forward into the Eternity King's face. The Armour of Midnight's faceplate buckled beneath the blow. Malekith slumped back, dazed, his grip on Grimgor's arm torn free. The black orc raised his axe high again for a killing blow, bellowing in triumph. As if in response, Seraphon bucked hard. Malekith recovered enough of his wits to grasp hold of his saddle. Grimgor, with both fists locked about Gitsnik's haft, had no chance to find a handhold. With a roar of frustration, the black orc plunged from the dragon's back, and into a thicket of Phoenix Guard halberds.

To the north, Darkh'dwel saw the warboss and the king come away bloody from their clash. The elves and orcs had fought one another to a standstill, and now was the Verminlord's time for glory. With a chittering cry, Darkh'dwel hurled his stormvermin through the guildhouse ruins and onto the elves' northern flank. Those first to the fray perished in a heartbeat – they faced Malekith's Black Guard, and there were few foes more murderously efficient than they. Yet even the murderous could be overcome by sheer numbers, and Darkh'dwel's stormvermin far outnumbered their elven foes. Trapped between orcs to the west and skaven to the north, the Black Guard began to crumple.

Elsewhere, the shrieking of skaven and his own growing rage dragged Malekith from his daze. The greenskin brute had dented his armour! The Eternity King was dimly aware that his northern flank was in severe danger, but his focus remained on the black orc Incarnate. At Malekith's command, Seraphon lunged for Grimgor. The black orc was laying about himself with gusto, hacking down any elf who stood between him and Malekith. Seraphon darted forward, thinking to seize Grimgor in her jaws, but Gitsnik's wild blade tore through the scales of her neck, forcing the dragon to shy away. Seeing his triumph, the black orc bared his fangs and loosed an echoing *Waaagh!*.

The shout was taken up by those greenskins nearby, causing the air to glow a lambent amber. In response, a second cry of *Waaagh!* sounded from the west.

Hundreds more orcs came spilling through the rubble of the storehouses, choppas waving wildly. Behind them lumbered raucous giants, their booming voices and heavy footfalls shaking stones from the ruins. Boar riders forced their way up from the southwest, the groink and squeal of their mad-eyed steeds adding to the cacophony. And behind them all came the slab-muscled ogres. They alone did not give voice to the Waaagh!-cry, and instead bellowed out their own coarse feast songs.

His heart sinking, Malekith gazed westward, and saw his army's doom. The Eternity King was nothing if not a confident general, but he knew that he could not defeat the orcs, the ogres and the skaven at the same time. Nor could he win through by harnessing his own shadow-power. Though the one-eyed warboss made no conscious attempt to harness the power of Ghur, the wind of beasts more than made the orc Incarnate the Eternity King's physical equal.

The Malekith of old, the Witch King of Naggaroth, would have fled the field at that moment, would have retreated to lick his wounds with no thought of the cost to others. It was the only ending that pride would have allowed. But Malekith was no longer quite the selfish creature he had so recently been – or more accurately, that part of his nature was buried deeper than before. As Grimgor charged for him once more, the Eternity King had a sudden flash of inspiration. The situation could perhaps be rescued, though at the cost of his pride.

Malekith dropped from Seraphon's back. The orc warboss was less than a dozen paces away, his axe hacking down through the last of the Phoenix Guard. Steeling himself, the Eternity King strode directly towards his foe, sword raised.

An orc burst from the brawl to Malekith's left. He roared an unintelligible challenge, his spittle flecking the Eternity King's armour. Then he collapsed senseless as the warboss' fist smashed him aside. Clearly the black orc would allow no other to claim his victory. Malekith would have had it no other way, and quickened his pace towards the warboss. This was the moment in which he would discover whether he had read the other's character true. If he had not, then he would perish.

The orc roared again as Malekith approached, but the Eternity King ignored the brutish display. Swiftly and elegantly, the Eternity King sank down onto one knee, his head bowed and his sword proffered – pommel first – in the orc's direction.

'I yield,' he announced, the necessity of the words doing nothing to soften their bitterness.

The hulking orc froze mid-blow, and Malekith wondered at the thoughts racing through the brute's meagre mind.

'I yield,' he repeated. 'In my name, and in that of the elven race.'

The black orc gave no answer, at first. Then his lips hooked into a snarling smile, and he raised his axe high above his head.

'GRIMGOR IS DA BEST!' he bellowed, turning his back on Malekith and pounding a gauntleted fist against his armoured chest. The cry was taken up across the ruins of the guildhouse, a thousand greenskin voices shouting the declaration as one.

'No,' Malekith's voice, hard and steady, cut through the din.

Grimgor stiffened. He lowered his axe and turned, slowly – dangerously – to face the kneeling Malekith.

The Eternity King matched the warboss' one-eyed stare with his own. 'I came to this city to defeat a servant of the Dark Gods. The ratmen and the northlanders all serve him, this Everchosen. He seeks to destroy this world and everything on it.'

Grimgor growled threateningly, but his axe remained lowered.

'How can Grimgor be the best, if the world dies by another's hand?' Malekith asked slyly.

The warboss' frown deepened in an expression Malekith took for unaccustomed thought. 'Where is he?' rumbled the orc.

Malekith extended a thin finger northwards. 'At the bottom of that pit,' he guessed, then pressed on. 'I will show you, if you will permit us to fight at your side.'

'Pointy-ears are weak,' Grimgor growled.

'Then we have no chance of stealing your glory,' Malekith pointed out, 'and every opportunity to prove ourselves worthy of your rule.'

After a lengthy pause, a savage grin crossed the black orc's scarred features. Then, Grimgor beckoned Malekith to his feet. 'Come.'

Unseen beneath his mask, Malekith's lips twisted into a smile. He had sacrificed his pride, but a hope of victory yet remained. In any case, promises to lesser creatures had no meaning. If the orc survived the coming hours, then there would be a reckoning between them.

To the north, Darkh'dwel was realising how badly he had underestimated the might of the greenskin horde, but his forces were so committed to the battle that he could see no way of extracting them. Already, his stormvermin had pushed the Black Guard so far back that his own western flank had come under assault from bellowing orcs. A short distance ahead, the Verminlord could see occasional glimpses of both Malekith and Grimgor, but the press of bodies between them cheated his gaze as often as not.

With a chittering shriek, the Verminlord summoned the seething rats of Middenheim's sewers. They emerged from grates and outlet pipes; from amongst the rubble of the guildhouse's buildings. The squealing tide flooded beneath the embattled stormvermin, and swept across the orcs and elves. Razor-sharp claws tore at pale elven flesh and thick orcish hide; chisel teeth sank deep into throats and pulsing arteries. As his enemies vanished beneath writhing bodies and twitching tails, Darkh'dwel pressed southwards, clouds of shadow billowing about him. The stormvermin advanced behind their master, driven to a killing frenzy by the Verminlord's enchantments.

Had he been less certain of his own success, Darkh'dwel might have noticed that there were fewer and fewer elves amongst the dead, or that the banners of Naggaroth and Ulthuan had retreated further south. Similarly, he might also have realised that the sounds of battle to the south were no longer so strident as they had been. Instead, the Verminlord pressed on to where he had last seen Grimgor, his confidence growing with every greenskin that fell dead at his feet.

At last, the bellowing mass of greenskins parted, and Grimgor charged towards Verminlord's patch of shadow. Darkh'dwel chittered in anticipation of victory, and hurled his Doomstar at the oncoming warboss. Poison spattered from the blade as it span through the night air. It was the weapon that had felled the so-called Herald of Sigmar during Middenheim's capture, and now it flew true to claim an orc warlord's head.

A moment later, there was a dull chink of metal. The two halves of the oversized throwing star clattered down against the armour of the dead, split by a swing of Grimgor's axe. The warboss had not slowed to deliver the blow, but charged on over the corpses. Stormvermin pressed forward, eyes gleaming with madness. Gitsnik swung again, and their lifeless bodies were hurled back in a spray of blood. Others came shrieking behind them, but the Immortulz crashed forward behind their warboss, choppas slamming down in great two-handed blows.



Unwelcome uncertainty arose in Darkh'dwel's gullet, but he crushed it down. Was he not an emissary of the Horned Rat, a master of fearsome sorceries? Warp lightning arced out from the Verminlord's claws, crackling through the air to broil the black orc alive in his own armour. Yet scarcely had the bolts left Darkh'dwel's fingertips, when they dissipated into nothing, dispelled by another sorcerer's will. Too late, the Verminlord heard the slow beating of Seraphon's wings overhead; felt Malekith's vengeful presence upon the winds of magic.

At last admitting his peril, Darkh'dwel grasped at the Wind of Ulgu, seeking to spread his concealing gloom. Again, his sorceries failed, ripped apart by the Incarnate of Shadow in the skies above. The Verminlord fled deeper into the mass of stormvermin, his mind reaching desperately for the power that would enable him to skitterleap to safety.

Grimgor caught the Verminlord three steps later. Gitsnik chopped down, severing Darkh'dwel's left leg at the ankle. The Verminlord lashed out as he fell, his talons gouging bloody wounds across the black orc's face. Grimgor just grinned, and brought Gitsnik's blade down on the Verminlord's neck. In all, it took eight strikes to sever Darkh'dwel's head, although his struggles ceased after three. On the seventh blow, the sorcerous frenzy within the stormvermin faded away as quickly as it had come, and the skaven fled shrieking into the night. Few made it very far. The boar boyz had come late to the fight, and were determined to wet their spears.

Malekith and his few surviving elves were spared from slaughter at Grimgor's decree. It seemed that the warboss was now quite taken with the idea that the warriors of an elder race had joined his Waaagh!. Not all of Grimgor's bosses were of like mind, but their objections were soon muted after the warboss several times reinforced his decision in the bloodiest way possible.

As for Malekith, he felt only the burden of bitter failure. His army was all but destroyed, and it was scant consolation that only his quick thinking had rescued it from total defeat. Ignoring the accusing stares of his surviving warriors, the Eternity King pledged anew that Archaon would pay for that day's indignities, and followed Grimgor's host onto the shoulders of the great excavation. He only hoped that the other Incarnates were faring better than he.





DEATH ON THE OVERLOOK

Sigvald the Magnificent arrived at the Great Park's overlook just as the Doomed Legion and the warriors of the Kurgan began their bloody contest. The scream-wracked air stank of burning flesh, and witchfires gleamed sickly green amongst the fire-twisted trees. Overhead, morghasts did battle with swarms of furies and roaring chimerae.

The prince was none too pleased to have been whisked from his pleasure-halls amidst the ruins of Parravon, and less so to find himself under orders from Archaon Everchosen. As far as Sigvald was concerned, the wars of the End Times could be left to others. If the world was coming to a close, then he had no desire other than to pass its final hours in a feast of depravity. His worshippers had spent days preparing such a celebration, and the thought that it would now go to waste many hundreds of leagues distant was a further grievance on a night already laden with them. Yet the prince knew better than to oppose Slaanesh's will, and grudgingly accepted his charge.

Far below Sigvald, the centre of the Kurgan lines broke apart. Black-armoured warriors fled up the slope like scurrying beetles, glory forgotten in the face of the overwhelming ranks of undead. Sigvald sniffed. He had always thought the Kurgan to be unreliable brutes, brave enough whilst the battle flowed in their favour, but always ready to leave the real work to others. Once again, victory rested on the genius and skill of Prince Sigvald the Magnificent. With a touch more flourish than was necessary, Sigvald drew Sliverslash from its scabbard. Pausing only to admire his reflection in the blade, the Geld-Prince strode down into the fight.

Behind Sigvald came a host of lithe-limbed daemonettes – a gift from ever-generous Slaanesh. The daemons were perfection in motion. Each graceful step blended effortlessly into the next, as if they were naught but the choreographed steps of some mesmeric dance. Their lilting song danced across the deeper notes of the battle like mayflies flitting above a brook. It began softly, sweet and seductive to all who heard it. Then, as the dancers picked up speed, the harmonies became discordant and jagged. Yet somehow the song remained as intoxicating as before.

Those touched by those notes heard every lost love and forbidden desire calling their name. Fleeing Kurgan halted dumbfounded, their minds numbed and senses set afire by the siren song. Some reached out to touch the dancers. The daemonettes laughed, a sound that made the heart sing and the flesh crawl. Then claws flashed out, and the besotted northlanders gurgled their last through ruined throats. All this the dancers did without missing a step, and without slowing their pace.



Far below, the wights of the Doomed Legion marched in lockstep through the charred forest. Blood and bone rained down upon them from high above, as the morghasts fought their vicious skyborne battle. As the wights advanced, a dying chimera spiralled out of the skies, its ruined body slamming into the Doomed Legion's ranks. A score of Krell's warriors were crushed flat by the beast's impact, but the Doomed Legion marched on.

Krell heard the lilting voices of the daemonettes, but their song was cold in his ears. Whatever desires the wight had once possessed had departed with his flesh – only Nagash's will any longer had a purchase upon his black soul. Yet as Krell laid eyes upon the golden figure who strutted at the daemonettes' head, he felt an old hatred stirring. Echoes of long-ago battles stormed through the wight's mind, of wars fought between the warriors of Khorne and Slaanesh's effete champions. Guided by an instinct older than the Empire, Krell altered his line of advance to bring him into confrontation with the golden figure.

The centre of the Kurgan line had broken apart, but the flanking warbands fought on. To the north, barrow-steel clashed with ensorcelled iron as the knights of the Doomed Legion fought the murderous black-armoured reavers of the wastes. The chaos knights were stronger and faster than their undead foes, and their swords and axes hacked through the bronzed grave armour to shatter the bones within.

Only Arkhan's sorceries prevented this conflict disintegrating. Drawing upon the death magic that swirled about his shadowy master, the liche reknitted broken bones, and rebound the wights' wicked spirits to their long-dead bodies. The northlanders were not so fortunate, and those who fell to the undead knights' cursed blades did not rise to fight again. Worse, there were no sorcerers or shamans to unravel the liche's necromancy, for Nagash had slain them all within moments of battle being joined.

On the Great Park's southern edge, isolated Kurgan warbands fought beneath their skull-topped banners. Wailing spirits streaked through the ashen forest, clawing at the

northlanders with icy fingers. Hordes of charred and blistered zombies lurched between the walls of spiked shields, mindless save for Nagash's controlling will. The living dead tore at shields and flesh, insensate to the blows that thudded into them in return. Here, as in the north of the ravaged park, the dead did not rest easily. Only by hacking their foes entirely to pieces could the northlanders achieve a measure of respite. Even then, it lasted only until Nagash stretched forth his will once again. The Great Necromancer sent bleak pulses of amethyst magic into the risen dead, lending them vigour and strength. Kurgan shields were torn from their wielders' grasps. Northlanders were dragged down into the blood-sodden ash where the risen corpses of slaves and former shieldmates stamped and tore them to death.

Sigvald reached the wights of the Doomed Legion just as the first of the southern Kurgan warbands broke. The prince did not enter the fight in a wild charge, as was the custom for his rival warlords, but at a calculating, measured pace. He thrust Sliverslash forward at eye level, the rapier's point sliding over a wight's shield and punching through the creature's skull before it could react. A heartbeat later, Sigvald swung the blade to his right, the silvered sword-tip ripping through a second wight's iron gorget. A third wight thrust a barrow blade at Sigvald's armoured belly. The prince turned effortlessly away from the lunge, not even deigning to catch the strike on his shield. With a disdainful laugh, Sigvald swept Sliverslash back across the shield wall's face, severing the arm that had dared to strike at him. With a rattle, the wights pressed forward against their gaudy foe.

It was then that the daemonettes struck. The daemons didn't so much as slow as they hit the line of shields. Rather, the tempo of their dance increased, becoming a quicksilver display of balletic murder. Every pirouette ended with a lunging claw; every cabriole with a shatter of bone. They fought with the same grace that Sigvald believed he possessed, each fluid motion as inevitable as the rising of the sun, and yet somehow impossible to predict.

For the wights of the Doomed Legion, whose wits were but a shadow of those they had possessed whilst alive, the daemonettes were an untouchable foe. What wounds the wights inflicted upon the dancers' alabaster flesh owed more to blind chance than precision, and the magic binding the revenants to the world of the living steadily began to dissipate.





Sigvald, his earlier ill mood dispelled, fought on amongst the whirling daemonettes, laughing with the joy of the fight. The prince's only disappointment was that his foes did not scream as he cut them down. To him, slaughter without voiced agony was like a meal without wine – palatable enough, but lacking a feeling of true fulfilment. Yet he knew that Slaanesh would shower him with rewards for the deeds he performed that day, and lost himself for a moment in dreams of depravities beyond the ken of lesser mortals.

In that moment, the killing edge of Krell's gleaming axe nearly took Sigvald's head. The prince broke out of his reverie a heartbeat before the ragged blade struck home, and only a desperate upward swing of his shield prevented his head tumbling from his shoulders. There was a shrieking sound as the axe-blade scraped across the shield's front, and Sigvald saw that the wight's strike had torn a jagged scar across the silver skin. At that sight, the Geld-Prince forgot his dreams of indulgence and threw himself at the Mortarch of Despair.

Thus began a contest of champions, well-matched in ability even though their fighting styles could not have been more different. Sigvald was lighter on his feet, his blade fast and precise. Krell was a brute, ponderous in motion but his axe unstoppable in its swing. Sigvald quickly learned that Krell's great haymaking blows could not be parried – his first attempt to do so nearly resulted in Sliverslash being ripped from his hands – and threw his efforts into evading the Black Axe's brutal arcs. This was more easily said than done. Each of Krell's whirling blows led seamlessly into the next, a sight that would have been strangely graceful were it not for the murderous intent that lay beneath.

For the first time that night, Sigvald fell back before a foe. Krell moved with him, the great blade whistling closer with every step. A daemonette,

not realising her danger until it was too late, darted away from the Doomed Legion's swords and into the Black Axe's path. The heavy blade scythed through her without slowing, the ichor-stained halves of her corpse thudding onto the ashen ground a moment later.

Again and again Sigvald lunged at Krell, always timing his strikes to match the openings in the wight's whirling guard. As often as not, Sliverslash's tip skittered across Krell's ancient armour. Even when it did penetrate the barrow-iron, Krell did not so much as slow. Indeed, the only sign that the wight had felt the blow at all was a momentary flare of the witchfires in his eyes.

Sigvald ducked. Krell's axe whistled over the prince's head and smashed through a scorched tree. Cinders rained down upon them both, leaving ashen streaks across Sigvald's golden armour. Krell reversed his strike, looping the blade up and over his head, and swept it down towards the stooped prince. Sigvald twisted aside. The axe slammed down – cleaving a few strands of the prince's blonde hair as it fell – and thudded deep into the thick soil.

For a split second, the blade was lodged fast, and in that moment Sigvald struck. The prince rose up triumphantly, Sliverslash thrusting forward. With a screech of metal and a puff of grave dust, the blade's tip punched through Krell's breastplate and into his chest. For a moment, the two champions stood silent and still as the battle raged about them. Then to Sigvald's horror Krell's witchfires blazed anew, and a dry, deathless laugh echoed from his hollow helm. The wight twisted heavily to one side, wrenching both his axe blade from the ground and Sliverslash's hilt from Sigvald's hand. Suddenly weaponless, the Geld-Prince backed away in dismay as Krell advanced once more, the silvered blade still lodged deep in the wight's torso.

Elsewhere the tide of battle began to shift. Arkhan the Black felt his master's displeasure rippling through his mind, and summoned the surviving morghasts from the angry skies. The osseous heralds descended upon the embattled Kurgan and daemonettes, their spirit-bound blades cleaving mortal and immortal flesh alike. The daemons were unfazed by their plight, seeing only fresh foes to inveigle into their otherworldly dance. For the Kurgan, however, this sudden terror from the dark shattered what battle-spirit they had left. Giving in to despair, the northlanders broke apart and fled towards the overlook.

Suddenly, the overlook shook to a throaty roar. A new silhouette appeared atop the crest, vast and lumpen. A tattered red cloak hung from his monstrous shoulders, and a glimmer of gold gleamed about a mighty fang. Throgg, the Wintertooth, the King of Trolls, had come. Larger shadows gathered upon the overlook; the trolls, giants and mutants of the northlands, the feral minotaurs and ghorgons of the Drakwald. They had come from across the city at Throgg's call, bound to his will by the magic in his tarnished crown.

It had been Archaon's desire for Sigvald and Throgg to defend the overlook together. Yet Sigvald had found only insult in being compared to a troll, and had dealt Throgg what he had thought to be a killing blow shortly after they had left the despoiled Temple of Ulric. Throgg, however, was tougher than the princeling had reckoned, and his gnarled flesh had soon repaired itself. Now the Troll King had come to the overlook not only to crush the undead, but also to slay Sigvald for his treachery.

Throgg's army of monsters made no distinction between friend and foe as they stampeded into the burnt-out gardens. Fleeing Kurgans were smacked aside by makeshift clubs, or trampled underfoot. Some were scooped up to serve as makeshift missiles, and flung down the slope to crash into the mass of undead. Many of the daemonettes – their attention on the foe ahead, not the allies behind – fared little better. But for all of that, the undead suffered worse, and scores of the Doomed Legion's reanimated warriors were stomped flat.

At Nagash's command, the morghasts flocked towards the new threat. At first, the advantage lay with the undead. None amongst Throgg's horde could fly, and this allowed the morghasts to strike wherever opportunity lay. Spirit-wreathed halberds hacked through troll-flesh and slaughterbrutes' armoured hides; enchanted falchions thudded home through minotaurs' thick fur. Unfortunately for the undead, the beasts were too many and their dull minds scarcely noted the pain. Armoured claws swatted the morghasts from the skies, or wiry knuckled hands seized their legs and dragged them downwards, to be hacked apart by blunt-edged cleavers.

Sigvald and Krell fought on through it all. Twisting aside as the Black Axe hacked down, Sigvald leaned forward, grasping Sliverslash's grips. He gave a shout of triumph as his fingers closed around the handle of flayed skin, then let go his shield and fell backwards with an altogether sharper cry. Sigvald had one hand upon his reclaimed sword, the other clapped across his bleeding face. Krell had predicted the prince's actions, had lured him in and then reversed his stroke to catch his foe off guard.

As the wight king came forward once again, the Geld-Prince caught his reflection in his abandoned shield. His hand barely concealed the wound's extent, for it ran from his chin to above his brow. Tearing his fingers away, Sigvald saw the bloody ruin of his left eye, and puckered, discoloured flesh that he knew at once would never heal.



In that moment, Sigvald went berserk, overcome by a rage more befitting of a Khornate champion. Scooping up his shield, he threw himself at Krell, thrusting, punching and kicking.

Fury gave the Geld-Prince the advantage that finesse had so far denied him, and this time it was Krell who fell back in retreat, his laughter at last silenced. Again and again the Black Axe smashed down, its baleful blade hacking deep into Sigvald's silvered shield. By the fourth stroke, the shield was but a tattered mass of metal and boarding, which the Geld-Prince hurled into Krell's face. The wight, temporarily blinded, didn't see the Sigvald's next blow, which sliced cleanly through his left arm just below the shoulder.

Krell gave an angry hiss at the sight of his severed limb, and swung the Black Axe down against the blade that had dared to wound him. There was a dull chink as the heavy axe-head struck the slender steel, and Sliverslash's blade snapped in two. Yet before the wight could capitalise on his sudden advantage, Sigvald sprang forward and bore him to the ground. As Krell's helm struck the ashen ground, Sigvald slammed Sliverslash's broken spike into the wight's glowering left eye socket. Then, with his armoured knee braced against Krell's remaining arm, pinning the Black Axe to the ground, the prince laid about the wight's head with his bare fists.

Sigvald pounded the wight again and again, shouting incoherent hate at his expressionless foe. He was heedless of the blood running down his face, and streaming from his swollen hands. He felt the cheek-piece of Krell's helm give under the onslaught, and flung the twisted scrap of metal clear, not noticing that the blow that had warped the metal had also sheared off one of his fingers. The prince relished the sound of fracturing bone that accompanied each frenzied punch, not realising that it came as often from his own breaking fingers as it did the wight's skull.



Only when the witchfires finally faded from Krell's eyes did Sigvald slump back, his breathing ragged. At last, the Geld-Prince glanced down at his crushed and bloody fingers, at hands that would never again wield a weapon. Throwing back his head, Sigvald screamed at the sky, the sound fuelled as much by his anger as by despair.

He did not scream long. As the shout turned into a broken, rasping sob, the head of a stone maul crashed into the side of Sigvald's head, splitting his skull open and splattering brain-matter across Krell's corpse. As the Geld-Prince fell lifeless across the wight's body, brutish Throgg scowled down at the pair, and then emptied his bladder across Sigvald's golden armour. Insult and treachery repaid, the Troll King descended deeper into the charred trees and went to claim victory for the Chaos Gods.

Nagash felt the departure of Krell's evil spirit, but could spare no more attention for his servant's fate. The arrival of Throgg's monstrous horde had shifted the battle's fortunes. In the centre and to the north, the Doomed Legion had been all but swept away by the brutish press of bodies, and more bellowing creatures spilled down the slope at every moment. Only to the south, where the flame-scarred zombies had broken the Kurgan shieldsmen, was the battlefield yet in undead hands.

The Great Necromancer was monstrously proud, and ill-inclined to retreat. However, he recognised at once that defeat was his only alternative. He could raise his fallen army from the dead once more – he could even restore Krell to existence – but the effort would leave him badly drained, and it would do no good if he reached the heart of the great excavation as a spent force. Calling to his side those morghasts that remained, the Great Necromancer bade Arkhan to cover his retreat, and headed south.

'*MY SERVANT.*' Nagash's heavy voice echoed through Arkhan's thoughts.

The liche tore his attention from the battle and gazed respectfully up at his master's dread form. Arkhan could see that the battle was going poorly, but he was certain that Nagash had a plan. His master always had a plan.

'What would you have me do?' Arkhan asked.

'TAKE TWO HOSTS OF THE MORGHASTS. HOLD THE ENEMY HERE, UNTIL YOUR LAST STRENGTH IS GONE. DO NOT FAIL ME.'

The liche accepted the death sentence unflinchingly. He had perished before in Nagash's service, and would gladly do so again. Loyalty had its price, as well as its rewards. His master would restore him, as he had done so many times before.

'Yes, master. Do you have any further commands?'

Nagash paused for a moment, seemingly frozen by indecision. For the first time Arkhan felt a spark of unaccustomed dread in his withered heart. If his master did not truly know how events would unfold – was not confident of ultimate victory...

***'DIE WELL, MY SERVANT,'* Nagash commanded.**

Arkhan watched his master depart, his doubts redoubling. Then, the monstrous horde was upon him, and there was no longer any time for aught save his impossible battle.





A CLASH OF LIFE AND DEATH

The dwarfs' arrival at the Middenplatz had bought Alarielle's Host of Life a much-needed reprieve. Their first salvo – as much stone from the eastern wall as iron shot – did little to Hellebron's witch elf and Skaramor followers, but it tore the howling warherds into bloody ruin. A few beastmen fought on beneath crude and tattered banners, inspired by the brutal examples of their chieftains, or simply too lost to battle-lust to care. Most reeled in disarray – easy prey for elves and forest spirits who had suddenly found hope amidst defeat, and for the dwarfs whose axes rose and fell with grim certainty.

Soon, the eastern half of the Middenplatz was awash with a panicked stampede of horn and hoof, the tide steadily slackening as axe, arrow and shot did their deadly work. However, those beastkin that did fight on died hard. Braying their coarse-tongued battle-prayers, they hacked at flesh and armour with frenzied abandon, ceasing only when the last spark of life left their bodies. The minotaurs were the worst, stamping and goring their foes whilst ignoring wounds that should have long ago seen them slain. It was against these brutes that Gelt and Hammerson sent their ironbreakers, trusting to rune-bound gromril armour to defend against the minotaurs' mangling blows. For the most part, this trust was not misplaced, but too many brave sons of the mountains perished even so.

After what seemed like hours, but what in reality had been the most fleeting of minutes, the last of the beastmen fled. But the danger was far from over. Hellebron's witch elves and Skaramor had been all but untouched by the dwarfs' explosive entrance, unwittingly shielded by the bodies of their feral allies. These blood-mad warriors alone outnumbered Alarielle's dwindling host, and the odds worsened with every clash of blades. Little by little, the ring of elves and forest spirits shrank in upon itself, leaving behind a tidemark of bodies to mark every desperate struggle. The witch elves could match even the swiftest dryad blow for blow, and the thick armour of the northlanders cheated all but the weightiest. Only where Durthu and the treemen fought did the ring of elves stand firm. The witch elves' slender knives could do little to these elders of the forest, and a single whack from their thorny fists could pulp any of the Skaramor, no matter how thick his armour.



Alarielle fought on in Durthu's shadow, lending her life-giving magics to restore the wounded and the dying, but her fading strength was plain to all who saw her. The Everqueen was radiant no more. She had aged centuries since her arrival in Middenheim, her body ravaged by the magics she had drawn so heavily upon. Alarielle's skin was lined, and her once brilliant hair no longer shone, yet her will to fight remained as strong as ever.

Hellebron was one of many who recognised the Everqueen's fading fortunes, and the sight brought her nothing but cruel cheer. What little sanity the Blood Queen had once possessed had long since been washed away after her arrival at Middenheim, replaced by a portion of Khorne's godly rage. From the top of her cauldron-shrine she spat and railed, issuing orders and threats in a voice twisted by madness. Yet still Hellebron remembered the vision Be'lakor had shown her, a vision that had promised that she would die at Alarielle's hands, if the Everqueen was not slain first. The Blood Queen's blades were ready in her hands as the shrine ground on.

Thus did Hellebron hack a trail of carnage directly towards where her enemy fought, the heavy wheels of her cauldron-shrine crunching over the broken dead. Laughing witch elves came leaping in the shrine's wake. They were as lost to the Blood God's will as their mad mistress, but this served only to hone their murderous skills further. Determined to prove themselves queens of murder, the witch-warriors forsook opportunities to inflict lesser wounds, their slender blades lunging always for the throats and hearts of their besieged kinsmen.

Further north, between Hellebron's cauldron and the Middenplatz's wall, the Bloodthirster Karan'gar led his own charge. Skaramor fought fearlessly in his shadow, certain that the daemon's hulking presence was Khorne's blessing upon them all. Karan'gar's axe smashed down into a press of eternal guard, slaying half a dozen with a single stroke. Chanting skullreapers crashed through the gap, their own axes adding to the slaughter. The treeman Skarana, seeing the northlanders loose within the huddled formation, lumbered forward to fill the gap with his own body. Tribesmen gave brief, agonised screams as Skarana's feet stomped down, and the strike of his heavy staff crumpled their armour. Seeing

at last a foe worthy of his strength, Karan'gar flexed his whip, and strode forth to slay the treeman.

For the second time that night, the dwarfs proved to be Alarielle's salvation. A low growl echoed across the Middenplatz as they advanced on the witch elves and Skaramor assailing the Host of Life's southern flank. Hammerson and his kin had lost much in recent months, and had many grudges to repay. Moreover, none amongst the Throng of Metal would have denied that there was some small satisfaction in proving that the arrogant wood elves needed their aid.

Drakeguns roared a torrent of alchemical fire that tore apart Hellebron's howling horde. The salvo flung armoured bodies across the Blood Queen's approach, throwing already anarchic ranks into complete disorder. Before the echoes of the blast had faded away, the deep-throated war horns of Zhufbar sounded, and the dwarfs hurled themselves into the fight.

Hammerson's throng was as unstoppable as a glacier's advance. They came as a great, relentless wedge of axes and shields that split Hellebron's host in two. Golden light danced across the dwarfs' weapons as Gelt's magic awoke the full power of ancestral runes. Axes trailed glittering light through the night sky, and hacked apart northland plate as easily as the witch elves' bare flesh. Gromril armour flared and shone with each return blow, proof against all but the most savage of strikes.

Through it all, the dwarfs kept perfect order. At Hammerson's command, the slopes of the wedge turned outward, forming shield walls to the east and west. Hammerson commanded the east, and Gelt the west. Leaving their dead behind, the Zhufbarak advanced, the two lines hinging around the wedge's point to prevent the Skaramor to the north breaking into the dead space between the walls.



The dwarfs' intervention had brought Hellebron's momentum to a shuddering halt. Moreover, it had divided her host into two disordered forces. The smaller of the two – which included the Blood Queen herself – was now trapped between a line of Hammerson's shields and the Host of Life. Where before Hellebron had drawn upon on a tide of enraged Skaramor to reinforce her witch elves' numbers, now she had to face a battle on a more even footing. Had the Blood Queen yet possessed her wits, she might have balked at that prospect. As it was, she was too far gone into Khorne's madness to care. Disdaining the dwarfen shields that pressed hard upon her, she exhorted her cultists to greater effort, and hurled them towards the Everqueen.

As Hammerson's dwarfs ground hard upon Hellebron's forces in the east, Gelt's held firm to the west. Theirs was the harder task by far: to hold the greater part of the northlander horde at bay whilst the smaller was crushed between Hammerson's shields and the surviving elves. Gelt laboured from behind the Zhufbarak banners, drawing upon the runic power of the ironbreakers' armour to bind their shields tighter than mere mortal might would ever allow. The wizard felt strangely vulnerable. It had been a long time since he had been forced to fight a battle from the ground, but the wounds Quicksilver had taken in King's Glade meant the pegasus could not fly, and could thus only bear him as a horse would. Not that it otherwise mattered much. Gelt had no intention of breaking faith with his dwarf allies – they would triumph, or they would perish together.

Sparks flew and shields shuddered as the northlanders hurled themselves at Gelt's wall, but the line held true. Northlander axe-blades hooked over dwarfen shield rims many times, weakening the wall enough for other weapons to crash home against the Zhufbarak beyond. No Skaramor lived long enough to strike a second blow. Rune axes carved wicked, efficient arcs above the locked shields, the magically honed blades slicing through the thick northland steel and opening flesh to the bone. Gelt's wall buckled repeatedly, but always held. The dwarfs would have died many times over rather than bear the shame of failure. Thus they bound their wounds with dirty rags, swigged their last dregs of Bugman's XXXXXX, and battled on.

Further north, Karan'gar's whip lashed tight around Skarana's upper torso, pinning his arms close about his chest. Sap welled up beneath the barbs as the treeman struggled vainly against the coils. One arm ripped free, but the daemon's axe hacked down before Skarana could pull away. Splinters of bark rained down on the dryads and Skaramor battling at the giants' feet, and at last Skarana tore free of the lash, sap streaming down his ravaged body.



The ancient's staff thrust forward, striking the Bloodthirster full in the chest. Karan'gar staggered back, his hooves kicking northlanders aside as he sought purchase. The end of the staff glowed a brilliant green, and thorns whipped out from its tip, clawing blindly for the daemon's flesh. But Karan'gar had found his balance now, and his great axe swept out again, severing the thorn clusters and splitting Skarana's staff part way down its length. The Bloodthirster came forward again, his axe once more hewing deep into the dying treeman's flesh. This time, the damage was too great. With a creaking wail, Skarana toppled sideways, his valiant spirit fleeing before his cloven corpse hit the ground.

At once, the treeman's dryad handmaidens let out a shrill cry of mourning, and fell upon the Skaramor with renewed ferocity. But hatred and grief were no match for the battle-hardened fury of the northlanders, and many of the dryads soon joined their master in death.

Durthu saw Skarana fall, and heard the Bloodthirster's savage cry of victory. He would have challenged Karan'gar, were it not for the fact that to have done so would have left the ailing Everqueen unguarded. Only a thin wall of spears now stood between Alarielle and Hellebron's wild cultists, and the treeman did not trust the dwarfs to reach his mistress before the foe did. Alarielle, however, was more ready to place her faith in the Zhufbarak. Moreover, she knew that now only Durthu could match the Bloodthirster's terrible strength. The ancient treeman commanded the might of all the ancients who had perished before him, and no daemon could endure against such power. In taut tones, she bade the treeman leave her side. When he made no move to do so, the Everqueen's tone hardened, and the request became an order. Reluctantly, Durthu obeyed. Entrusting his queen's care to the few remaining sisters of Avelorn, he bore down upon the greater daemon.

With a Bloodthirster fighting at their fore, the Skaramor would have driven aside what was left of Skarana's handmaidens. However, as the northlanders charged in behind Karan'gar, a chill wind blew through the fire-blackened defences beneath the wall. Dark magic filled the broken bodies of the elves and northlanders who had died there, the corpses lurching awkwardly to their feet at the command of a will not their own. Khornate tribesmen perished in droves as the dead arose, for their eyes were upon the living, not the slain. More died soon after, as Vlad von Carstein dropped lightly from the wall, and forced his way to the head of his resurrected army.

War-forged though the Skaramor were, there was not one amongst them who could match Vlad's immortal skill. The vampire employed finesse and brutality in equal measure, deftly parrying in one moment and overpowering through unholy strength in the next. The same could not be said of the zombies, but Vlad used them only to shield himself from the northlanders' blows, and trusted to his own blade, Blood Drinker, for the killing.

Thus, by fortune rather than design, the Skaramor attack stalled long enough for Durthu to reach the fray. The Eldest of Ancients struck Karan'gar at a lumbering run, smashing the Bloodthirster sideways into the Middenplatz wall. There was a crackle of snapping bones as the Bloodthirster's wing folded back on itself, but this was quickly drowned beneath Karan'gar's bellow of pain as Durthu's Daith-forged blade punched through his breastplate and deep into his monstrous flesh.

Even mortally wounded, the daemon fought on. Pushing himself away from the wall with a meaty hand, he hacked at Durthu, each blow sending splintered shards of bark flying from the ancient's hide. But Durthu was an altogether different prey to Skarana. He weathered those fearsome blows without uttering a sound, then twisted his blade free of the Bloodthirster's chest, tearing the daemon almost in half and casting his vile spirit back into the Realm of Chaos.

Durthu's absence was hard-felt in the brutal melee around the Everqueen. Without the treeman at their side, the dryads and eternal guard were being overwhelmed by Khorne-pledged blades. The Skaramor and witch elves fought on ferociously, unaware of the dwarfs that steadily chopped their rear ranks to offal.

Hellebron gave a triumphant shriek as her cauldron-shrine crashed through the thin asrai shield wall, and bore down upon the fading Everqueen. Dryads flung themselves up the shrine's iron stairs, their wicked claws tearing and slicing deep into the Blood Queen's flesh. Hellebron paid the wounds no heed. Laughing, she hacked the spirits apart, then vaulted down to the foot of the shrine to claim Alarielle's life.

Even at the height of her strength, the Everqueen would have been sorely put to defeat Hellebron. Though she had learned blade-craft from the finest warriors in Ulthuan, Alarielle was a creature of peace more than war, and even the most skilful of her tutors would have been beaten down by the Blood Queen's initial flurry of blows. As it was, the first strike carved a great splinter from the Everqueen's staff, and the second screamed past her head. Had Alarielle been a fraction slower in twisting aside, that blow would have split her skull in two. It was only a short reprieve. Hellebron's vicious kick caught the Everqueen full in the stomach, sending her staggering backwards.

A pair of eternal guardsmen threw themselves at Hellebron from either side. The Blood Queen's twin blades arced out in perfect synchronicity, and her assailants fell headless. Alarielle made the most of the distraction, and conjured a wall of thorns in Hellebron's path. The Blood Queen didn't even slow her pace, but dove into the tangle, hate driving her through the flesh-tearing spikes. Before Alarielle could conjure another defence, Hellebron rammed her sword deep into the Everqueen's belly.

Alarielle screamed as Hellebron ripped the sword away. The Everqueen fell to her knees, one hand pressed tight across her wound, the other losing its grip on her alabaster staff. She could feel her lifeblood pulsing away. Ghyran was trying to mend the wound, but the black magics of the Blood Queen's blade fought it. Briefly, Alarielle bent her magics to hasten the healing, then saw Hellebron's crackling blade coming about once more, this time to claim her head.

Even Alarielle didn't know what spurred her next action. Perhaps it was Ghyran whispering through her thoughts, or maybe it was merely the instinct of desperation. As Hellebron's sword cut towards her neck, the Everqueen lashed out with a half-gathered spell – the healing magics swept not over her own wounds, but into the Blood Queen's crazed mind. In that instant, the renewing power of Ghyran flooded across Hellebron's fractured psyche, a cleansing gale that swept away the clouds of madness that had dominated her being for thousands of years. The insanity was too entrenched to be banished for long. For a split second, however, Hellebron perceived the world – and her own place in it – with sane eyes. At once, the Blood Queen was paralysed, visions of a lifetime of malice pouring through her. Her strike faltered, her sword fell to the ground.

Even though her vision was clouded with agony, Alarielle saw the change overcome her foe. The Everqueen urged her leaden limbs into action, and cast about for a weapon. Numbed fingers closed on an eternal guard's broken spear. Ignoring the desperate pain as her half-healed wounds opened anew, Alarielle thrust the weapon upwards. The steel tip took Hellebron beneath the ribs, and pierced her heart. A heartbeat later, the two queens collapsed – one dead, the other nearly so.

Hellebron's cultists were undismayed by their queen's fall – if anything, it drove them only to greater frenzy. Roaring and shrieking, they hurled themselves anew at the surviving band of elves, to complete what their mistress had begun. But the moment had been lost. Durthu, returned from his battle with Karan'gar moments too late to save Alarielle, struck the leading ranks of the northlanders like an avalanche.



Armoured bodies scattered left and right before the treeman's onslaught. With a roar that shook the Middenplatz, Durthu tore Hellebron's cauldron free of its moorings and hurled it into the Skaramor horde. Fresh screams broke out as boiling blood spilled across armour and flesh, but Durthu was not yet done. Bracing one massive fist against each of the shrine's twin staircases, he tore it apart with a screech of tortured metal. Given heart by the treeman's deeds, the last of Alarielle's host dug deep into their failing strength and made one final effort.

Trapped between Vlad's undead, Hammerson's dwarfs and the remnant of the Host of Life, the eastern half of Hellebron's horde was at last crushed. Durthu was the hammer, his Daith-wrought blade wielded in one hand, and a mangled shard of the cauldron-shrine in the other. The Zhufbarak were the anvil, their overlapped shields unflinching. The Skaramor and the witch elves did not perish easily, and many hundreds more skulls were claimed for Khorne before they were at last defeated, but defeated they were. As healers clustered around the Everqueen's fallen form, the last tribesman fell dead, his head split by a blow from Hammerson's runic staff.

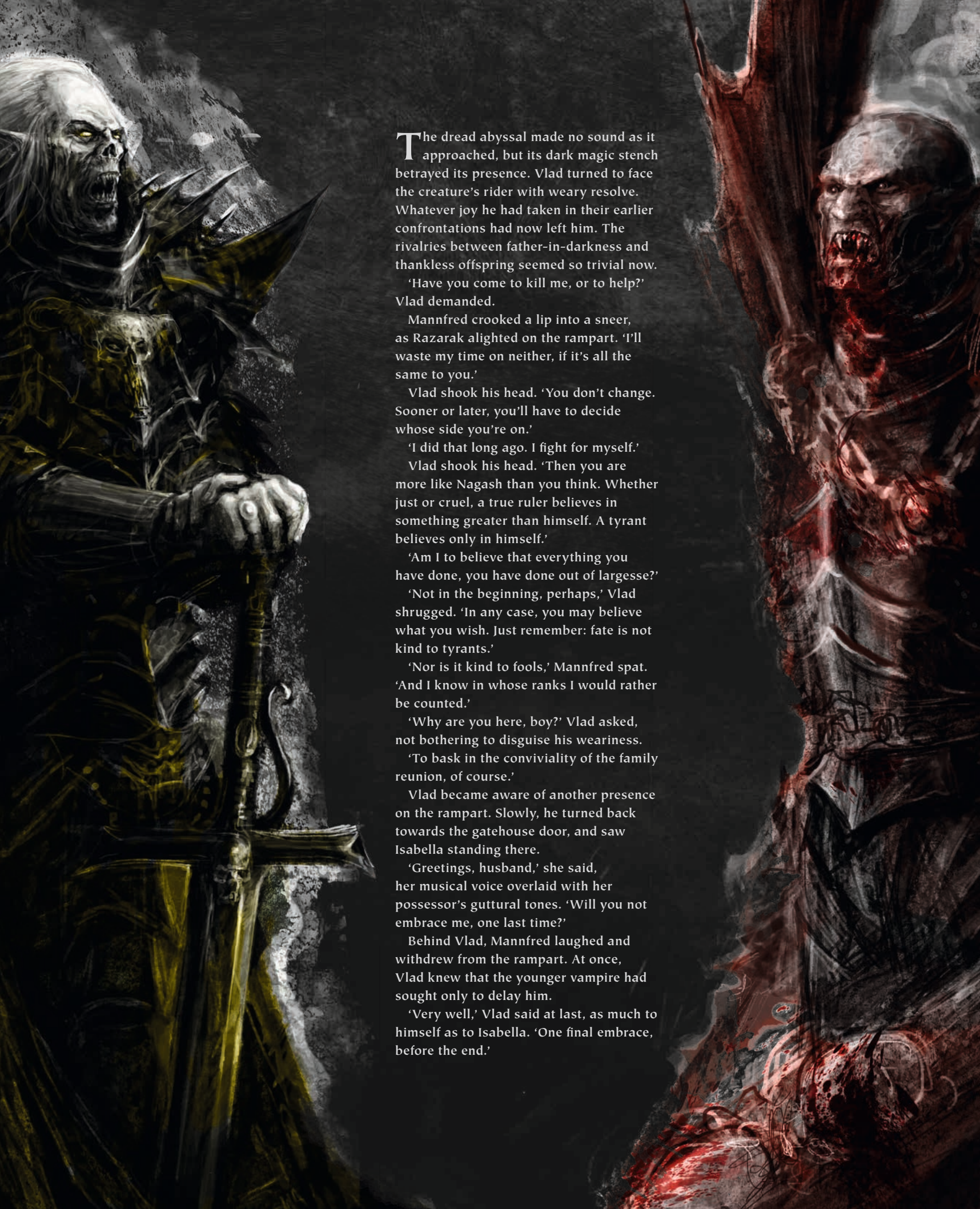
That left only the western half of Hellebron's army, held at bay thus far by dwarfen resolve and Gelt's magics. Twice, Gelt had ordered a fighting retreat. Each time, the Zhufbarak shield walls backed away from mounds of bloodied dead, the wings of the line folding back on themselves as their numbers were gradually whittled down. Now, Gelt's dwarfs were themselves on the brink of being overwhelmed. Yet Vlad's undead came down from the north to thicken their right flank, and weary elves looped around to strengthen their left. Hammerson's Zhufbarak reinforced the centre, for it was there that the fighting was thickest. At last, the tide of Skaramor slackened, and victory seemed possible.

It was then, with a clamour of gongs and a mournful drone, that a new army made its presence known in the Middenplatz. In truth, it had been advancing for some time, but its shuffling approach through the western gate had been lost beneath the war cries of Skaramor and the shrieking of dryads. Even then, had the wind been blowing from the west, rather than the north, none could have ignored the reek of diseased flesh that hung about the newcomers as thick as the swarms of buzzing flies. As it was, the last of the Skaramor had scarcely fallen beneath Zhufbarak axes when the Nurgle host trudged home against the increasingly ragtag shield wall.



The dwarfs allowed themselves but a moment of quiet weariness at the sight of their foes. Then they raised their axes, bellowed their oaths of battle, and met this new onslaught with the same fortitude they had brought to every battle since Averheim's fall.

To the south, the wood elves' plight was even worse. Weapons and shields had to be cast aside as they disintegrated into maggots and filth, leaving their bearers defenceless against the glistening plagueswords. But the direst straits were in the north, where Vlad's risen army held the Zhufbarak right flank. There advanced Isabella von Carstein, walking through the clashing blades with as much concern as a noblewoman out for a summer stroll. Where she passed, the gift of Nurgle in her veins unravelled Vlad's unbreathing horde, allowing the plaguebearers to advance unopposed. Soon Vlad had no choice but to retreat through the fire-blackened stakes at the foot of the Middenplatz wall, and up onto the ramparts high above. Isabella followed, a thin smile dancing across her lips.



The dread abyssal made no sound as it approached, but its dark magic stench betrayed its presence. Vlad turned to face the creature's rider with weary resolve. Whatever joy he had taken in their earlier confrontations had now left him. The rivalries between father-in-darkness and thankless offspring seemed so trivial now.

'Have you come to kill me, or to help?' Vlad demanded.

Mannfred crooked a lip into a sneer, as Razarak alighted on the rampart. 'I'll waste my time on neither, if it's all the same to you.'

Vlad shook his head. 'You don't change. Sooner or later, you'll have to decide whose side you're on.'

'I did that long ago. I fight for myself.'

Vlad shook his head. 'Then you are more like Nagash than you think. Whether just or cruel, a true ruler believes in something greater than himself. A tyrant believes only in himself.'

'Am I to believe that everything you have done, you have done out of largesse?'

'Not in the beginning, perhaps,' Vlad shrugged. 'In any case, you may believe what you wish. Just remember: fate is not kind to tyrants.'

'Nor is it kind to fools,' Mannfred spat. 'And I know in whose ranks I would rather be counted.'

'Why are you here, boy?' Vlad asked, not bothering to disguise his weariness.

'To bask in the conviviality of the family reunion, of course.'

Vlad became aware of another presence on the rampart. Slowly, he turned back towards the gatehouse door, and saw Isabella standing there.

'Greetings, husband,' she said, her musical voice overlaid with her possessor's guttural tones. 'Will you not embrace me, one last time?'

Behind Vlad, Mannfred laughed and withdrew from the rampart. At once, Vlad knew that the younger vampire had sought only to delay him.

'Very well,' Vlad said at last, as much to himself as to Isabella. 'One final embrace, before the end.'



Once again, Isabella's speed surprised Vlad. As their blades cut and parried, it took every drop of Vlad's battle-honed skill to match her. Matters were made worse by the fact that Vlad knew he could not allow Isabella to touch him – he had seen too often what Nurgle's 'gift' did to undead flesh. Moreover, Vlad could not, even now, bring himself to harm Isabella – no matter what evil now had possession of her body and soul. Alas, he knew that nothing, save death, could drive the daemon from his beloved's soul.

Back and forth along the rampart they fought. Gradually, Vlad's parries became slower, his ripostes more reckless. Then, as the battle once more returned to the gatehouse where it had begun, Isabella scored her first, meaningful blow. The tip of the countess' sword tore through the cold flesh of Vlad's sword arm, and Blood Drinker clanged on the ground. With a cold smile that was more Bolorog's than her own, Isabella advanced upon her weaponless opponent, hand outstretched to bless him with Nurgle's gift. Yet despite all appearances, Vlad was not done. Unable to bring himself to end his beloved's existence, the vampire had settled on an altogether more desperate plan.

Already the Carstein Ring was reknitting Vlad's severed muscles, restoring motion to his wounded hand, but he made no attempt to pick up his fallen blade. Instead, he darted forward, swifter than thought, and slipped under and around Isabella's grasping fingers. Such was the suddenness of his move that the countess had no chance to react. As he ducked past, Vlad seized Isabella's outstretched arm at the wrist, and twisted it up and behind her back. The countess hissed in pain, and struggled to pull free, but her strength was no match for Vlad's. He tore the blade from her free hand, careless that the deed cost him two fingers, and held her close.

Already, Vlad could feel Isabella's curse gnawing at his flesh. He closed his mind to the pain it caused, and urged his disintegrating body to one last effort. Shucking off the Carstein Ring, Vlad forced it onto one of Isabella's fingers. Then, before his last strength failed, the eldest of the von Carsteins flung his arms about the struggling countess, and heaved them both off the rampart's outer edge. For a long moment, the air was filled with Vlad's bitter laughter, and Isabella's desperate scream. Both sounds cut off suddenly as the plummeting vampires struck one of the fire-seared stakes at the wall's foot, the point punching through Vlad's heart an instant before it pierced Isabella's.

No one marked Vlad's passing, not then, for those that remained were too intent on their own survival. Slowly but surely, the surviving Zhufbarak and wood elves were forced back, their wall of shields refashioned as a ragged ring that sheltered the convalescing Everqueen. Durthu alone felt no weariness, just a rage that redoubled with every fallen ally. He knew that defeat was nigh, and that the world would end soon after. This, the Eldest of Ancients could not allow – not whilst he yet had the power to alter events.

With a snarl of sorrow, Durthu hurled his sword deep into the daemons' ranks, the Daith-forged steel spitting a Great Unclean One like a hog over a firepit. Then, the treeman turned and knelt at the Everqueen's side, and gently rested a single gnarled finger upon her brow. Once, long ago, one of his brothers had sacrificed himself to rid an elven queen of a blight upon her soul. Now, Durthu willingly gave of his life, not to dispel a darkness, but to usher in new life. The treeman's thorned skin withered and cracked; leaves fell as dust from his shoulders. As Durthu's spirit guttered and died, Alarielle's bloomed anew. Her wounds reknitted, the lines faded from her skin, and a brilliant light shone about her once more.

Rising as if from a dream, the Everqueen took in the sight of Durthu's petrified form, and knew at once the sacrifice the ancient had made. Anger mingled with sadness in Alarielle's heart. She reached back to a time before the Rhana Dandra had begun, when she had not been the Incarnate of Life, but Alarielle, bane of daemons. Binding together the dying embers of Durthu's soul, the power of Ghyran raging within her, and the purity that was hers by right of lineage, the Everqueen closed her eyes, threw back her head and sang a single perfect note.

White fire, its tips crested with brilliant green, pulsed out across the Middenplatz. It passed over the shrunken ring of Zhufbarak and elven shields without harm, but those daemons it touched burned to ash. Alarielle had felt hundreds of daemons perish. Yet when she opened her eyes, she saw wearily that thousands more remained. Durthu's sacrifice had brought them a breathing space, no more. Pushing her way to Gelt's and Hammerson's side, she prepared to make a final stand.

Of all whom remained in the Middenplatz, it was only Balthasar Gelt who kept any hope. Where others saw only a death delayed, the Incarnate of Metal saw opportunity, but one that was fading fast. For the first time since Gelt's arrival, the north gate was clear – at least for a time. As the daemons lurched over the ashes of their comrade to renew their assault, Gelt exchanged a glance with Gotri Hammerson. The two had shared many perils since their meeting at Averheim; the dwarf at once knew what was in the wizard's mind, and gave a slow nod of assent.

With only a moment's hesitation, Gelt set his heels to Quicksilver's flanks. Though no longer able to take wing, the pegasus was swift enough upon the ground – certainly enough to outpace corpulent daemons of Nurgle. Quicksilver whinnied and sprang away. Gelt passed Alarielle at full gallop. The wizard gave a sharp word of command, and golden hands gathered the Everqueen up and onto Quicksilver's back. Plague drones buzzed after them, but Hammerson barked a command, and a salvo of handgun fire tore the daemons apart.

As they passed by the northern gatehouse, Gelt caught a glance of Vlad's lonely, impaled corpse, his lifeless eyes fixed skyward, and a smile upon his lips. For a moment, the wizard felt an unexpected sadness, an echo of history strangely repeated, and wondered what fate had laid the vampire low. Then, Quicksilver was through the gate, and into the streets of the Palast district.











THE BATTLE OF ULRIC'S BONES

The Emperor and Tyrion drove their knights hard through Middenheim's ruined streets, guided ever eastward by the flames on the horizon. They slowed for nothing, not for the roaming packs of skaven, the wild-eyed northlander warbands, nor even the daemons who haunted the possessed alleys of Sudgarten. Each foe was met with lowered lances and a fervent cry, or else driven back by dragonfire delivered from on high.

Princes of Caledor swooped fearlessly through the skies, braving the storm and fire in order to clear a path for their allies. Not all survived their audacity. One dragon was struck by a bolt of emerald lightning, its plunging corpse demolishing a row of dwellings before it came fully to rest. Many more brave knights – elf and man – perished during that headlong charge, dragged from the saddle by a ratman's claws, or hacked down by a northlander's wild axe. But there was no force in Sudgarten that could hold against the fury of Deathclaw, or against the searing white light that was Tyrion's to command.

At last, the Emperor's charge carried him out of the Sudgarten, and into the levelled waste of the Ulricsmund. There, the knights saw the cause of the fire they had followed. On the edge of the great excavation, a dwindling host of elves drove hard for the Temple of Ulric. Fire was their cloak and their shield. It spilled from the blades of their weapons and from the phoenixes who circled in the skies above. Roaring skullreapers and hissing bloodletters surrounded the elves, a blood-hungry tide that never slackened, but the wake of blackened corpses stood as sickening testament to the slaughter Caradryan's host had wrought in their defiance.

Even as Tyrion arrived at the Ulricsmund, he saw Ashtari swoop onto the back of a bellowing giant. Before the brute could shake him free, the firebird lunged his hook-beak into the giant's blistering flesh, tearing free a great bloody gobbet. Caradryan's halberd came about a heartbeat later, hacking into the giant's skull in a spray of blood and bone. With a sickening lurch, the giant fell sideways, slamming into the northlanders with enough force to shatter the rock underfoot. Ashtari was already away, talons raking a warband of skullcrushers as the gore-slicked knights began their thunderous charge.



So embroiled were the Skaramor in their battle against the Host of Fire, that they did not mark the new arrivals. Only when the ground began to tremble with the pounding of hooves did the rearmost northlanders recognise their peril. Chieftains bellowed orders when they saw the gleam of silver and white amongst the gloom, and the ominous silhouettes of dragon-wings against the storm-chased clouds. But their orders went unheard amongst the clamour of battle, or were ignored by warriors too lost in the prospect of claiming skulls for Khorne. Only when the first lances thrust home, and the first death-screams rang out, did the northlander warbands truly react. By then, it was too late.

Reiksguard lances punched through armour and into the soft flesh beyond. Dragons plucked skullcrusher knights from their brass saddles and cast them wailing over the great excavation's edge. Skycutters darted to and fro above the milling horde, long spears thrusting down to pierce the eye sockets of crimson helms. Demigryphs and cold ones clawed and bit at juggernauts, and knight matched steel with knight. Ordinarily, no warrior of the Empire or Athel Loren could have hoped to match a Khorne-pledged brute blow for blow, but desperate times lent them the strength to prevail.

Deathclaw was ever in motion. Each swooping pounce the griffon made ended in blood and horror. His talons crushed northlanders where they stood, or else pinned them in place until his beak could tear them apart. Tyrion was scarcely more than a dozen paces behind the griffon, Malhandir keeping effortless pace with Deathclaw's savage advance. The Incarnate wielded his light as a weapon. Where it fell, daemons were snatched into oblivion, and Chaos-tainted mortals were struck blind, clawing at their eyes and easy marks for the vengeful elves that rode behind the prince. Caught between fire, light and the vengeance of 'weak' southlanders who had years of horrors to repay, the warriors of the Skaramor and their daemon allies began to fail.

One by one, the Skaramor warbands broke, spilling away north to the Temple of Ulric, and the uneven roadway that led down into the great excavation. Bereft of allies, the daemons felt their grip on the mortal world begin to slacken, and the Realm of Chaos drew them inexorably home. None of this went unnoticed by wrathful Khorne, and a bellow deeper and more piercing than the loudest thunder shook the skies.







Blazing meteors penetrated the clouds, each one a brass-plated skull plucked from the Blood God's throne. One by one, they crashed indiscriminately into the seething mass upon the Ulricsmund, slaughtering the Skaramor as readily as their enemies. Khorne was displeased by his worshippers' cowardice, and strove to smite them as readily as he did the mortals who fought against his cause.

Yet the skulls also took their toll of elven and Imperial lives. One slammed into the Host of Fire, all but obliterating a pride of white lions. Another struck a circling phoenix, hurling the firebird's broken body to the ground. The last of the Knights Griffon, who had stood stalwart at the Emperor's side since Averheim's siege began, were consumed by flame when a howling skull slammed into their formation's heart.

There was no shelter from the bombardment. What few ruins still stood collapsed like matchsticks when skulls struck them. Tyrion wove a shield of pure magic, a dome of shining light beneath which he sought to shelter his allies, but it shattered like glass under the first impact, scattering shards of razor-sharp light across the Ulricsmund. With no other choice, the united Hosts of Fire, Light and Heavens fought on as the skies fell, each warrior amongst their ranks praying for victory, or at the very least a swift death. On they forged through the sea of fleeing Skaramor, trying to ignore the flaming doom that screamed from above.

Only when the combined Incarnate host was nigh unto the Temple of Ulric's walls did the bombardment cease. None believed that a holy presence within the shrine had caused the attacks to falter; so slighted and defiled was the once-grand building that no wholesome god could have any longer held power over it. In this, the warriors of the host were correct. Khorne's wrath, though never-ending, was easily distracted to other concerns – even as the End Times drew to a climax – and some quarrel with his brothers now commanded the Blood God's attention.

Thus did the Incarnate host come before the great excavation, and find their path blocked. A blaze of crackling warpflame guarded the descent, a deadly barrier that none could traverse. Beyond the fire, raven-headed sorcerers cackled their blasphemous spells whilst lurid daemons capered and sneered. None amongst the host doubted that the Incarnates could breach the barricade – they had come too far to be denied by mere sorcery. However, it was another question whether they would be given the time to make the attempt. Already, crude chants were echoing from the north. In the shadows beyond the temple, the Skaramor were regathering their courage.



Worse was to come. As Tyrion and Caradryan wrestled with the magic of the warpflame barrier, a chorus of gnawing, feral howls rang out from the north, followed by the percussive thud of many hundreds of running feet. As the Incarnates laboured, the Emperor reformed their forces to face this new threat. The howling grew louder as weary elves and men hurried into position, at last reaching the pinnacle of the Ulricsmund as new foes arrived to do battle.

Most of the leading wave were northland hounds, all lean muscle, greasy fur and keen fangs. Most of those wretched creatures had once been men, twisted into new and more servile shapes by dread Ka'Bandha, Lord of the Hunt. Others were stray brutes, separated from their masters during the running battles across the city, and drawn by instinct to the shelter of the pack. They pounced without hesitation, driven by a terrible hunger and a will not their own. Most perished in that first attack, for the Incarnate host's blades were ready for them. Even so, many a pair of fangs tore a throat ragged, or dragged a knight from his steed so that the pack could tear him limb from limb.

Behind the dogs came warhounds of a different sort. These still wore the shape of men, but Ka'Bandha had changed their minds as surely as he had warped their fellows' bodies. No intelligence lurked behind those bloodshot eyes, just a desire to rend and tear, to sink their teeth into still-pulsing flesh, and feel the warm blood spill free. These feralkin howled like animals as they charged, and perished like vermin beneath the disciplined blades of the Incarnate host. But they dove onto the waiting blades without hesitation, dragging swords from hands with the weight of their own bodies. It was a new and desperate insanity in a night full of madness, and there was no cure save death.

Then, with a swoop of wings like a peal of thunder, the huntsmaster himself descended upon the Ulricsmund. Spreading his wings wide, Ka'Bandha issued a bellow of challenge that boomed across the city. On hearing it, the Skaramor lurking in the temple's shadow found their courage once more, and came forth to serve the cause of slaughter. Further south, the Imperials within the Incarnate host made the sign of the hammer, and prayed for Sigmar to save them. The elves placed their faith in the Incarnates, for they knew that mortal steel alone could not prevail.

Recognising that to wait for the oncoming horde would bring only death, the Emperor threw his knights forward. A cavalry line made for a poor shield wall, but a counter-charge gave a chance of survival, however slim. Banners raised, trumpets sang; the last charge of men and elves sprang forward through the baying hounds and feralkin. The Emperor led their charge, his battle cry bellowed in the old tongue of the Unberogens, not heard in those parts for long centuries. Propelled by Deathclaw's mighty wings, he soared towards Ka'Bandha's looming form, runefang brandished high. The Bloodthirster, recognising his prey come forth at last, gave a triumphant roar of his own and took to the air, his aim to at last seize the Emperor's skull.

Both man and daemon were too slow. The two foes were yet a quarter-mile apart when a bolt of winged flame surged past Deathclaw and struck the Bloodthirster head-on above the Temple of Ulric. Fire ringed the Bloodthirster, forcing him to abandon his charge and confront his new foe.

Caradryan and Ashtari hacked and tore at Ka'Bandha, seeking to keep the other off-balance. The Incarnate of Fire had known at once that the Emperor could not match the daemon in an even contest. An Incarnate's power was needed, or so Caradryan had deemed. However, Ka'Bandha was a Bloodthirster of the third host; he had fought both Tyrion and Malekith to a standstill in Athel Loren, and one Incarnate alone had little hope of besting him – something that Caradryan soon realised.

No matter how Ashtari tore at daemon's flesh, no matter the fires that crackled across his monstrous body, Ka'Bandha did not slow, did not even acknowledge what must have been fearsome agony. Even the wicked edge of Caradryan's Phoenix Blade, though it sliced into the daemon readily enough, seemed not to cause the brute any pain.



At the same time, Ashtari was forced to break constantly away from the fight, lest the impact of the Bloodthirster's whirling hammer-flail strike him from the skies. Yet each time the phoenix peeled away, he came back harder and more reckless than before, determined to elicit some roar of agony from the daemon.

Turning to follow the phoenix, Ka'Bandha shifted tactics. His hammer's chain blazed red as he whirled it through the air, then let fly. The Bloodthirster had timed his throw perfectly, and the hell-forged links looped around the phoenix's neck and bit deep. Ashtari screeched and swept his wings down in an attempt to pull free, but Ka'Bandha's strength was too great. Hand over hand, the Bloodthirster reeled the phoenix in, ignoring the tempest of fire with which Caradryan smote him. Ashtari clawed and bit at the daemon, the ichor-stained wounds blazing briefly, but there was no altering fate now. Ka'Bandha gave one last heave, drawing the phoenix into a deadly embrace. Then he sank his fangs deep into the firebird's blazing plumage, and tore out Ashtari's throat.

Ashtari went limp at once, the flames of his being rapidly turning dull and ashen as the magic left his corpse. Giving voice to a rare shout of anger, Caradryan sprang from his saddle as the Bloodthirster let Ashtari's corpse fall. The Incarnate's halberd gleamed as it clove the air, the blow granted strength as gravity dragged Caradryan swiftly groundward. The blade struck Ka'Bandha's brazen crown, splitting its outflung crest and hacking deep into his scalp. The Bloodthirster roared in agony for the first time, and swatted at Caradryan's falling body, shattering the Incarnate's legs as if they were twigs.

Caradryan struck the Ulricsmund with crushing force, his halberd jarring from his hand. Feralkin howled at the sight of wounded prey. They surged towards the fallen Incarnate, then backed away as Ka'Bandha's hooves crunched into the rubble – none dared deny the daemon his kill. Caradryan rolled onto his back. His fingers strained for the Phoenix Blade's haft, but it was far beyond his reach. With a sneer, Ka'Bandha raised one cracked hoof high and slammed it down onto the Incarnate's chest. In the moment before impact, Caradryan closed his eyes and uttered a single word, both a command to the magic in his blood and a final curse upon his slayer.

Burn!

As the Emperor reached the duel, he saw Ka'Bandha's hoof crush Caradryan's chest, and saw also sparks of flame burst from the Incarnate's corpse. They took root in the Bloodthirster's flesh, running hungrily across his torso and limbs, growing in intensity until no part of the daemon was not ablaze. Ka'Bandha bellowed as Aqshy flowed over him. He flailed and staggered, his outstretched wings scattering the feralkin and Skaramor in his shadow. Seeing his opening, the Emperor urged Deathclaw on.

As man and griffon closed with Ka'Bandha, the Bloodthirster's tone shifted from pain to a deep, rumbling laughter. Though the fires in his flesh had not receded, the daemon had plumbed the depths of his agony, and realised that he could endure the pain, for they were nothing compared to his own forge-born flames. As the Emperor dove towards him, the Bloodthirster lashed out with his hammer-flail. The brazen head struck Deathclaw with the audible crack of a breaking wing. The griffon was smashed out of the air, his unconscious body slewing around as it ploughed through the temple's rubble. The Emperor was flung from his saddle by the impact, thrown high through the remnants of a stained-glass window, and into the gloomy chamber beyond.



Ka'Bandha stomped through the rubble, angry fire trailing behind him. Deathclaw lay before him, the griffon's feathers twitching as he struggled against unconsciousness. Snarling in anticipation of his kill, the Bloodthirster brought his hammer slamming down on the beast's skull. Yet, as he did so, a shield of brilliant light coalesced in front of Deathclaw. The barrier shattered into a thousand gleaming shards as the hammer struck, but the intercession robbed Ka'Bandha's blow of all force. Before the daemon could strike again, there was a blur of motion, as Tyrion arrived to oppose him.

The light was blinding, its touch painful, but it was nothing to the fire of Aqshy that still burned in every fibre of his being. Ka'Bandha stared down at the impudent elf who thought to challenge him. Had the mortals not yet learned that he was a foe beyond them? Not that it mattered. Khorne would reward him for their deaths.

'This beast and his master are mine to claim, bloodspeck,' Ka'Bandha rumbled. 'Flee now, and I shall not seek your death until this night's work is done.'

The Bloodthirster hoped that the elf would accept the offer. The hunt was always more enjoyable than the kill. Besides, Karl Franz's skull had evaded him too long, and Ka'Bandha yearned to claim it.

The elf shifted in his saddle and scowled, his brilliant halo shining all the stronger with his defiance. 'I do not bargain with daemons. I kill them.'

Then he raised his sword, and charged.

Ka'Bandha had slain one Incarnate, but Tyrion was a far more challenging foe. Even before the power of Hysh had infused him, the prince had been one of the mortal world's foremost warriors – now, he was all but unstoppable. Thus he matched Ka'Bandha's savage strength with speed and skill. Again and again the hammer crashed down, throwing dust and wicked stone shards in all directions, but Malhandir's swiftness ensured that Tyrion was never struck. The hammer-flail's chain whistled through the air with every strike, but each time, Sunfang's gleaming blade deflected the links before they could snare its wielder.

In return, Tyrion lashed out at Ka'Bandha with banishing light. However, as in King's Glade, the beast's savage will saw him battle on. The killing, then, was left to Sunfang's edge, but even Tyrion's most savage blows left the Bloodthirster untroubled. His flesh afire and assailed by cleansing light, the Bloodthirster was beyond pain such as Tyrion could cause. What bellows he uttered were threats and snarls, not cries of agony, and Ka'Bandha grew all the more savage even as the elf began to tire.

Anarchy reigned across the Ulricsmund. The Skaramor and feralkin paid little heed to tactics, and simply went wherever slaughter took them. At first, this worked to the favour of the elf and human knights, who wheeled and charged so that their lances and swords always struck the foe where they were unprepared. Where the path was blocked, dragons roared overhead, their flames forging paths of twisted and blackened flesh through the Chaos horde. However, as the battle went on, the balance of power lurched away from the Incarnates' forces.

With Caradryan's death, the power of Aqshy began to leave those elves who had fought at his side. Fires faded from their blades, and fury from their hearts. Furthermore, when the Emperor was struck from the skies, many of the Imperial knights felt dismay claw at their hearts. They fought on, but the sudden shock of their leader's fall threw many a charge into disarray, and the Skaramor were quick to take advantage. Only the druchii who fought for Tyrion kept their haughty composure. The Captain of the Phoenix Guard had been their enemy far longer than their ally, and the human Emperor was, by his very definition, an inferior being.

The Incarnates' casualties tallied ever higher, the bellowed war cries and the clash of steel echoed out across the city, luring new warriors to the fight. Kurgan, skaven – even a few bestial survivors of the Middenplatz massacre – flocked to the Ulricsmund and flung themselves into battle.



WAAAGH!

Grimgor's horde spilled into the Ulricsmund from the south, the sudden onslaught of choppas and iron-bound clubs obliterating the skaven who had arrived only moments before. As the survivors of the Host of Shadow advanced more cautiously behind, the Waaagh!-cry went up again, and the orcs thundered into the welcome fury of battle.

Skaramor warbands shifted course to oppose the newcomers. They bellowed their crude battle cries, clashed their blood-stained blades and hurled severed heads into the greenskins' ranks. Such bloodthirsty displays had served them well before, but they had no effect whatsoever on the orcs, who simply roared all the louder and increased their headlong pace. The two lines slammed together with a crash loud enough to be heard across the Ulricsmund, the force of the impact hurling armoured northlanders and bleeding greenskins high into the air, or back into their own ranks.

Grimgor fought at the orcs' head, the standard of the Immortulz close at his back. The ogres, however, displayed a fraction more canniness, and held back long enough for their ironblasters to be wheeled across the mangled pile of skaven dead. When the last war machine was in place, flaming brands were touched to fuses and a volley of heavy iron balls whipped across the Ulricsmund, tearing bloody holes in the flank of a Skaramor warband, and all but obliterating a host of Kurgan knights. A chorus of belly-laughs boomed out at the grisly spectacle, and then the ogres barged forward over the Kurgans' bloody remains.

Few of Tyrion's embattled knights had attention to spare for the sudden arrivals from the south. Those who did, welcomed the Beast-Waaagh!'s arrival – at least so long as they beat the Skaramor bloody. Even so, many knights thereafter chose to fight battles that led them steadily northward, away from the unpredictable greenskins who pressed in from the south.

Those knights who battled northwards found fresh respite in the arrival of Balthasar Gelt and Alarielle. Quicksilver had borne the two Incarnates through the winding northern streets, always choosing evasion over needless conflict.

Both felt the burden of allies slain or abandoned, and had silently pledged that the sacrifices made by Hammerson, Durthu and Vlad would not be in vain. Now the pegasus bore his burdens to safer ground. Golden light flared, transmuting Skaramor into lifeless statues, and then Gelt and Alarielle were amongst the lances and shields of the Reiksguard.

Though he would never have admitted it, Tyrion was overmatched. Ka'Bandha seemed impervious to pain and fatigue, had battled on though his flesh was charred and cracked from Aqshy's flame. The Bloodthirster fought with both hammer-flail and axe now, the weapons whirling with berserk energy.

Tyrion leaned low in his saddle. The axe-blade ripped through the air above, splitting a granite pillar in two and toppling a defaced statue of Ulric. The falling stone would have crushed the elf, had not Malhandir spurred forward at that moment, galloping around Ka'Bandha's legs. As a giant, flaming wing passed overhead, Tyrion rose up in the stirrups once more and hacked at the leathery membrane. Malhandir's momentum, wedded to Sunfang's flawless edge, tore not only through the wing's membrane, but also through three of its bony vanes.

At last, Tyrion provoked a roar of pain. The Bloodthirster span back to face him. Ka'Bandha's axe hissed down again, aimed to split the prince in two. Sunfang rose to meet it, the blade blazing with Tyrion's light. There was an ear-splitting screech and a flash of light as the two weapons met, but Sunfang proved the superior blade. A vast shard of Ka'Bandha's axe-head sheared away to clang into the rubble, but such was the force of the blow that Tyrion was knocked backwards out of his saddle, and fell winded to the ground.

Casting his ruined axe down, Ka'Bandha stepped forward with a bellow of triumph and raised his right hoof high, to stomp the life from Tyrion as he had his fellow Incarnate.

At that moment, a sudden gale sprang up across the Ulricsmund. It blew from the south, out of the charnel streets of the Merchant District, and howled up along the great excavation's western flank. With it came a swirling dark cloud, roiling and pulsing with dread energy. Where the cloud passed, combatants fell lifeless; their skin desiccated and cracked, their weapons and armour crumbled to dust. It made no distinction between the battling sides – orcs and elves perished beneath its embrace as surely as did ratmen or northlanders. As the cloud grew close to Ka'Bandha, it burst apart, the scattering tendrils of vapour revealing a robed figure as grim as death itself. With a dark gleam, Zefet-nebtar, the Mortis Blade, swept out.

Tyrion forgotten, the Bloodthirster threw himself at his new foe. His hammer came up to block the Mortis Blade's strike, sparks flying as daemon weapon and cursed blade vied for supremacy. Neither Nagash nor Ka'Bandha found victory in that first clash, and the weapons ripped apart to the sound of the Bloodthirster's renewed bellow and the liche's death-rattle.

Nagash had not sought to save Tyrion's life. Indeed, the Great Necromancer hadn't even marked his presence at Ka'Bandha's feet; both the prince and his faithful steed would have perished if he hadn't recovered the presence of mind to cast a shield against Nagash's arrival. Rather, the Supreme Lord of the Undead loathed stooping to physical combat, and had determined to make an example of the mightiest foe upon the field now that he had been forced to sully himself.

Unnoticed, Malhandir bore an exhausted Tyrion away as the two demigods traded blows that would have cracked a mountain. Nagash matched the Bloodthirster strength for strength, but the Mortis Blade was not his only weapon. Nine tomes of flesh-bound lore performed swirling orbits around the Great Necromancer as he fought, their pages fluttering and sparking with amethyst energy as Nagash drew upon their power.



At last, Ka'Bandha had met a foe that was his equal. However, this was only to the Bloodthirster's liking, for he deemed Nagash's skull to be the greatest prize upon the Ulricsmund. He ignored the chill wind that tore at his flesh, at last extinguishing Caradryan's flames, and battered at the liche with every dreg of strength he possessed. His hammer-flail whirled and struck in a punishing rhythm, driving shards of warpstone from the Great Necromancer's cursed blade, but coming away scarred in return. The barbed chain lashed out to shatter Nagash's bones, but the liche only laughed as flaring amethyst magic crept along his limbs and restored his broken body. Yet neither Ka'Bandha's fury nor Nagash's sorceries could break the deadlock – the foes were too well-matched.

However, in fighting Nagash, Ka'Bandha had quite forgotten the hunt that had brought him to the Ulricsmund in the first place. He had forgotten the Emperor.

The Emperor awoke in darkness. His face was sticky with half-clotted blood, and his body was numb. The air was heavy, and the unmistakable smell of a slaughterhouse was thick in his nostrils.

Dragging himself to his feet, he peered into the darkness. Ahead of him, a pool of blood bubbled and spat; all around, corpses hung from the ceiling on heavy chains. And at the back of the chamber, at the very limit of the Emperor's vision, loomed a throne of skulls and flayed skin.

A howl sounded behind the Emperor. It was quickly joined by others, and by the scramble of paws and hands on rubble. The Emperor's hand flew to his scabbard – then he remembered that the runefang was gone. It had been flung from his hand when he'd been thrown from Deathclaw's back. It could be anywhere now, and he didn't relish facing Ka'Bandha's hounds without it.

With no other option, he pressed on through the forest of chains. Behind him, the howling grew louder, accompanied by the crunch of boots on stone.

Moving quickly, propelled by an instinct he couldn't quite identify, the Emperor skirted the blood pool, and stared at the throne. Scraps of sinew and fat still clung to the bones, but he scarcely noticed, for his attention was drawn to a gleam of bronze atop the abhorrent structure. No cleansing flame, no morning sunlight had ever seemed so beautiful as that sight.

Behind the Emperor, the howls reached a fever pitch as the first of the hounds caught his scent. It didn't matter. Not now.

'Hello, old friend,' he whispered, and reached out a trembling hand.

Lightning flared across the sky. This was not the blood-red lightning of recent days, but an angry shaft of heavenly light. It struck the Temple of Ulric's ravaged dome, and sparked across its battered roof. Thunder pealed, crisp and clear, and the lightning came again. With the second bolt, the front of the temple exploded, chunks of brick and stonework flung outwards by the blast. Bodies of Skaramor and feralkin came too, cast from the temple's depths by a sudden rebirth of power, and Deathclaw's wounded body was lost to sight. Ka'Bandha and Nagash both shrank away from the light, the Great Necromancer recalling unbidden the memory of a long-ago humiliation at the gates of Altdorf.

Tyrion saw the light, and with it the revelation of a truth that he had known since his return from the dead. Karl Franz had not been reborn during the fall of Altdorf. His body had been restored, true enough. However, the will that drove it was not his, but that of Sigmar Heldenhammer, whose spirit who had been trapped within the Wind of Heavens for more than two thousand years. Yet without his fabled hammer – without Ghal Maraz – the first Emperor had not been reborn whole, not at first. Archaon had unknowingly exploited this weakness when he had stripped the Emperor of his Incarnatehood at Averheim. However, the Everchosen had not – could not – truly comprehend the nature of his foe. To Archaon, Sigmar was a myth, a lie, but Archaon had deceived himself, had read only what he wished to see in the prophecies of Necrodomo the Insane. Now, with Sigmar and his fabled weapon reunited, the power of the heavens was his once again, and hope was reborn.

All upon the Ulricsmund felt the sudden shift in fortunes. Feralkin howled in sudden terror, and skaven screeched in dismay. The knights of the Empire, who had fought at Sigmar's side for many months, never knowing the truth until now, felt all tiredness fall from their bones. Sudden joy bubbled up through the fear and hatred that had dominated their recent days, and they fell about their foes with a fury that knew no abeyance. The remaining Incarnates looked towards the Temple of Ulric, and recognised the truth of the Emperor's return. Only the orcs missed the significance of what had just occurred. They continued about their bloody work, neither awed nor dismayed by the fury in the skies.





Even buried deep in the Fauschlag, Teclis heard the distant sounds of battle far above. In the centre of the cavern, the warp-artefact shone ominously, myriad colours rippling like fire across its oily surface. Sorcerers clustered around it, uttering harsh syllables as they coaxed the ancient doom to life. Even Teclis, learned as he was, recognised few of the incantations being uttered. Instinctively, the mage knew that he was hearing sounds not uttered since the time of the Old Ones.

For the hundredth time, the mage tested his chains, and for the hundredth time it proved a wasted effort. The links went taught against their mooring in the rock wall, and cold iron chafed against wrists that were already raw from previous attempts, but there was nothing more to show for the effort. It was all the more frustrating because Teclis could feel the magic billowing through the cave. It had been drawn forth by the thousands of blood sacrifices whose stench lay thick upon the air, and whose corpses lay strewn about the cavern's perimeter. Yet the baleful runes set in the heavy manacles prevented Teclis from siphoning even a fraction of that power – and without it, he was helpless.

But then, Teclis doubted he could have achieved much even if he had broken free. The chamber was ringed by Archaon's silent warriors, and the Everchosen himself only tore his attention away from the glistening artefact to satisfy himself that his captive made no mischief. Archaon should have killed him, Teclis knew. However, the Everchosen's pride clearly demanded an audience for his last terrible act – even if it was an audience of one.

All of a sudden, Teclis' keen ears picked up the faint sound of lightning.

The chamber shuddered, dislodging several stalactites from the ceiling. Gold gleamed through the fresh cracks in the cavern roof, and Teclis wondered at the Fauschlag's true nature – not that it mattered greatly now. The calcified spikes crashed down into the triple-ringed ritual circle, crushing several of the chanting sorcerers. Others fled their labours, only to return at Archaon's sonorous command – clearly they feared the Everchosen more than the caprices of falling rock.

'Sigmar is coming,' Teclis said. He had spoken softly, but the some trick of acoustics carried his words clearly across the chamber.

Archaon rounded on the mage. 'Are you so desperate for salvation that you place your hope in a myth?' he demanded. 'I thought elves more rational than that.'

Teclis shook his head. 'I am too rational to doubt the evidence of my own experience.'

'You are blinded by lies,' the Everchosen snarled.

'One of us is, certainly,' Teclis rejoined, unflinchingly meeting the Everchosen's hollow gaze. For a moment, he thought that Archaon would cut him down, trading the loss of a witness for silence. Then the Everchosen laughed, a sound somehow darker than his snarl.

The chamber shuddered again, but this time lightning high above was not the cause. Behind Archaon, the warp-artefact pulsed suddenly, its gleaming mass doubling in size. The nearest sorcerers were sucked into its depths, not even given time to scream. Pain-wracked faces bulged against the oily surface from within, and the whorls of colour broke apart into ever more dizzying patterns. The cavern floor cracked and fissured, baleful light gleaming up through the jagged wounds in the rock. The stench of blood was overwhelmed by the bitter stink of brimstone, and a sweet, sickly smell that Teclis could not identify, and did not wish to.

Archaon laughed again as the artefact pulsed anew, its circumference redoubling. 'The dying moments of the world are upon us. A false god cannot save you now.'

On the summit of the Ulricsmund, lightning struck the temple for a third time, then seared outwards through the shattered facade. Except this time, Deathclaw was at its head. The griffon was bloodied – one wing was still broken and lifeless from where Ka'Bandha's hammer had struck him from the sky – but the fury in his voice was terrible to hear. Sigmar rode atop the griffon's shoulders, Ghal Maraz gleaming with brilliant light in his hand.

Deathclaw surged forward, propelled across the rubble by powerful claws. Lightning burst from Ghal Maraz's head. It struck Ka'Bandha square in the chest, melting his armour, and flinging him backwards. The Bloodthirster bellowed, his hooves scoring twin tracks through the rubble as he sought to steady himself. Then he roared, and went to meet the Emperor's charge. Nagash made no move to stop him – the Great Necromancer had no desire to make Sigmar's existence any easier than strictly necessary.

Ka'Bandha and Deathclaw struck each other mid-leap. The Bloodthirster's hammer went wide, but the Emperor's did not. It had been dubbed 'Skull Splitter' by its forger, and once again it proved the aptness of that name. The rune-inscribed head struck Ka'Bandha's crown with a hollow chime, cracking the metal.

With a roar, Ka'Bandha fell backwards, slamming into the rubble of the Ulricsmund, the impact throwing up a cloud of dust. Deathclaw was upon him in a heartbeat, the griffon's weight pinning the Bloodthirster down whilst the Emperor readied another blow. This second strike was even mightier than the first, the hammer's head trailing lightning as it crashed home. Ka'Bandha's skull shattered with a sharp crack, speckling the Emperor and Deathclaw with shards of ichor-stained bone. The daemon convulsed once, and did not rise. His physical form was at last slain, and his monstrous spirit flung back into the Realm of Chaos.

This marked the turning point in the battle of the Ulricsmund. With Ka'Bandha slain, the bloodthirsty spirit that had guided his hounds faded away to nothing. Feralkin howled and fled, or else cowered, waiting for the inevitable deathblow. Skaven and Kurgan retreated in droves, seeking shelter in the ruins beyond the Ulricsmund. Some Skaramor fought on. However, the Beast-Waaagh!'s brutish warriors were drawn to their bloody banners like flies to dung, and one by one, the skull-totems fell, their bearers slain or fled. As the Incarnates rallied what forces remained to them, greenskins and ogres pursued their beaten foes deeper into the city. Only Grimgor and his Immortulz remained. The warboss was bound by his desire to best the Everchosen who waited at the excavation's heart, his bodyguard by their ironclad loyalty to their master's will. Malekith spoke for Grimgor, his tone somehow managing to tread a line between respect for his new 'leader' and deadly challenge to any who sought to mock his status. Thus, the strange alliance that had begun in the Wynd was now extended to all of the Incarnates.

As the uproar of battle faded into the surrounding streets, the Incarnates gathered their forces before the great excavation's entrance. The barrier of warpflame was still in place, the chanting of daemons and sorcerers beyond having only redoubled in the wake of Ka'Bandha's defeat.



Summoning the full force of their power, the Incarnates smote that barrier with the majestic spectrum of magic – or almost so. With Caradryan's death, the power of Aqshy had been lost, but its absence was not sorely felt. Assailed by the dual onslaughts of light and shadow, of life and death – hammered by skyborne lightning, and transmutative golden rays – the magics of the barrier began to shift and crack. Only Grimgor made no attempt to unleash his latent arcane potential, for the orc still understood little of the fate that had overtaken him. Instead, he hefted his axe once, bellowed a wordless challenge at the pulsating warpflame and struck the barrier with all of his considerable might.

As Gitsnik sliced home, the magics of the barrier collapsed. The flames broke inward as drops of blazing, many-hued liquid, the backwash snatching the barrier's creators into ashen oblivion. Grimgor bellowed in triumph. As if in answer, the Fauschlag gave a sudden lurching shudder. The way was open, but was it too late?









No enemies assailed the Incarnates and their surviving army of orcs, elves and men as they journeyed into the Fauschlag's torch-lit depths. Many times they heard the skittering of skaven claws, but always in branching passages, and scurrying away. The Incarnates and their allies travelled as swiftly as they could, mindful that the tremors in the rock boded ill. None could say for certain how far progressed Archaon's ritual was. All were certain that it had begun, if for no other reason than the Everqueen appeared increasingly wan as time passed. As the Weave suffered, so did she. Nevertheless, Alarielle refused all aid, and insisted on making the journey on her own two feet.

Even without foes to harry them, the descent was far from easy. The excavation cut through flag-stoned tunnels, and long abandoned sewers, and had been hewn out of a desire for haste, not ease of use. The topmost tunnels had been dug to allow toiling slaves into the lower depths, not to admit beasts of Seraphon and Deathclaw's size, and there was many a scrape on flesh or scale. Nagash, of course, had no such problem. The Great Necromancer traversed the tunnels as the same oppressive death-cloud he been on arrival at the Ulricsmund, forcing his allies to advance either well ahead or well behind him. Only when the Incarnates reached the cavernous lower levels could the dragon and griffon move relatively unhindered.

The last traces of man-made environs eventually gave way, replaced by the cold bedrock of the mountain. Here, the skaven had made use of the Fauschlag's natural caverns, and the route became less direct. But always, the trail of dead, emaciated slaves pointed the way deeper into the mountain. Here too were the first signs of otherworldly infestation. In many places, the dark rock of the tunnels gave way to pulsing expanses of daemonic flesh. Skaven and human bodies lay clustered in such places, slaves and guards alike, the bones often picked clean of flesh and pock-marked as if by acid. The Incarnates bypassed these passageways, where the layout of the tunnels allowed, and used magic to scour away the infestation where there was no other route to take.

Escape from the cramped confines of the upper passageways presented its own dangers, however – Archaon had not been so foolish as to leave his rituals entirely undefended. Thus, as the Incarnates breached the Fauschlag's hidden caverns, the first attacks began.

The early attackers were skaven, well-used to fighting in dank, subterranean spaces. They came as great chittering swarms of mangy fur and snapping teeth, desperate to overwhelm the Incarnates. The chieftains and grey seers who led these assaults had no illusions as to the consequences of failure. If Archaon did not have them put to death, then the Great Horned Rat – or one of his Verminlords – surely would. Thus the ratmen warlords defended each cave and tunnel to the last drop of their minions' blood, sometimes even going so far as to join the fighting in person, if absolutely no other option presented itself.

The Incarnates fought back with all their fury, knowing that the time for restraint was long passed. Better by far to reach the ritual chamber with the merest dregs of power remaining than not to reach it at all. The Emperor, Tyrion and Grimgor led the way in these battles, hacking and bludgeoning their way through the teeming ranks, and clearing a path for others to follow. It was brutal work. Hundreds upon hundreds of skaven died in those tunnels, cut down by desperate Imperial steel, transmuted into glittering dust, or blasted apart by lightning's strike. Many twitched to life again moments after, revived by the Supreme Lord of the Undead to do battle in his name.

As the Incarnates fought their way deeper, so too did the ferocity of the resistance increase. They reached calcified catacombs where the skaven had possessed the time to prepare proper defences, to conceal war engines amidst the grottoes and galleries. Increasingly, the Incarnates were forced to coordinate their efforts. All save Nagash, who stood alone, even then, and Grimgor who charged on heedless through every volley of bullets and warp lightning. It was not enough – none of it was enough. No matter how Tyrion strove to shield his allies, or Alarielle laboured to mend their wounds, there were too many spears, too many bullets and too many desperate ratmen.

Time was the enemy now as much as the skaven. Through it all, the Fauschlag continued to shake as Archaon's world-breaking ritual accelerated towards completion. Millennia-old rock formations cracked apart and rained down, crushing struggling warriors on both sides. Chasms split open beneath the combatants' feet, spilling them into the as-yet uncharted depths beneath the mountain. Fearing that the chance to halt Archaon's plan would soon be lost, the Emperor drove his allies as hard as he dared. The injured were abandoned alongside the dead, and the shrinking Incarnate host pushed into the Fauschlag's grim heart.

Behind the Incarnates came another intruder, concealed as much by the desperation of those who might have observed him as the sorceries with which he cloaked himself. Mannfred von Carstein had reluctantly taken Vlad's last advice – he had finally chosen a side.

Shackled to the wall of the ritual chamber, Teclis heard the sounds of battle in the caves above, and hoped beyond hope that there was still a chance of victory. The warp-artefact had swollen to many times its original size, and its baleful presence was tearing the chamber apart. Shards

of stone fell constantly from the roof, and a deep, buzzing drone reverberated from the rock walls. It was a penetrating sound, heard as much in the mind as by the ear, and it made the mage's teeth rattle and his eyes bleed.

Scores of the Everchosen's sorcerers were dead already. Some had been sucked screaming into the expanding sphere, others had collapsed to their knees with blood streaming from their eyes and ears. Still more had perished on the Swords of Chaos' blades, cut down during their attempt to flee the doom they had wrought. Archaon himself had slaughtered the most recent of them, tearing the wretch's heart out through his ribcage and crushing it before the light had faded from his dying eyes. After that example had been set, no other had attempted to abandon the ritual.

The artefact pulsed and expanded once again. Teclis blinked back tears of blood as the pressure in his mind increased yet further. The mage could hear daemonic whispers in his mind, their voices like claws scratching at his sanity. He had heard such things before, but never so strong, and never without the means to defend himself. It took all of the mage's remaining willpower to stop himself slipping forever into madness.

The end was mere minutes away, Teclis was certain of that. The sphere could not grow much further without imploding. When it collapsed, the Fauschlag would be drawn into the Realm of Chaos, and the rest of the world would be torn apart. It was unfair to have sacrificed so much for survival, and yet teeter on the edge of the abyss. For a moment, Teclis lost himself in despair. Then he realised that the voice whispering in his thoughts was not his own, but a daemon's sibilant whisper. Blotting the creature out, the mage fixed his thoughts on the sounds of battle above, and the salvation it promised. The end could yet be averted.

Archaon was also aware of the Incarnates' approach. Indeed, such was the clamour echoing down from the upper caverns that he would have had to be entirely deaf in order to have remained ignorant. The Everchosen's disappointment at his minions' failure was tempered by anticipation of the battle to come. Above all things, Archaon was a warrior. The ritual would grant the Chaos Gods the victory they demanded, but it was a somehow unseemly way to mark the end of all that was. It was therefore with some satisfaction that he ordered his Swords of Chaos to form a line of battle at the ritual chamber's entrance.

As the Swords of Chaos took their places beneath their grim banners, the inky black surface of the warp-artefact parted and a great host of daemons marched into the cavern. They came striding, capering, shambling, and dancing – the minions of all four Chaos Gods united in a single cause. The glistening blackness of the artefact's skin dripped from the daemons' limbs like oil as they passed into the chamber, mouths and tentacles forming in the fluid as it pooled about their feet.

Archaon did not want these reinforcements. He interpreted their presence as chastisement from gods who did not believe that he could otherwise see their mission completed. Yet the Everchosen could hardly refuse the aid, and would have likely been ignored had he tried. Besides, the daemons could serve as a distraction, allowing his own chosen warriors the chance to prove the weakness of the civilised lands.

As the sounds of battle drew ever closer, Archaon spurred Dorghar into the Swords of Chaos' silent ranks, and drew the Slayer of Kings. So many battles had led him to this point, so many victories. One more triumph, and then his burden was done. The end would be heralded not by the frantic whispers of sorcerers, but by one final, glorious battle!



THE INCARNATE HOST

This was the army upon which hung the world's fate. It was a strange assemblage, thick with former enemies driven by the common goal of survival. In times past they had spilled one another's blood, and would surely do so again if the world survived its coming doom. For now, however, they were allies.



THE EMPEROR, INCARNATE OF HEAVENS

None entered the bowels of Middenheim more driven than Sigmar. After Tzeentch had trapped him in the Wind of Heavens, he had abided in the Great Vortex for thousands of years, unable to lend aid to the Empire he had founded, or to take up Ghal Maraz to defend those who had worshipped him as a god. That failure, though not truly of his making, hung heavily upon Sigmar's shoulders, and fuelled his determination that his second confrontation with Archaon would end differently to the first.



GRIMGOR IRONHIDE

Grimgor was not entirely foolish. He knew that Malekith had sought to manipulate him into joining the battle against Chaos – he just didn't care. The warboss lived to prove his prowess in battle, and had shrewdly realised that none of the elves or humans who had reluctantly embraced him as an ally would serve as a meaningful challenge. If the opposite had been true, then why would they have sought his aid in the first place? No, for Grimgor the challenge lay in defeating the emissary of the Dark Gods, thus proving that he was truly the strongest.

DA IMMORTULZ

The Immortulz had fought at Grimgor's side since the warboss first marched out of the east. Since then, they had brought ruin to dwarf holds, skaven lairs and innumerable human settlements along the Worlds Edge Mountains. Like their leader, they cared little for wealth and territory. Instead, they sought only the joy of battle. Middenheim was therefore paradise, filled as it was with the very best warriors that the northlands had to offer. Unlike Grimgor, most of the Immortulz saw little reason to ally with the weakling elves and men, but were nonetheless content to let their boss do the thinking.





THE REVENANTS OF KHAINE

For centuries, the Revenants of Khaine had guarded the Blighted Isle from Malekith, whom they believed to be evil personified. In recent years, their surety had been sorely tested, and they had learnt first-hand that the former Witch King was but one evil amongst many. Now they fought at Malekith's side against a greater threat – proof enough, said some, that the world was coming to an end.



THE REIKSGUARD

The last survivors of the army that the Emperor had led from the ruin of Averheim, the Reiksguard felt the coming battle's burden no less greatly than their commander. In truth, few truly understood the full, horrible depths of the stakes at play. Most knew only that they had been given one last chance to repay the Everchosen for the destruction of their homeland, and the slaughter of their families. Before entering the caverns, every last knight had sworn a blood oath that they would fight to the last, no matter what horrors awaited them beneath the Fauschlag.



THE KNIGHTS OF ALABAST

Too many of Lothern's elves had fought at Tyrion's side during his descent into madness. Khaine cast a long shadow over the prince even now, but the Knights of Alabast were determined to fight at his side – as much to clear the stain upon their homeland's honour as anything else. Even with the world on the brink of destruction, asur pride demanded that past sins be expunged. Thus had their skycutters fought in Middenheim's streets, and thus did the surviving knights now ride at his side in the depths of the Fauschlag.

The Emperor,
Incarnate of Heavens

Malekith,
the Eternity King

Grimgor Ironhide,
Incarnate of Beasts

Alarielle,
Incarnate of Life

Tyrion,
Incarnate of Light

Balthasar Gelt,
Incarnate of Metal

Nagash,
Supreme Lord of the Undead

Teclis

The Reiksguard
One brotherhood of Reiksguard Knights

Da Immortulz
Three regiments of Black Orcs

The Revenants of Khaine
One regiment of High Elf Spearmen

The Shadows of Naggaroth
One regiment of Darkshards

The Knights of Alabast
One regiment of Silver Helms

The Spears of Talagand
One regiment of High Elf Spearmen

The Winterborn
One kinband of Sisters of the Thorn

The Fauschlag Dead
One vast horde of Zombies

THE EVERCHOSEN'S HORDE

At Archaon's back in that final battle stood the greatest of his mortal warriors. Accompanying them, their presence neither sought for nor desired, were great swathes of daemons. Yet however unhappy this alliance might be, it made for a formidable horde, one with the power to bring the world to a final, crashing end.



ARCHAON EVERCHOSEN, THE THREE-EYED KING, LORD OF THE END TIMES

With victory and defeat both seemingly a mere coin's toss away, Archaon had taken care to keep his finest warriors close. To a degree, the Everchosen did not care if the Dark Gods' plans came to fruition or not. He was also not yet prepared to believe Teclis' assertion that the Incarnate host was led by Sigmar, but it changed nothing – Archaon's monstrous pride demanded that this final challenge to his supremacy be crushed. The Empire had been destroyed, and his soul was damned, regardless of what now came to pass. All that remained was blood and death.





KARAVOX

A Bloodthirster of Insensate Rage, and one who hungrily sought to claim Ka'Bandha's title as huntsmaster, Karavox came willingly to the Fauschlag's depths. Like all the Greater Daemons summoned to that place, he had little faith in a mortal's ability to achieve Khorne's glorious goal. Karavox relished the chance for battle in the mortal world, but was less pleased to discover that his master expected him to fight alongside the pleasure-addled minions of the Dark Prince.

TCHZEN OF THE SILVER CLAW

One of two greater daemons in command of the Tzeentchian daemon host, Tchzen was more given to physical confrontation than his brother Lords of Change. What magics he wielded, he did so to enhance his prowess in battle – as more than one Great Unclean One had discovered to their cost during the interminable battles along the fringes of the Crystal Labyrinth. Tchzen savoured each victory, often taking a small bone token from the vanquished as proof of his triumph. Indeed, the Vault of Bone Chimes in the heart of the Impossible Fortress was said to have been constructed purely of such trophies.



BOLRAGOTH THE FESTANT

Bolragoth's fellow Great Unclean Ones considered him a strategic genius, a corpulent visionary who could lead any census legion to victory against any foe. Thus was he Nurgle's first choice for an emissary in the battle to end all things. This honour was little to Bolragoth's liking, as he had used the tumult of the End Times to indulge his true passion – the promulgation of a particularly virulent strain of Yellow Flux – on what remained of the ogres of the eastern mountains. Nevertheless, Bolragoth knew better than to argue with his master's will, and prepared to do battle, though he dreamed wistfully of blossoming pustules and frothing bowels the entire time.



SSLIVOX THE SERPENT

Though he took pains to conceal it from his dark brothers, Slaanesh was not altogether convinced at the wisdom of unmaking the world. He had dined well on its many pleasures – not least the surfeit of elven souls that had reached his table during Ulthuan's demise – and feared that such joys would be lost if the mortal realm ceased to be. Thus the Dark Prince sent what he considered his most inept servant to command his contribution to the battle in the Fauschlag. Sslivox was not stupid – not exactly – but his wits had long ago been addled by the pleasures of Slaanesh's palace.

THE SWORDS OF CHAOS

The Swords of Chaos had been ravaged during the final moments of Averheim's fall, but they were still an army fit to match the best that the Incarnates could throw at them. Whether driven by loyalty, personal ambition or merely the joy of battle, all felt the gaze of the Dark Gods upon them.

Archaon Everchosen

Karavox
Bloodthirster of Insensate Rage

Tchzen of the Silver Claw
Lord of Change

Bolragoth the Festant
Great Unclean One

Sslivox the Serpent
Keeper of Secrets

The Swords of Chaos
Two dark brotherhoods
of Chaos Knights,
three regiments of Chaos Warriors,
one regiment of Chosen

The Forgecloven
Two Heralds of Khorne,
three packs of Bloodletters,
one pack of Flesh Hounds,
one regiment of Bloodcrushers and
one Skull Cannon

The Whimsicorus
One Lord of Change,
one Herald of Tzeentch,
two covens of Pink Horrors,
one flock of Screamers,
two packs of Flamers

The Blightborn Legion
One Great Unclean One,
one Herald of Nurgle,
three tallybands of Plaguebearers,
one squabble of Nurglings and
three tallybands of Plague Drones

The Carnival of Caprice
Two Heralds of Slaanesh,
three courts of Daemonettes,
three courts of Seekers,
one pack of Fiends and one Hellflayer





CHAPTER 5

Lord of the End Times

Autumn 2528



THE END OF ALL THINGS

Thus began the battle for the fate of the world.

The Incarnates came to the ritual chamber weary and bloodied, their power spent on constant battle, their followers all but wiped out. Against them, Archaon had the collected Swords of Chaos as his army's grim centre, supported on the flanks by daemons of the four Dark Gods. The Everchosen's forces were rested, unharmed and prepared to die in their dark masters' service, for they knew no other way.

Even with the Emperor restored to his full power, no gambler would have chanced a coin on the Incarnates' chances of success. Yet still they came, the fate of the world heavy upon their shoulders, and giving voice to battle cries from many realms. There was no chance for rest, or even the most basic of strategies. If there had been a time for subtlety or cleverness, it had passed long ago. Now there was only blood, steel and sorcery, and the will to fight.

Grimgor and the remnants of his Immortulz were the first to reach the fight. Of all those who had entered the tunnels, only the black orcs showed no signs of weariness. Rather, they had grown stronger with each battle, the wild power of Ghur combining with their peculiar greenskin heritage to forge a force against which no enemy had yet been able to stand. Behind the orcs came the Emperor and his few surviving knights, and behind them, Gelt and the elven Incarnates. Nagash entered the chamber last of all, his presence an ominous blackness that rivalled that of the pulsating and glistening sphere at the cavern's centre.

The daemons did not wait for Archaon's order to attack, but immediately charged across the chasm-wracked floor to meet Grimgor's onslaught. Bloodletters bounded forward, hissing and chanting Khorne's praises. Horrors hurled their torrents of writhing magic, squealing with joy as the flames consumed enemy and ally alike. Plaguebearers shambled close behind, their legendary hatred of the Tzeentchian daemons suppressed for the moment by their common cause. And at the rear, dancing and laughing, were Slaanesh's daemonette handmaidens. Greater daemons of the four powers loomed over the unholy host, driving them on with lash and bellowed orders, though no such encouragement was needed. The fickle honour of the Dark Gods was at stake, and no daemon would dare be the cause of their master's shame.



Archaon held the Swords of Chaos back as the daemons surged forward. The Everchosen disdained the idea of allowing the daemons to win this, his ultimate battle, but he knew the pragmatism of letting them test his foes' strength. He had encountered few of the Incarnates before their ascension, and only the Emperor since. The same pride that led the Everchosen to embrace this final battle so completely also drove him to caution. He would not countenance defeat in this, of all arenas.

The daemonettes quickly outpaced their fellow daemons. They danced lithely around the broken stalagmites and across chasms, their motions blurring and strobing in the cavern's strange half-light. Slaanesh's handmaidens were grace personified, as opposite to the lumbering orcs as it was possible to be. With a final lilt of seductive laughter, the daemonettes leapt and pirouetted into the Immortulz, and the slaughter began.

That first clash was also the most one-sided of those that would unfold in the cavern that night. The orcs were clumsy and lumpen compared to the daemonettes, unable to defend themselves against their swift strikes. However, it took two or three blows from a daemonette's claw to slay one of Grimgor's black orcs, but only one bone-crunching impact from a choppa to hack one of the slender daemons in half. Shrieking laughter turned to wailing screams as the daemonettes' vanguard disintegrated in a mass of ichor.

The Keeper of Secrets, Sslivox the Serpent, strutted into Grimgor's path, its scented blade flashing like quicksilver as it swung at the black orc. Grimgor stumbled on a daemonette's corpse, and the sword-stroke went wide. The daemon-blade shattered Grimgor's left pauldron and hacked deep into his shoulder, but the one-eyed warboss didn't so much as slow. As Sslivox's claws lunged forward to finish what its blade had started, Grimgor's armoured foot pushed off a fallen stalactite, propelling the warboss up and over the serrated pincers. Just before gravity reclaimed its hold upon him, the warboss raised Gitsnik high in a double-handed grip, and brought the heavy blade razoring down to shatter Sslivox's skull. Grimgor fell into his victim's body, the daemon's flesh pulping as it cushioned the black orc's impact with the rocky floor. Rolling free, Grimgor bellowed a cry of victory. As the Immortulz took up the cry, the warboss charged on towards his next foe.



Grimgor likely believed he could win that battle all by himself, but it was just as well that he had allies, all the same. Even as the daemon host shifted to envelop the roaring greenskins, the Emperor struck, a crackling torrent of lightning a herald to his coming. Bloodletters and horrors were flung aside, their bodies scorched and broken by the heavenly bolt. Then Sigmar himself was amongst the foe, Ghal Maraz seemingly weightless in his hands as it whirled and swung, hurling pulverised bodies left and right. The last of the Reiksguard came with him, their fervent charge careless of the uneven ground, their lances and swords driven into daemonic flesh by zealous determination.

Tyrion and Malekith came next, breaking to the Emperor's left and right. Tyrion wielded his light as a weapon, and bloodletters recoiled before it. Silver helms and dragon princes shouted their ancient battle cries and charged in behind him. Not so very long before, they had fought against the prince in the bitterest of conflicts, but those days were long behind. Tyrion was once again a hero to outshine all others, and the light of Hysh brought hope in that very darkest of hours.

Malekith's already sparse followers suffered greatly in those opening moments. Their course led them towards the massed Tzeentchian daemons, and into the path of a scalding salvo of sorcery. Elves fell screaming to the ground, flesh warping and minds collapsing under the change-bringing barrage. Unreal firestorms spiralled deep into the charging ranks, leaving cinders and bubbling fluid in their wake.

However, the fires of Tzeentch soon proved to be the daemons' undoing. As the horrors' sorceries and the gouts of daemon-fire crackled across the chamber, myriad shadows scattered along the walls and floor – pathways that Malekith could utilise. The Eternity King's followers faded away as the shadows overtook them, only to burst forth unharmed from another fleeting patch of fire-spawned darkness to carry their blades deep into the daemons' ranks.

With the advantage of the sorcery neutralised by a foe that could seemingly disappear and reappear at will, the horrors soon found the battle turning against them. Daemons perished as halberds chopped down through their vivid flesh. Blue horrors were called into being with every demise, but seldom managed more than a surly growl before perishing beneath the same blades that had felled their reluctant 'parents', or were punted into gaping chasms by armoured boots.

Malekith alone did not advance through the shadows. Disdaining the fire that crackled around him, he swooped to confront a pair of Lords of Change whose shrill orders held sway over the Tzeentchian host.

The survivors of Caradryan's host marched in behind the Incarnates of Light and Shadow, Alarielle and Gelt at their head. So unbalanced had the Weave become that Alarielle barely had the strength to stand, let alone fight. She staggered each time a tremor shook the chamber, her spirit assailed by forces that no other in that cavern could truly comprehend. Yet still the Everqueen advanced, the white lions' surviving pridemates clustered close around her. The elves' heavy axes hacked down the bloodletters that pounced to claim Alarielle's worn soul, their bodies a shield of flesh against daemon-steel when all other methods failed.

By contrast, Gelt fought as never before. Of all the Incarnates, the wizard had the greatest hope of victory. He had walked the dark path of necromancy, and yet emerged into the light. Why would fate have allowed such a thing, only to see him fail when the world needed him most? This surety – and the revelation of Sigmar – drove the wizard to wield the power of Chamon with a determination he had never before known. With a gesture, he unbound the enchantments that held together plagueswords and daemonblades; with piercing words, he loosed swarms of flesh-rending shards to tear scores of daemons apart. A Bloodthirster swooped across the cavern, the membranes of its wings grazing the tips of stalactites. Gelt sent forth a searing beam of molten light that burned the greater daemon to ashes.

Behind all came Nagash, his looming presence inscrutable, his power overwhelming. His zombie horde groaned and lurched as it fanned out behind the other Incarnates, the mass of dead forcing the daemons back by sheer weight of numbers and mindless persistence. Yet even with much of his mind bent on his minions' progress, the Great Necromancer had attention enough to spare for his own battles. Spirits swirled about him, moaning pitifully as he snuffed out their essence to further empower his sorceries. Lurid amethyst fires blazed from Nagash's eyes and outstretched fingers, boiling the flesh from plaguebearers' bones, and blasting the remains to drifting ash.

At the chamber's heart, the artefact pulsed again, its circumference expanding to nearly four times Nagash's height. As it did so, jagged lesions appeared on its outer skin. They spread across the oily surface like stress fractures in a pane of glass, or streams of magma revealed beneath a shifting crust of rock. Brilliant white light shone out through the wounds, dazzling and painful to behold, and the entire chamber – perhaps the entire Fauschlag– gave a sudden, jarring lurch.



Great slabs of rock crashed down from the ceiling, pulverising zombies, daemons and even a few luckless elves. The Great Unclean One Bolragoth practically burst under the impact, foetid liquid loosed from the turgid prison of his skin to spatter across all who fought in his shadow. The chasms in the floor grew wider as the cavern floor bucked and heaved. Three Reiksguard and a dozen skullcrushers vanished without trace as the rock beneath their feet fell away into darkness. Tyrion, fighting to the Reiksguard's left, was almost claimed by the same abyss. Malhandir leapt clear at the last moment, carrying the prince away from doom. Unfortunately for Tyrion, the loyal steed landed poorly, his right foreleg lamed by impact. Malhandir would run no more that day.

Whatever hope Teclis had drawn from his allies' arrival was dashed by the sudden fracturing of the sphere. For Archaon, however, the hastening of doom spurred him to at last hurl the Swords of Chaos into battle. The Everchosen gave no order – likely, none would have been heard over the fury of battle anyway – he simply raised a single, clenched fist. At once, the Swords of Chaos went forward at a run, their banners and shields high.

Archaon rode before his knights, leading the headlong charge. The Everchosen had taken the measure of his foes, and had judged the greatest threat to lie in the centre, where Grimgor and the Emperor fought. The black orc Immortulz had punched through the troupes of daemonettes, and were wreaking ruin in the plaguebearer tallybands behind. Archaon was impressed that so few of the brutish greenskins could have wrought so much slaughter, and considered for the first time that he might have underestimated the orcish tribes. Not that it mattered now.

Archaon struck the Immortulz' flank at full gallop. The Slayer of Kings slashed down, cleaving through a black orc's armour to lay his flesh open to the bone. Other greenskins threw themselves at the Everchosen, roaring their crude threats. Archaon rammed the ridge of his heavy shield down onto one attacker, snarling in satisfaction at the sudden howl and the snap of bone. The Slayer of Kings' vicious steel claimed the rest, the blade tracing circles of dark fire in the air as it clove limbs and tore throats away. With every kill, Archaon pressed deeper into the greenskin ranks, hacking a path of corpses for the Swords of Chaos to follow.

It did not take long for Grimgor to realise that his Immortulz were under attack. At once, he recognised Archaon as the foe that Malekith had spoken of, the being who would end the world, and thus rob Grimgor of a never-ending Waaagh!. Hauling

Gitsnik from the ruin of a Great Unclean One's corpse, the black orc warlord bellowed and took off towards the golden-helmed foe, barging aside friends and enemies as he did so.

As Grimgor bore down on Archaon, the Everchosen gestured and two Swords of Chaos advanced on the raging orc. Their steeds' eyes shone red as they charged, their lowered lance-points gleaming with the cursed enchantments of the north. Grimgor ducked low under the first blade, his back-handed axe blow scything low across the steed's fetlocks. Man and beast collapsed in a sudden bloody smear, the rider tumbling end over end into a knot of plaguebearers. Rising up, Grimgor rammed Gitsnik's blade into the second horse's mouth. The steed reared up in pain, all momentum lost, and the Chaos knight crashed to the ground. Grimgor was on the northlander in an eye-blink, pinning him to the ground with a heavy foot on his chest, before striking his head clean off with a single sweep of his axe. Looking up at Archaon, less than a dozen paces away, Grimgor sneered and levelled Gitsnik's blade in challenge.

Archaon responded to Grimgor's defiance by spurring Dorghar to greater effort. The daemon-steed reacted at once, its flaming hooves pounding across the dead and dying. Grimgor held his ground against the snorting, charging steed. He ignored the point of the Slayer of Kings spearing towards his face, and the plume of rippling fire that trailed from Archaon's helm. The warlord just hefted his axe, feeling its familiar weight against his palms, and waited for the moment to strike.

It came almost at once. Dorghar accelerated further as he closed the final distance. Archaon stabbed the Slayer of Kings' point down, the cursed steel aimed true for the centre of Grimgor's skull. But Grimgor was already moving. With a mighty bellow, the black orc whirled anticlockwise, the motion pulling him away from the Everchosen's strike, and lending Gitsnik crushing momentum. Even then, he wasn't quite fast enough – the Slayer of Kings gouged a new scar across the left side of his face and tore away what remained of his already mangled ear. None of this robbed the merest ounce of strength from Grimgor's blow. Gitsnik struck Archaon's shield dead-centre. Sparks flew, the shield buckled, and Archaon crashed from his saddle.



Grimgor was on the Everchosen as soon as he struck the ground. Gitsnik hacked down again and again, scarring angry red lines across the Armour of Morkar. Archaon lashed out with his blade, the serrated edge cutting a livid wound across the black orc's chest. His momentum broken by the sudden pain, Grimgor staggered back, and the Everchosen sprang to his feet as if his armour weighed nothing. Yet scarcely had Archaon regained his footing than Grimgor was on him again, axe swinging in arcs that made the air scream.

Archaon thrust the Slayer of Kings into Gitsnik's path. The axe came to jarring halt, but the shock of the impact almost caused the Everchosen to lose his grip on the daemon-sword. Their blades locked together, Grimgor and Archaon threw their full strength into the clash, each trying to overpower the other by brute force. For a long moment, they stood battle-scarred face to helm – so close that Archaon could smell the black orc's rancid breath. Then, Grimgor slammed his bony skull forward into the Everchosen's helm, and the two were flung apart.

Staggering back, Archaon felt the Eye of Sheerian grow dark. He raised a gauntleted hand to the front of his helm and traced his fingers over the dented metal. The eye was no more, crushed by orc's headbutt. The Everchosen saw Grimgor approach, more slowly this time, and heard the warlord's rumbling, mocking laugh. He had underestimated the orcs – this brute was far stronger than he appeared, his crude bladework perhaps even a match for the Lord of the End Times. However, Archaon still had one advantage. He loathed to employ it simply to defeat the base creature before him, but it was far preferable to meeting defeat at the greenskin's hands. With a whispered curse, Archaon unravelled the enchantments that bound U'zuhl's strength into the Slayer of Kings, and felt the greater daemon's vigour join to his own.

Grimgor knew at once that something had changed. The Everchosen had been swift before, but now he was swifter still. Each of Archaon's blows hissed out with a viper's speed, the sword's edge hacking splinters of metal from the warlord's armour and opening bloody wounds across his flesh. Yet Grimgor did not yield. Gitsnik hacked and cut in a ceaseless flurry, but somehow Archaon's blade intercepted every strike. No longer did the Everchosen attempt to match Grimgor in a battle of strength; instead he sought to parry the blows.

Six times in all the warboss and the Everchosen crossed blades. On the sixth strike, the Slayer of Kings split Gitsnik's haft below the axe-head. Grimgor did not give up as the heavy blade fell away, but brought the remains of the haft down hard on Archaon's golden crown. The Everchosen staggered under the force of the blow, but the wooden shaft shattered into fragments. Grimgor abandoned the useless weapon and threw himself at the Everchosen, powerful fingers reaching for Archaon's throat.



But the warboss' luck had at last abandoned him. With a dark laugh, Archaon brought the Slayer of Kings around in a wicked arc, and struck the black orc's head from his shoulders.

The Everchosen didn't even spare Grimgor's lifeless body a glance as he hauled himself back into Dorghar's saddle. He didn't see the spectral form billow from the orc's body, all fangs, claws and thick shaggy fur. For a moment, the fading aspect of Ghur shone amber in the dark of the chamber. Then it collapsed into wisps of light, and was drawn into the pulsating artefact by unseen winds.

Grimgor's death drove the surviving Immortulz berserk. As the last of Ghur was ripped from them, they bellowed one final earth-shaking *Waaagh!* and threw themselves at the Swords of Chaos with redoubled fury. They were a magnificent sight, one whose power could not have been denied even by those whose realms had suffered at greenskin hands. Northlanders fell to their knees, blood seeping from rents in ruined armour, or were hammered aside by thudding fists. The Swords of Chaos' shield wall cracked apart under that unrelenting pounding, and Archaon's cavalry were driven back.

Elsewhere, Malekith's battle against the Lords of Change was all but done. His first opponent – too confident in his abilities by far – had sought to challenge the Eternity King in a duel of sorcery. His crisped and lacerated corpse now stood as testament to the folly of that desire. Tchzen of the Silver Claw had chosen physical confrontation, drawing upon the power of Ghur to raise its already inhuman strength and fury to incredible levels. That one had torn Seraphon's hide bloody before she had torn out its throat, but the dragon yet fought on.

As the balance of power in the cavern shifted in response to the black orcs' charge, Malekith caught sight of Teclis, shackled to the rock wall.

The Eternity King still had little love for the asur mage, but was realistic enough to know that the chances of victory were greater with Teclis freed and fighting at their side than without.

Urging Seraphon to one last effort, Malekith soared across the cavern, for there were no shadows close enough for him to utilise. He nearly didn't make it. Blazing Tzeentchian fire pursued Seraphon through the air, scorching the mighty dragon's already ravaged hide. Moreover, the magister of Archaon's coven – who still bore Teclis' sword and staff as trophies – broke off from his ritual to join the attack. Lightning sprang from his fingertips, shattering the dragon's belly scales and blowing apart the flesh within.

With a last wrathful cry, Seraphon plunged groundwards, striking the cavern floor with tremendous force. Yet even in death the black dragon claimed a tally of her foes, for her skidding impact bowled aside a dozen ritualists, the last of whom was the magister himself. Shaken by the impact, but otherwise unharmed, Malekith hauled himself free of his saddle. For a moment, he stared at the glistening sphere, its surface close enough to touch, had he been so foolishly inclined. Then the artefact pulsed once more, and Malekith moved hurriedly away. Vaulting a yawning chasm, he ran to the magister's pulverised remains. As Seraphon gave one, last shuddering convulsion behind him, the Eternity King gathered up the staff and sword, and sped to free Teclis.

Alas for Grimgor's Immortulz, even greenskin rage had its limits, and these were reached all too soon. Slowly but surely, the wings of the northlander shield wall looped around and inward, gradually enveloping the roaring black orcs. Surrounded on all sides, fighting on against impossible odds, the last of the Immortulz finally perished. Behind them, they left a pile of black-armoured dead, of broken

weapons and shivered shields – proof of deeds worthy of remembrance, if any there lived to tell of them.

Sigmar, however, was more concerned with the present than posterity. In their death throes, the Immortulz had wrought havoc amongst the Swords of Chaos. The northlanders were as vulnerable as they were ever likely to be, and the moment could not be missed. Lightning arced from the Emperor's upraised fist, and the bloodletters fighting to his front were hurled aside with a smell of scorched ichor. Before the daemonic ranks could flow back together, Deathclaw was through the gap, the last of the Reiksguard riding hard behind him.

Lightning crackled about the griffon as he charged, and thunder echoed behind, the corona of energy growing with every loping step. The rearmost Swords of Chaos heard the Emperor's coming. They turned to face the new threat, but their response was too fractured and too late. Ghal Maraz crashed down and the hastily-assembled line of shields crumpled, their bearers hurled lifeless through the air by the impact. Deathclaw did not slow, but forged on through the armoured ranks. Axes and swords hacked deep into the griffon's flanks, but between the blasts of lightning and Ghal Maraz's bludgeoning weight, no northlander survived to land a second blow.

Before the Swords of Chaos could overwhelm the Emperor as they had the Immortulz, the Reiksguard struck. They did not charge alone. Many of the surviving elves came also, and with them Gelt and Alarielle. The Emperor was a beacon of hope in that dark place, and even without words he inspired his allies to greater effort. Lances and swords clanged from northlander plate, then glowed golden as the Incarnate of Metal sent magic to hone the steel. Alarielle healed what harms she could, trying to ignore the ravaged Weave screaming in her mind.

As the battle raged and the lightning flared, other forces converged on the Swords of Chaos. Teclis, freed from his shackles by the strike of Malekith's sword, unleashed torrent after torrent of fire and lightning, the spells powered as much by his pent up rage and pain as by the winds of magic themselves. Tyrion, though slowed by his lamed steed, brought his own warriors hard against the Swords' northern flank. Nagash drove his zombies in behind the elves, a wall of dead flesh that prevented the daemons from surrounding Sigmar's desperate spearhead. No longer did the Great Necromancer spend his attention on spells to assail the daemons. Now, all of his effort was fixed on maintaining his unbreathing barricade, on restoring the zombies to unlife in the same moment they were hacked down, ravaged by daemonfire or torn apart by claws. The strain must have been immense but, as ever, Nagash gave no outward sign.

Yet even with all this, the Emperor's charge stalled, just as that of the greenskins had earlier ground to a halt. The Swords of Chaos were the northlands' finest warriors, and not easily cast aside by desperate gestures of courage. Elves and men died by the score as the northlanders shook off their earlier disorder and fought with the murderous skill that had fuelled their legend.

Archaon was ever where the fighting was thickest, and the Slayer of Kings was a reaper's blade that day. The Everchosen had not yet had the opportunity to rebind U'zuhl into the cursed steel, and the daemon's strength and speed was still his. Yet every blow Archaon struck marked a battle of wills. U'zuhl longed to be free, and sought mastery of his wielder at every turn. However, the Everchosen refused to succumb, and fought on as his own master.

With each blow, with each fallen foe, Archaon and the Emperor drew nigh to one another. It was as much destiny as it was conscious desire that drove them. Some fates were inevitable, and it appeared that the deciding battle between the Three-Eyed King and the Emperor ranked amongst their number.

Minute by bloody minute, the Incarnate host and the Swords of Chaos ground each other to bloody offal. The last Reiksguard perished as the sphere gave another pulse of expansion, the spiderweb of lines now covering almost all of its surface. The last three elves died to a sweep of the Slayer of Kings soon after.

The Swords of Chaos were all but finished as well. Of a warband that had once numbered hundreds, only a few score remained, and this tally shrank further with Ghal Maraz's every strike. Those who remained fought as a grim band about the Everchosen, determined to defend their master even at the cost of their own lives. Yet in this, the Swords would not meet their desire. Archaon had no fear of the Emperor, saw him only as another champion to be overcome. The Lord of the End Times had bested him once in the streets of Averheim, and now he rode forth over the mound of dead and dying to defeat the Emperor once and for all.

Sparks flew as Ghal Maraz struck the Slayer of Kings, the sound of their meeting reverberating around the chamber. Lightning rippled along the hammer's rune-etched head, vying with the dark fire that rippled forth from the Slayer of Kings. Again and again the weapons clashed. These were not killing blows – not yet. Rather, they were strikes crafted to test the other's strength and will. Deathclaw and Dorghar were not so restrained as their riders, and saw no need to hold back. The griffon's talons raked the daemon-steed's head and neck, drawing forth welts of ichor. In response, Dorghar stamped and bit, rising high on his hide legs to batter the griffon with spiked forelegs and iron-hard hooves.

As the remaining Swords of Chaos fought and died around them, the Everchosen and the Emperor pulled back momentarily, having taken each other's measure. Then, with bellowed battle cries that drowned out all else, they urged their steeds forward and the last battle began.

In Averheim, the Emperor had been the Everchosen's inferior, had matched Archaon through desperate need. Now, however, things were greatly different. Sigmar had been reunited with Ghal Maraz, and with it the full fury of his heavenly power. Furthermore, Archaon had been robbed of his own sorceries – and his gift of foresight – when Grimgor's headbutt had closed the Eye of Sheerian. No longer could he sever the Emperor from the power of Azyr.

Thus did Archaon find himself in a truly equal contest for the first time in many centuries. What edge he did have was his solely by virtue of U'zuhl's borrowed strength. The Emperor fought with desperate need, smiting the Everchosen with little regard for his own defence. Each punishing blow bled seamlessly into the next, forcing Archaon into a series of shuddering parries that threatened to strike the Slayer of Kings from the his hand.

Again Ghal Maraz crashed down. This time Archaon twisted in his saddle, and the hammerhead slammed into his shield, denting it further, then slid clear with a scrape of metal. That opening was all Archaon required. With a cry of triumph, he lunged forwards and upwards. The Emperor shouted in pain as the Slayer of Kings lanced through his breastplate and scraped against his ribs.

As if in answer to the Emperor's call, lightning crackled from his outstretched hand. Three times it smote Archaon about the chest and head. It knocked the Everchosen back in the saddle, his daemon-sword pulling free from the Emperor's flesh in a spill of blood. Archaon ignored the stench of his own scorched flesh and pulled himself upright, determined to capitalise on his foe's weakness with another lunge. As he did so, Deathclaw lashed out. Abandoning his attack, the Everchosen braced his shield against the griffon's strike, feeling the metal shudder as the talons gouged three scars across the battered metal.

Given a moment of respite by his loyal steed, the Emperor struck anew, but his blows were slower than before. The entire right side of his armour was slippery with his own blood, his right arm so weakened by Archaon's blow that he had to wield Ghal Maraz's killing weight two-handed. The hammer smashed down, and this time it struck the Slayer of Kings aside and slammed into Archaon's chest, crushing one of the Everchosen's skull-amulets to powder and buckling his breastplate.



Archaon suppressed his sudden pain with a snarl, and lunged forward once again whilst the Emperor was still off-balance. This time, however, he struck not at the Emperor, but at his steed. Deathclaw screeched wildly as the Slayer of Kings' blade razored through plumage, flesh and the thick corded muscle of his throat. Blood sprayed from severed arteries, drenching Archaon and Dorghar. With a final gasping cry, Deathclaw slumped forward, almost crushing the Everchosen beneath his dead weight. As the griffon struck the cavern floor, the Emperor was flung clear, coming to rest amongst a pile of elven dead.

As the Emperor staggered to his feet, the sphere pulsed once more. With a savage rumble, the cavern floor split apart almost at the Emperor's feet, swallowing the corpses that had cushioned his fall. Behind the Emperor, Archaon levelled the Slayer of Kings, and ordered his daemon-steed to charge.

The Emperor heard the galloping hooves behind him, and turned wearily to face his attacker. Ghal Maraz was heavy in his hand, its grips slippery with blood. The Everchosen was the spectre of death upon a fell steed, as inevitable and unstoppable as the setting of the sun, and yet Sigmar held his ground. Time seemed to slow, and his eyes swept the chamber, taking in the full extent of those who had given their lives to bring him to this point. In that moment, the Emperor was galvanised by fresh strength.

With a mighty shout, the Emperor brought Ghal Maraz up in a gleaming arc. The golden hammer smashed into Dorghar's jaw with so much force that splinters of bone lanced up through the daemon-steed's brain, killing it instantly. Archaon's blow went wide as he crashed from Dorghar's saddle, rolling twice amongst the dead before coming to rest.

Thus began the final duel between Emperor and Everchosen. Both were grievously wounded, their flesh bloodied and scorched, yet each found fresh reserves of strength. Archaon was swifter than his foe, and the Slayer of Kings' wicked edge sliced many times into the Emperor's flesh. Yet in that hour, Ghal Maraz was the superior weapon, and neither daemon-blade nor northlander shield could still its fury.

Back and forth along the chasm edge the battle raged, but it was clear that there could be only one victor. Sigmar fought with his own strength alone, whilst Archaon battled not only with his, but also that of the daemon U'zuhl. At last, the Emperor's vigour ebbed, and Ghal Maraz slipped from his hands.

Archaon stepped towards the Emperor, savouring the moment of victory. U'zuhl's voice was raging in the Everchosen's mind, but the joy of triumph could not be unmade by a daemon's pettiness.

'To think that one of your allies believed you a god,' Archaon mocked.

'There is no victory for you here.' The Emperor's voice was that of an old man – tired, and bitter. Archaon could scarcely credit that he had ever believed him a threat. 'You could have been the best of us, could have been the sword that swept the Empire clean of Chaos. But you are nothing, a petty warlord held prisoner by his pride.'

Overcome by sudden anger, Archaon slammed his shield into the Emperor's head and body. He staggered, but did not fall.

'Prophecy put you on this path, did it not?' the Emperor asked, wiping blood and teeth from his mouth. 'You embraced those words to gain the power they contained, but in doing so you wrote your own end.'

Archaon scarcely heard the Emperor's words. He burned to break the man who stood unbowed before him.

'A champion of light shall stand alone against the Three-Eyed King...' the Emperor breathed.

All at once, Archaon was weary of the Emperor's prattling. The joy of victory had gone stale in the face of the other's defiance, but blood would restore it.

'No weapon shall he have but his will, and yet his spark shall rise to a mighty flame.'

With a roar, Archaon raised the Slayer of Kings high, and brought it hissing down.

As the Slayer of Kings hissed down, Sigmar raised a clenched fist, two fingers rising in the sign of the twin-tailed comet. Then he lowered his fingers, and punched his hand into the air. Lightning flared from the Emperor's fist, striking the daemon-sword's blade. This was no short burst of energy as he had wielded before, but a sustained torrent that hissed and sparked. His muscles paralysed by the lightning's energy, Archaon could not move, could do nothing as the Emperor poured all of his remaining strength into that searing pulse.



With a wrenching scream of tortured metal, the Slayer of Kings exploded. Shards of daemon-steel ricocheted from Archaon's armour as the dread sword died, the soul of U'zuhl at last freed and cast back into the Realm of Chaos. As the daemon's strength left him, Archaon sagged. Before the Everchosen could recover, the Emperor locked his fists together. With a wordless cry, he slammed them into Archaon's expressionless helm, knocking the Everchosen back one step, and then two. The second footfall found not rock, however, but a chasm's empty void.

Archaon threw himself forward as he fell, his gauntleted fingers scraping against rock as he sought purchase. Then the ledge crumbled, and Archaon Everchosen, Lord of the End Times, fell into darkness.







Even as Archaon plunged from sight, the skin of the sphere shattered and collapsed in on itself, leaving a swirling rift of dark energy in its place. Howling winds sprung up across the chamber, buffeting the mortals towards the rift. The daemons were even more profoundly affected, their skin streaming like molten wax, the droplets carried into the darkness by the merciless winds. Within moments, the last of the daemons had been banished, carried into the terrifying realm of their creation by the rift's awakening.

Though less than half the size its parent had been at the time of its collapse, the rift grew steadily – not in anarchic pulses, but gradually, inexorably. The fitful tremors of before were gone, replaced by an ominous rumble whose intensity grew with every passing moment. Beneath the growing rift, the rock of the cavern floor rippled like water in a whirlpool, its colour and form changing second by second. Leering faces formed in the stone, then vanished beneath the surface as the currents shifted. All around the chamber, natural law began to buck and heave as the raw stuff of Chaos leaked into the world.

The Everchosen had been defeated, and his army cast into the void. The Swords of Chaos were no more. Though it had cost them the lives of every warrior who marched at their side, the Incarnates stood as masters of the battlefield. Yet the world teetered on the brink of destruction all the same. Through her connection to the Weave, Alarielle felt the world's bedrock warp under the rift's influence, as pure Chaos forced its way into the mortal realm. It was but a trickle, but it would soon become a flood if they did not contain it. Thus did the six Incarnates wearily harness their remaining might and strive to turn the influx of Chaos back on itself.

Had there been eight Incarnates in that chamber, still the contest would have been a struggle. As it was, with Caradryan and Grimgor dead, it was almost impossible. The winds of magic were strong in that chamber, for they swirled undiluted from the Realm of Chaos itself. Whilst each of the Incarnates held sway over their own wind, and could turn its strength back upon itself, the masterless winds of Beasts and Fire ran rampant, shattering the delicate incantations of the ritual without warning.

In the end, they would have been lost but for Teclis. Rooting his staff in the ground, the mage drew in the stray energies of Ghur and Aqshy, even though he knew it would be his doom. The loremaster had near unrivalled understanding of magic, but no mortal could embrace the full force of two winds and survive. Scarcely had Teclis begun when his skin began to blacken, and his mind started its irretrievable descent into madness. Yet still he held true, certain that no other could take his place.

As Teclis' flesh began to boil and peel, the winds of Ghur and Aqshy at last started to quieten, allowing the Incarnates to resume their incantations. Slowly – imperceptibly at first – the rift began to shrink as its power waned. Yet success was far from assured. Even a moment's slip could reverse the rift's momentum. Moreover, if Teclis succumbed to the forces he served as the conduit for, then the resulting turbulence would make victory impossible. If there had been another wizard present to take a part of Teclis' burden, then success would have seemed certain. However, so far as the Incarnates knew, there was no such being at hand.

Mannfred von Carstein slipped into the ritual chamber to find the Incarnates labouring before the shrinking rift. He recognised at once what the Incarnates were attempting, and silently applauded their audacity, if not their instinct for survival. Self-sacrifice was not a trait that the erstwhile Lord of Sylvania admired.

Dismounting Ashigaroth, Mannfred silently commanded the beast to remain out of sight, and picked his way through the corpse-strewn chamber. So far as the vampire could tell, there was nothing alive in the chamber save for the Incarnates. There was also a sizable zombie host whose enchantments bore all of Nagash's powerful yet refined hallmarks, but their rudimentary senses were easily clouded by one such as Mannfred.

On Mannfred pressed through the chamber's flickering light, his motives teetering back and forth. He told himself that the Dark Gods were whispering to him – as they must have done to Kemmler, Harkon and all those others who had laboured in Nagash's service – but the truth was that he could no longer tell the difference between his own embittered pride and the gods' venomous words. Even when he had served Nagash, he had seen precious little reward. Indeed, humiliation had been heaped upon him time and again. Perhaps it was better to be the right hand of anarchy than a slave to mindless order.

Vlad's final words had driven Mannfred to this place, had convinced him to take a stand against the forces of Chaos. However, with every step he took through the corpse-choked chamber, the vampire became less sure of his intentions. Did he really want to re-enter Nagash's service, for that was what his chosen course surely entailed – assuming any of them survived the next few moments? And could he really bear to consider the Incarnates his equals – let alone his superiors? Vlad had been ready to do so, but Vlad had always been a sentimental fool.

By the time he reached the rift, and the ring of Incarnates gathered around it, Mannfred had come to his decision.



Mannfred struck from the shadows without warning. His sword took Gelt in the back, punching effortlessly through his heart and out through his breastbone. The force of the thrust lifted the wizard high in the air. Gelt hung there for a moment, his arms limp and his head drooping as if to gaze with curiosity at the blade protruding from his chest. But the truth was that Gelt had perished in the instant the steel had touched his heart – and with it, the Incarnates' hopes of containing the power of the rift. Mere moments after his life fled him, a beam of golden light burst from Gelt's corpse, and was swallowed hungrily by the rift.



Without Gelt's power of metal, Chamon tore free. Teclis, seeing the collapse of everything for which he had striven, reached out and attempted to channel Chamon as he already did Ghur and Aqshy. The strain was too much, even for him. The entropic forces wracking the mage's body accelerated, and he was blasted to ash.

Teclis' death signalled the end of all that the Incarnates had hoped to achieve. With an ear-splitting screech and a brilliant flare of inky-black light, the rift tore loose. The Incarnates felt their grip slacken in the moment before it occurred, and flung up their hands or twisted away in order to shield their eyes. Mannfred, however, had no such warning. Even as he tossed Gelt's corpse aside, the vampire was transfixed by the black wave, and blinded by it.

The rift had tasted power when it touched the mortals who had sought to cage it, and now it reached out to feed upon its would-be captors. The five surviving Incarnates screamed in pain as the rift tore loose their soul-bound magics. Even Nagash was not immune, and his bellowed agonies were the stuff of mortal nightmares. The raw essence of sorcery bled from the Incarnates' eyes and mouths and into the rift, a swirl of brilliant white, brooding grey, vibrant jade and sickly amethyst. The winds danced for a moment about the patch of darkness, then were dragged inside it.

Suddenly bereft of their magics, the Incarnates collapsed. Malekith and Nagash were afflicted worst of all, for the power of shadow and death had long been part of them. The Eternity King collapsed, head clasped in his hands, whilst the liche beheld with unaccustomed panic his deathless form beginning to unravel, returning to the dust whence it had come. Sigmar had been rebound to the wind of Azyr for mere hours, but the agony of separation was all the deeper for the second loss. Even Tyrion, joined to Hysh for mere days, fell to the ground like a puppet whose strings had cut – though he was quicker to rise than his allies.

Only Alarielle felt no physical pain. With Ghyran's departure, her link to the Weave had been severed also. For the first time since she had become the queen of Athel Loren, Alarielle no longer felt the death-agonies of an unbalanced world, but this gave her little satisfaction, for she felt suddenly and inexplicably alone. Mannfred knew none of this, for the darkness that had stolen his sight had ravaged his wits also – a last gift from the gods he had chosen to serve. He staggered across the chamber like a pleasure boat in stormy seas, ranting and railing nonsensically at voices only he could hear.

Tyrion was the first to recover, the wrath kindling in his heart driving away the agony caused by the ritual's collapse. The prince had scarcely known Gelt, but the sudden loss of his brother was a terrible burden to bear, and one he was determined to avenge, even if it was his last act in the world. With a scrape of armour on stone, the prince lurched to his feet and bore down upon Mannfred.

Still blinded, the vampire did not see Tyrion's approach. Seizing Mannfred by the shoulder, Tyrion stabbed Sunfang up through the vampire's belly and into his black heart. Mannfred gave a thin, rattling hiss as the sword slid home – one that turned into a wailing scream as Sunfang's angry flame took root in his flesh. Desperate, the vampire fought Tyrion's grasp, but the prince's fingers were like a vice. Mannfred's entire body was soon ablaze, the flames of his demise licking ineffectually at Tyrion's armour. After what seemed like forever, but was in fact just a few moments, the scream faded, the flames dying alongside. Tyrion released his grip, and the blackened, wizened cadaver that had once been Mannfred von Carstein shattered against the cavern floor.

Fed by the Incarnates' stolen power, the rift began to grow. The ritual chamber, already pushed to the limit, began to succumb. The walls shuddered and cracked, sickly yellow blood bleeding out through the wounds. Vast sections of the cavern floor fell away into a bleak darkness, filled with gleaming eyes and snapping teeth. Boulders and stalactites fell like rain.

Tyrion saw a great spill of rock tear loose from the ceiling and plunge towards Alarielle. The prince shouted a warning, but it was lost amongst the tumult of the chamber's collapse. The Everqueen would have perished then had not Malekith, driven by a motive that he would never be able to discern, shoved Alarielle clear. The Everqueen fell heavily, striking her head hard on the ground, but she at least fell out of the avalanche's path. Malekith, however, was not so fortunate, and the Eternity King gave a piercing shout of pain as his legs were crushed.

Archaon had not perished in the chasm. He had clung on with all the strength that remained to him and, as the Incarnates had attempted their desperate ritual, had hauled his way, hand over agonising hand, to the jagged precipice high above. At last, the Everchosen had clambered free of the chasm in the very moment of Mannfred's treachery. Now, as Sigmar moved to aid Malekith, Archaon loosed a great cry and slammed into the Emperor from behind.



Archaon's voice was raw and desperate, born of fury, humiliation and soul-rotting hatred. He hammered at the Emperor with gauntleted fists, seeking to keep him off balance, driving him ever closer to the edge of the rift. Ghal Maraz struck him a glancing blow, tearing away thick armour plates and leaving the flesh beneath mangled, but the Everchosen hardly slowed. Sigmar raised the hammer high for a second blow, but Archaon threw himself forward, gripping the hammer's haft. For a moment, the two men wrestled on the edge of the rift. Then they were gone, lost amidst the swirling darkness.

Malekith lay on his side, his shattered legs pinned beneath a slab of rock. The pain was unbearable, but it was nothing compared to the void in his soul. The rift's creation had ripped not just Ulgu from him – all the magic he had once been heir to had been sucked away, leaving only a yawning emptiness behind. For the first time in millennia, Malekith was utterly helpless.

At the centre of the chamber, the rift gleamed malevolently. Malekith could just about make out Nagash's disintegrating form on the far side. The ancient liche's dimming witchfires seemed to be staring bleakly into the void. Had his magic been ripped from him also? Malekith wondered. Did the great and mighty Nagash know despair for the first time in thousands of years? That thought was enough to elicit a brief smile, despite the pain.

Alarielle lay motionless to Malekith's left, her face masked in blood. Even now, the Eternity King could not fathom why he had felt moved to save her. Perhaps, as had often been said, a selfless act by Malekith the Betrayer had indeed heralded the world's demise. With that thought, his smile became a choking laugh. One last jest before the end of everything.

Malekith's laughter ceased abruptly as Tyrion limped across his field of vision. The prince's face was bloodied from battle, his armour scorched from the fury of Mannfred's demise. Without a word – without a glance – at Malekith, Tyrion knelt at Alarielle's side, and shucked off his torn cloak. Silently, he folded the thick cloth into a bundle, and placed it beneath the Everqueen's head.

'How touching,' Malekith sneered. 'Do I not get some consideration?' As he spoke, the rubble on his legs shifted. He stifled a gasp of pain as his shattered bones ground against one another.

Tyrion turned towards Malekith. 'I can speed your passing, if that is what you desire,' the prince replied, his tone bereft of anger, yet holding no suggestion of mercy.

'I have walked this world for seven thousand years,' Malekith muttered, fighting to keep the pain from his voice. 'I will bide until its end.'

The outer edge of the rift drew level with Seraphon's corpse. The mighty dragon's scales and sinews burst into dust at its caress, then coalesced into shimmering droplets of liquid. They orbited the growing rift for a moment, and were then sucked into its abyssal heart.

Alarielle's eyelids twitched, and the Everqueen uttered a gasping moan, neither fully conscious nor wholly otherwise.

'You could flee,' Malekith suggested archly. 'Take her and go. Malhandir is swift. Perhaps he can outrun this doom.'

'Where would we go?' Tyrion replied grimly. 'This is the Rhana Dandra, the end of all things. There is no outrunning it.'

'Fool,' Malekith spat. 'Were I in your place, I would leave in a heartbeat.'

'No, you wouldn't.'

'Dying at the side of one's allies is entirely too noble a sentiment for the likes of I.'

'Indeed it is,' said Alarielle, suddenly awake – although barely so, if her wan appearance was any indication. 'You would choose to remain out of a desire to claim the rift's power.'

Malekith glowered at the Everqueen, but said nothing.

'We can all feel it,' the Everqueen went on. 'With such power, we could have created a new world in our own image. If only Lileath had understood, then all of this might have counted for something.'

Tyrion helped Alarielle to her feet. The prince and the Everqueen turned their backs on Malekith to stare into the rift. Overhead, what remained of the cavern roof gave another ominous groan.

Alarielle turned back to gaze down at Malekith, a sudden strength back in her voice. 'It is not yours to wield. Our chance was lost, and our time is over.'

The edge of the rift was close now. Alarielle clasped one of Tyrion's gauntleted hands in both of hers, and turned her back on Malekith once more. For a moment, the prince and the Everqueen stood silhouetted against the rift's roiling darkness, and then they were gone.

The air was both scalding hot and freezing cold at the same time. Malekith could feel daemonic voices inside his skull, gnawing at what little remained of his sanity. Then the edge of the rift swept over him also, and with it a deep and impenetrable darkness.

Malevolent laughter echoed about Malekith. Memories from the past danced before his eyes like phantoms: recollections of a father's coldness, and a mother's cruel love. In an instant, Malekith relived every betrayal, every malicious deed, and every failure.

Suddenly, the memories were gone, cut away as if by a knife. The creature that had once been Malekith felt a moment of panic, for he found that he could not even recall his own name.

Then the laughter faded, and only the darkness remained.















And so the mortal world fell away into oblivion. The gnawing rift at the heart of mankind's domain devoured reality.

Slowly it spread at first, but then with the hunger of ravening wildfire.

Invigorated, great polar rifts slipped their ancient bounds and joined their younger sibling in its feast.

The peoples of the world beheld their doom, and screamed in despair.

No two watchers beheld the same vision. Some saw skies riven with fire, some looked upon an ice-cold maelstrom of stars, some saw colossal tentacles and fanged maws that drooled the molten stuff of Chaos. Perhaps the Dark Gods raised their champions to daemonhood from the battles that raged amongst the flames. It matters little, for the truths of those hopeless wars are lost.

The Oak of Ages was swallowed last of all. Mournful dryad-song echoed under livid skies as Athel Loren perished. With its destruction, the Weave that bound time and space together thinned and stretched. Twisted by unnatural energies, it dissolved entirely into nothingness.

That terrible act of uncreation might have taken the blink of an eye, or unfolded across millennia. The Dark Gods were not fettered by the flow of time, and let it pass unmarked. Already tired of their victory, they turned away from the ruin they had wrought and began the Great Game anew in other worlds and other creations. In doing so, they paid no heed to the tiny speck of light tumbling in the infinite darkness – the glowing essence of what had once been a man.

Through the storm of nothingness he fell, adrift for aeons upon unseen tides.

Then came a glimmering orb, a fiery world-heart grown cold as the abyss.

Desperate, the figure seized upon the sphere with a grip that could shatter mountains. He stared into the void, and from the darkness, the void stared back.

The figure clung tight, marshalling his faded strength. He reached forth his hand, and a miracle took shape.

And what of tomorrow? What of tales yet to be told, and the cycle of the stars?

These were truly the End Times.

But they were also the beginning.



